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Dimensions of hope and the school environment: Results from a school-wide needs assessment at an urban high school

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Abstract

Objectives: Various aspects of hope can play a major role in how students from urban locales perceive their school environment. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between various dimensions of hope and the school environment as perceived by adolescents at an urban high school. Methods: Data from a school-wide needs assessment measuring urban adolescents' perceived hope and perceptions of the school environment were analyzed. Results: The analysis from regression models indicate that the dimensions of hope variables can be predicted by perceptions of the school environment. Conclusion: Overall, the urban adolescent hope domains of Spirituality, Personal Agency, Education, and Caring Connections all proved to be important elements correlated with the school environment. Implications of these findings for future research and practice are discussed

Keywords

hope, schools, school social work, school environment, school climate, urban schools, adolescence

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Dimensions of Hope and the School Environment: Results from a School-Wide Needs Assessment at an Urban High School

Students' perceptions of hope and the school environment are significantly associated (Idan & Margalit, 2013). This association includes the notion that higher-hope students who perceive their school environment as positive have increased school engagement and achieve more academically (Van Ryzin, 2011). Research has demonstrated hope is a positive aspect of life enhancing confidence, creativity, and a common belief that our "next" will be better than our "now" (Snyder, 2002). Though volumes of research have been devoted to understanding hope primarily within the context of positive psychology, namely focusing on goal attainment, pathways, and agency thinking (Snyder et al., 1991), it is unclear how this construct is perceived by students from urban school environments located within marginalized communities, who may have different perspectives on hope.

Research on urban adolescents has most often examined factors relating to the home and school environments from the perspectives of parents, community members, and school professionals (Morgan et al., 2019). Little is known about the perspectives of urban adolescents, particularly relating to hope within the school environment. Among existing research, studies conducted with children and adolescents from diverse school settings point to associations between hope and life satisfaction (Gungor & Avci, 2017). Other studies have examined similar factors that affect school self-efficacy in urban environments (McCoy & Bowen, 2015). Additionally, studies with adolescents who face adversity in urban communities, highlight specific factors that dive deep into the cognitive processes of hope, such as spirituality (Harley & Hunn, 2015), perceptions of hopelessness (Harley, 2015), and self-cultural hopefulness (i.e., Afro-centric/Black-centered schools; Ani, 2013). Some of these factors may be enhanced within school environments fostering safety and supportive relationships to bolster the development of young people and their future aspirations (McCoy & Bowen, 2015).

Combining hope with students from environments where elevated levels of adversity including poverty, racism, and violence are prevalent, hope can be viewed differently (Ani, 2013; Canfield et al., 2018). For example, urban youth who face daily stressors, negative environmental influences, or adverse childhood events, are often susceptible to experiencing low levels of hope (Bolland, 2003). Because hope plays a significant role in various dimensions of life, including social-emotional development (Snyder, 2002), the school environment is an area where hope can be influenced (Idan & Margalit, 2013). While schools have a critical role in educating students (Allen-Meares, 2009), the school environment has a role in addressing the needs of the students, such as safety or emotional well-being, all important predictors of hope among adolescents (Benardo, 2015).

Hope is a multidimensional concept with varying conceptualizations (Canfield et al., 2018; Harley, 2015; Harley & Hunn, 2015; McCoy & Bowen, 2015; Snyder, 2002) and so is the school environment (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al, 2013). Considering how one's level of hope and the school environment can shape educational experiences and influence student learning, some study has been conducted examining hope and the school climate. For example, findings indicate hope can mediate parental attachment and math anxiety (Demirtas & Uygun-Eryurt, 2020). However it is unclear if any studies have examined the various aspects of hope, particularly among urban adolescents (e.g., hope as faith, resilience, education, and culture), and how it is related to urban school environments. The purpose of this study is to examine associations between the dimensions of perceived hope and school environments for urban adolescents.

