

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Necessary But Insufficient:

How Educators Enact Hope

for Formerly Disconnected Youth

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Second-Chance Schools, Disconnected Youth, Critical Hope, Urban Schools, Social Justice, Education, Strengths-Based

POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth
Youth Living in Poverty

STEPPING UP THEMES

Education, Training & Apprenticeships
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“Adults have the ability to provide urban youth with resources to address their needs while also critically examining social inequality in a bold stance with their students” (p. 135).

1. What is the research about?

In light of systemic discrimination, it has been argued that, to be successful academically, Black students need to be in a school environment that expects them to do well, and that provides sufficient support so that they can meet high expectations. This research uses these necessary elements – high expectations and sufficient support – as a starting point from which to examine the experiences of teachers working with youth in urban areas. These teachers can play a critical role in young people’s experiences, as they set expectations and are meant to support youth in meeting them. However, the researchers suggest that, even when teachers are invested and experienced in working with youth, they may not be effective in supporting youth because of their own beliefs and attitudes.

This research focused on determining which types of mindsets educators need to best support marginalized youth. The guiding research questions were:

- How do educators think about their work with disconnected youth (youth who have left school) and the role of schools in fulfilling students’ needs?
- How do educators’ orientations toward hope shape the educational context in ways that are necessary and sufficient for student success?

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place at three charter schools in a large Midwestern city. These schools are part of an international non-profit organization and have more than 900 students per year, aged 16-21. These youth have a mean age of 18; 85% are classified as Black, 10% as Latino, and 5% as “Other” (p. 120). According to assessment scores at enrolment, students’ average computing and reading capacities are at a grade four level. As many of the students have previously left school, and some are homeless, the schools offer wraparound services; there is a housing facility at one of the schools, as well as childcare at another. The schools offer mostly online courses, but are beginning to offer more in-person classes.

3. Who is this research about?

The research engaged 30 people from the three schools, referred to in the research as “educators” – three principals, seven teachers, 16 support staff, and four security guards. All of the schools’ administrators and support staff participated in the study, and a selection of teachers were recruited.

4. How was the research done?

Interviews were conducted with the 30 educators working in various capacities at the three schools. In the interviews, researchers were looking for evidence that educators were committed to the idea that students need a community that holds high expectations of them and provides support. In order to find evidence of this commitment, the researchers used the concepts of “*false hope*”¹ and “*critical hope*”² (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) to categorize educators’ narratives (p. 119). Once the interviews with the educators were complete, they were transcribed (written out word-for-word) and the researchers looked for instances of each of these types of hope.

5. What are the key findings?

During the interviews, educators made many comments that could be considered instances of **false hope**, while making very few comments that could be classified as **critical hope**. Of the examples that would fit under critical hope, most fell within *material hope*, with examples of *Socratic hope* and *audacious hope* appearing infrequently.

The researchers identified how each type of false hope appeared in the interviews:

- *Hokey hope*: educators spoke about students just needing to work hard to be successful, without taking into account the barriers youth were up against.
- *Mythical hope*: educators discussed how it was helpful to use the small group of students who graduated each year as examples for the other students of how hard work would lead to 'making it.'
- *Hope deferred*: some educators spoke about their belief that a future change in a student's life or in society would improve the opportunities available.

Although the educators expressed clear intentions of wanting to inspire young people with these types of false hope, the researchers insist that these messages fail to recognize the challenges youth face – and can, in turn, further their marginalization.

Examples of educators questioning the injustice of students' lives, discussing how to challenge these injustices, or working with students to build solidarity were missing from the interviews. Youth were framed from a deficit perspective, as educators spoke in great detail about their material needs without highlighting youth's strengths.

Material hope appeared in many of the participants' interviews. Educators discussed how they tried to support youth by providing material (clothing, hygiene products, etc.) and intangible resources (emotional supports, love, etc.). While staff saw themselves as fulfilling an important gap with these resources, there was very little discussion of providing solid educational instruction; the schools' contexts prioritized emotional support and providing resources over ensuring a rigorous academic experience for students.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

While the research was focused on educators, it is equally important for youth work, as **the attitudes and beliefs that youth workers hold have implications for their practice with youth, and the outcomes that youth experience**. The researchers suggest that all three forms of critical hope must be used by those who want to equip marginalized youth for future success.

Youth are best-served by programs that address their **basic needs** (shelter, food, security, sense of belonging, etc.) while also supporting them to work on their **self-actualization** (expressing emotions, the capacity to cope with difficult life events, developing self-acceptance, etc.) by using various forms of critical hope.

People working with youth could benefit from consciousness-raising through training on critical theories. This may help to **foster an understanding of youth's challenges from a structural perspective**, thereby moving beyond ideas that youth 'just have to work hard' and wait for things to get better. Critical hope can enable youth workers to provide a space for youth to critically examine, question, and respond to some of the injustices they experience; without such solidarity on the part of youth workers, many youth may not have the opportunity to meaningfully engage with and respond to the powers that deeply impact their lives.

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¹Duncan-Andrade (2009) details three types of **false hope**: *hokey hope* (individuals who work hard enough will be successful); *mythical hope* (individual