Review of the Literature

Hope

Hope is defined in the literature as the pursuit of possibilities that involves a process of planning and using pathways to achieve goals (Snyder, 2002). Snyder conceptualizes hope into three major components—goals, pathways, and agency. For example, hope is a cognitive ability in which one has the desire to set goals, and if necessary, use different pathways or strategies and agency or motivation to meet those goals (Snyder, 2002). Hope within this context aims to focus on human potential by allowing one to advance hope and produce achievable goals through positive thoughts and beliefs.

A newer line of research documents how hope is perceived from the unique perspectives of low-income African American urban adolescents (Harley 2015; Harley & Hunn, 2015). Most of this work examined perceptions of adolescents from vulnerable populations who use factors such as spirituality, personal agency, the basics, education, and caring connections to define hope. Theoretically, Harley's (2015) work suggests adolescents who deem factors such as spirituality as a mechanism of support are hopeful about their futures. For example, Harley's conceptualization dives deeper into the lived experiences of youth, such as the utilization of prayer and faith as a coping strategy or recognizing good grades and academic achievement as pathways to pursue further education and career attainment.

School Environment

Research on the school environment also referred to as school climate or school culture is a multidimensional construct that influences teaching, learning, and quality of life (Cohen et al., 2009). Traditionally, the literature cites how school environments play a key role in the lives of students through basic instruction of academic development (Durlak et al., 2011). Because students spend a substantial portion of time in schools—their secondary home—studies have found school environments are a central arena for promoting the overall development of students (Zins & Elias, 2007), including their social, emotional,

and behavioral needs. In a systematic review of school climate, researched by Thapa et al. (2013), findings suggest a supportive school environment is significant and positively associated with children and adolescent development.

Previous studies that focused on the mental well-being of students and their perceptions of the school environment indicated declines in perceived school climate were associated with psychosocial and mental well-being (Way et al., 2007). Results from this study have become evidence to support the significance of perceived school climate on adolescents' well-being. Along these lines, just as adolescents' behavioral and mental well-being are negatively related to perceived school climate, barriers such as poverty and the lack of economic opportunities (Harley et al., 2015) that urban students face could impact perceptions of hope. Thus, within the school environment, these factors along with others can have the potential to impact students' capacity to learn and prepare for the future.

Conceptualizations of hope within urban school environments are progressing. For instance, during times of adversity, it makes sense theoretically to explain hope as it relates to children and youth within urban school environments. Given the myriad of experiences students in urban schools will encounter during their educational trajectory, particularly those facing ongoing barriers or stressors, hope can be offered through means such as spiritual support, food, clothing, shelter, and even educational opportunities (Canfield et al., 2018; Harley & Hunn, 2015). For example, supportive urban school environments can offer new doses of hope, not only in the form of pathway and agentic thinking for students with low levels of hope (Snyder et al., 2002), but through new and positive lived experiences that focus on the strengths of one's culture, heritage, and history (Ani, 2013) Studies have found, students who endure adverse childhood experiences, and sustain declines in school performance or even present with pessimistic attitudes, can benefit from hopeful thinking when setting goals for their future (Snyder, 2002).

As Snyder (2002) noted, hope is learned, and schools assisting students to build hope can offer alternate pathways for thinking. Furthermore, some findings indicate enhancing hope may lead to further engagement and school satisfaction (Kerret, et al., 2020). Schools serving as hopeful communities can provide guidance and supportive strategies for assisting students in generating new routes by reconnecting their present experiences to their future (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Alternatively, students who use spirituality as a protective factor in dealing with life circumstances may use aspects of their faith (Harley & Hunn, 2015) or cultural backgrounds (Ani, 2013) to build resilience and hope. Further, studies have shown school environments that recognize the unique challenges and impediments of hopeful thinking can enhance students' drive and motivation to live healthier and happier lives (Lopez, 2010). While obstacles, both internally and externally will continue to exist in both hopeful and less hopeful students, (Snyder, 2002) it is how a student's school environment is perceived that will shape future perceptions of hope and goal pursuits. Therefore, this study is guided

by one overarching research question: How does student perceptions of the school climate relate to dimensions of perceived hope for urban adolescents?

Methods

Dataset

This dataset was compiled from the information gathered during a school-wide needs assessment conducted at an urban high school. The school is located in Northern Kentucky, but is part of the greater Cincinnati metropolitan area. Serving grades 9-12, the school has a 100% free school lunch rate, indicating high levels of poverty, and consistently scores near the bottom of state school rankings. The school social worker spearheaded the needs assessment as part of routine school activities with help and consultation from related school services personnel, school administration, and teachers, following their rules and regulations for this activity. The research team was consulted regarding potential measures, but did not collect any data as again, this needs assessment was conducted as part of routine and normal operating procedures at the school. School approval to access the de-identified the dataset and IRB approval was obtained to examine the dataset.

During a school-wide study hall, the school social worker administered a survey to every student digitally through school-issued iPads. Absent students took the assessment the following day. The survey was loaded onto Survey Monkey software and took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to take. The survey consisted of items across several sections including demographics, a hope scale, items relating to educational experience, items relating to neighborhood experiences, and items relating to what the students felt others in their community needed (e.g. various school supplies, food, phone). The dataset was exported into a MS Excel format, deidentified, and then provided to the research team. The research team then exported the data into a Statistical Processing for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Measures

Urban Adolescent Hope Scale

This study used the Urban Adolescent Hope Scale (UAHS), a measure created specifically for use with urban adolescents. The developers of the scale used qualitative findings from a community-based, participatory action research study on hope with urban adolescents to create items and constructs for validation. The dominant themes found in the qualitative study served as constructs in the measure and comments made by qualitative participants served as the basis for the items in the scale (Canfield, et al., 2018). The scale is 24 items across five constructs. Each item is on the same five-point Likert-type agreement scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The scale was found to have high levels of internal consistency. And the measure also met criteria for various modification indices indicating strong model fit (Canfield, et al., 2018).

Perceptions of school climate

The measures for perceptions of school climate consisted of items expressly stating a concept about the school environment. Each item followed the same stem and leaf design. Participants were asked, "How much do you agree with the following statement?" and had a five-point Likert-type response set, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" to choose from. The school counselor, school social workers, administration, and teachers developed each item for use in the need's assessment, indicating face and criterion validity of each item as a component of school climate was met. Analysis was conducted using each item separately as a component of school climate, as opposed to an aggregated score of school climate, because no previously validated measures of school climate was used or developed. However, the items have utility as single-item indicators that expressly state a given construct, or in this case, component of school climate.

Results

Demographics

Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. The average age was 16.1 years (SD=1.373). For the gender distribution, the males accounted for 47.1% whereas females were 52.9% of the sample. There were more non-minorities (69.4%) participating in the need's assessment than minorities (21.1%). Finally, 11th grade had the most (31.3%), followed by 9th graders (26.3%), 10th graders (21.2%), and 12th graders (20.9%).

Correlates

Table 2 presents the correlates between the school climate perceptions and the dimensions of hope. Every coefficient in the table is statistically significant ($p<.05$). Overall, the item, "I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself," had highest mean correlation (M=.533). The item, "I know that I am responsible for my own actions" had the lowest mean, .401. For the first dimension, Spirituality, "I have at least one adult at school who I can talk to if I need to discuss something important," (r=.459) and "I know the classroom procedures and expectations in every class" had the lowest (r=.273). For Personal Agency, the second dimension, "I am looking forward to my future" (r=.646) was the highest, with "My teachers are fair with discipline," (r=.406). For The Basics, "I feel that school time is well-spent" (r=.46) and "I know that I am responsible for my own actions" (r=.254) were the two poles. The fourth dimension, Education, had "I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself" (r=.716) as the strongest correlate and "My school, family, and community work together to help me learn" (r=.482). Finally, the dimension, Caring Connections, was most strongly correlated with "I feel that my school is preparing me for my future" (r=.613) and weakest related to "I enjoy activities in class at school" (r=.421).

Regression

Table 3 displays results for four regression models, one each for Spirituality, Agency, Education, and Caring Connections. Standardized betas are presented across each model. The domain Agency had nine significant predictors ($p<.05$) upon analysis, with the strongest being "I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself ($\beta=.236$)." Caring Connections also had several significant predictors with perceptions of teachers explaining why information is being taught as the strongest ($\beta=.275$). The strongest predictor for both Spirituality ($\beta=.261$) and Education ($\beta=.285$) was the perceived pride in the school. No predictor was found to be significant ($p>.05$) for The Basics. Overall, the strongest R^2 was for Caring Connections (.818), followed by Education (.716), Agency (.686), and finally Spirituality (.42).

Discussion

Limitations

These findings are limited by several factors. First, the data comes from one school in the Midwest. Schools in other regions or schools serving other grades (i.e. elementary or middle schools) may have different findings. More study is needed to corroborate these findings using different samples. Next, the data relies on self-reported perceptions of the school and of hope. No actual observations were made. Real-world observations and assessments may yield different findings. Another limitation of this study is it was conducted by a school, for school purposes. Therefore, some items were asked or approached in ways that lead to potential issues regarding validity of responses. For example, gender and race were asked by the school as an open-ended response. A large amount of students either left the questions blank, wrote rhetorical responses (e.g. "who wants to know?" "why do you want to know?"), or put in racial slurs. Therefore, were could not corroborate the responses to potential control variables such as gender or race.

Finally, the educational experience questions limit some of the analyses. This data came from a school needs assessment as part of a high school's routine operations and was not necessarily collected with research in mind. Due to this, validated instruments of school climate were not used. Single items expressly stating a concept or construct were used instead. Abell, Springer, and Kamata (2009) advocate for the use of single-item indicators to examine convergent validity in scale development because of the direct expression of the concept. While a pre-existing, multi-dimensional measure of school climate would allow for more nuanced and detailed information, the use of single-item indicators would still allow for analysis due to the direct expression of the concepts. The findings for this study could be strengthened by using previously validated measures of the perceptions of the educational experience. Despite these limitations, several implications for research and practice can be gleaned from the findings.

Implications

These findings indicate that certain components of perceived school climate significantly predict hope. However, further study is needed to examine how these relationships impact tangible academic outcomes such as grades, reading levels, or test scores. Though we want to temper our statements given the limitations of this study, the findings may provide the beginning and basis for potential theoretical models of how hope (and other psychosocial concepts) may mediate the relationship between perceived school climate and academic outcomes. Previous study has indicated that hope and school environment may play a mediating role between parental attachment and math anxiety (Demirtas & Uygun-Eryurt, 2020), however, additional study needs to include specific academic outcomes. The value in the relationships between school climate and hope lies in how well they relate to academic outcomes, given that the purpose of the school is to educate (Allen-Meares, 2009).

Along those lines, our study indicates different aspects of the school influence different dimensions of hope. None of the dimensions of this study had the exact same list of predictors, indicating it is possible that different aspects of hope are involved in different processes. For example, Demirtas and Uygun-Eryurt (2020) discuss hope mediating the relationship between parent attachment and math anxiety. It is possible that a dimension such as Agency or Education is more "active" in this relationship, where as Spirituality may be more "present" in the outside environment. Further study is needed to establish how hope operates multi-dimensionally within a model.

Along these lines, future studies must use more nuance in examining components of educational experience and how its indicators of well-being such as hope. For example, the negative relationship between teachers recognizing student actions and the spiritual aspects of hope needs further study. While this may be an artifact of the limitations inherent in this study, this finding may also indicate the relationship between how students perceive their teacher's interactions and hope may require more subtlety. Could it be that cultural competence, delivery of message, or content of a message may be the driving factors in this relationship? Or could teacher recognition be a sign of future difficulty with peers, meaning students must balance their peers' perceptions with the teacher's perceived notions of the student? More nuanced and deeper measures and analyses are needed to unpack this relationship.

Further, additional study may want to examine demographic influence and interaction between hope and the school environment. As stated in the limitations, that type of analysis was not conducted because of questions to the validity of responses to items such as race and gender. For example, as indicated in Harley's 2015 work examining hope in urban African American adolescents, the identification of different domains of hope for this population indicate hope may be context dependent. It is possible the perceptions of hope are influenced by additional factors such as race, gender, or class.

Further, Harley's 2015 work established hope is different depending on the environment needed to be navigated. This may include future examinations of distal outcomes alluded to earlier, such as academic achievement. While we discussed that the notion of future preparation as a significant, but negative predictor of perceptions of agency may be an artifact of the study's limitations, it may also clue practitioners into how students view themselves within an environment. In urban area with high rates of extreme poverty (this school is a 100% free lunch school), the notion and idea of a future may not be under one's control. If a student feels or perceives no matter what they do or accomplish within the school has any bearing on outcomes outside of the school, discussing notions of a future may make students feel less empowered.

In particular, the feeling one has agency may be a driving factor that needs to be further studied. It could be the environmental-based adversity or hassles students face in urban environments (Miller, 2016) and its association to lower perceptions of hope (Bolland, 2003), manifests itself through loss of agency. Are the pathways that Snyder (2002) discusses as being key to hope, temporally before feelings of agency or are the pathways themselves influenced by agency? Further study is needed to examine this potential avenue for research.

As Snyder (2002) indicates, hope can be viewed as different pathways of thinking in order to achieve a goal. Theoretically, the domains of hope identified in this study's measure may be analogous to various pathways urban adolescents may use to navigate their environments in order to preserve and protect their well-being. In this regard, we have identified models that help narrow and begin to explain the interplay between dimensions of hope and navigating a contextualized environment, in this case the school. The results indicate certain components of perceived school environment (how one navigates the school) significantly predict hope but do so contextually. For example, feelings of pride may help one feel hopeful in the pathways and domains of spirituality, education, and caring connections, but do not help students achieve goals in terms of agency.

Utilizing predictors identified in these models must be used in order to develop interventions around hope and well-being. For example, this study found that for the Caring Connections domain of hope, the aspects of the school environment play a very large role in explaining the percentage of variance (R^2=.818). Thus, interventions designed to improve feelings of connectedness and meaningful relationships in order to bolster pathways to achieve a goal must include components identified in this study. For example, ensuring teachers take additional time to explain the reasoning behind information taught, may make a difference in how a student navigates the classroom and builds hope. Or increasing pride within the school, may also assist in developing caring connections within the school.

The school environment may play a large role in outcomes and areas beyond the academic. This study identified significant predictors of how

perceptions of the school environment may shape how hope is perceived by urban adolescents. Moreover, hope is a dimensional construct and this study supports that perceived aspects of the school environment are related to these dimensions in various ways. But importantly, this study finds that hope is a malleable concept that can be shaped by actions done within a contextualized environment such as a school, meaning that the risk and protective influences in a student's life (such as in feelings of hope and hopefulness) can be addressed by interactions with the academic environment.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics (N=297)

	M	SD
Age	16.1	1.373
Gender	N	%
Male	140	47.1
Female	157	52.9
Race/Ethnicity	N	%
Non-Minority	206	69.4
Minority	55	21.1
Grade	N	%
9	78	26.3
10	63	21.2
11	93	31.3
12	62	20.9

Table 2. Correlations for Dimensions of Hope

	1	2	3	4	5	M
I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself.	.375	.621	.347	.716	.608	.533
I have at least one adult at school who I can talk to if I need to discuss something important.	.459	.601	.377	.608	.582	.525
I feel that my school is preparing me for my future.	.415	.537	.406	.651	.613	.524
When I do well on my school work or participate at school, my teachers recognize it and let me know that I did well.	.43	.573	.427	.559	.611	.52
I am proud of my school.	.429	.502	.45	.595	.592	.514
My teachers explain why I need to learn the information they are teaching.	.397	.538	.438	.558	.61	.508
I am preparing for my future.	.383	.624	.362	.613	.555	.507
My teachers are willing to change the way they teach in order to help me.	.402	.516	.44	.545	.595	.5
I am looking forward to my future.	.416	.646	.298	.554	.553	.493
	1	2	3	4	5	M
The principal of my school is someone I can go to if I need help with something.	.453	.553	.362	.528	.545	.488
If I see a better or different way of doing something at school, I can tell teachers or staff at my school and they will take my ideas into consideration.	.415	.511	.408	.512	.577	.485
I can get help with my classes if I need it.	.327	.499	.443	.58	.564	.483
If most students in my class are not doing well on their school work, my teacher will find another way to help us learn.	.365	.497	.427	.538	.56	.477
I feel that school time is well-spent.	.366	.481	.46	.59	.481	.476
My school, family, and community work together to help me learn.	.423	.518	.376	.482	.563	.472

I understand why my school has its policies and procedures.	.326	.486	.404	.539	.554	.462
My school is preparing me for my future.	.331	.475	.345	.583	.561	.459

Table 2. Correlations for Dimensions of Hope

	1	2	3	4	5	M
I am appropriately challenged in my classes; they are not too hard or too easy.	.31	.467	.384	.557	.564	.456
I am challenged by my teachers to be the best I can be at school.	.371	.488	.361	.522	.534	.455
I have at least one teacher in my school who I can talk to about school or non-school issues.	.382	.509	.313	.539	.501	.449
When I have trouble with my school work, my teacher notices and talks to me about it.	.297	.462	.399	.492	.591	.448
My grades and test scores show the effort I put into school work.	.348	.501	.311	.601	.475	.447
I know the classroom procedures and expectations in every class.	.273	.492	.349	.568	.459	.428
I plan on furthering my education after I graduate high school.	.293	.52	.286	.557	.483	.428
I enjoy school-related activities outside of class.	.35	.508	.295	.483	.489	.425
My teachers are fair with discipline.	.283	.406	.449	.484	.486	.422
I am taking courses that will help me in my future career.	.344	.42	.302	.505	.459	.406
I enjoy activities in class at school.	.302	.466	.346	.488	.421	.405
I know that I am responsible for my own actions.	.309	.509	.254	.502	.434	.401

Note: 1=Spirituality, 2=Personal Agency, 3=The Basics, 4=Education, 5=Caring Connections

Table 3. Regression for Each Dimension

	Spirituality		Agency		Education		Caring Connections	
	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	*p*
I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself.			.236	.001	.25	.000	.151	.042
I have at least one adult at school who I can talk to if I need to discuss something important.	.207	.094						
I feel that my school is preparing me for my future.			.141	.11				
I am proud of my school.	.261	.006			.285	.000	.194	.007
My teachers explain why I need to learn the information they are teaching.							.275	.000
I am preparing for my future.			.184	.039	.18	.033		
I am looking forward to my future.			.161	.043				
The principal of my school is someone I can go to if I need help with something.	.184	.037	.145	.025				
If most students in my class are not doing well on their school work, my teacher will find another way to help us learn.			-.169	.035	-.13	.087	-.186	.024
I feel that school time is well-spent.							-.222	.004
My school, family, and community work together to help me learn.	.206	.016					.111	.087
My school is preparing me for my future.			-.229	.003				
I am appropriately challenged in my classes; they are not too hard or too easy.							.184	.007
When I have trouble with my school work, my teacher notices and talks to me about it.	-.232	.021	-.131	.075				
My grades and test scores show the effort I put into school work.					.162	.008		
I plan on furthering my education after I graduate high school					.141	.023		
I enjoy school-related activities outside of class.			.122	.054				
I enjoy activities in class at school.							-.162	.017
I know that I am responsible for my own actions.	.186	.037	.137	.037				

Note: R^2: Spirituality (.42); Agency (.686); Education (.716); Caring Connections (.818); No predictors for The Basics were significant (p>.05)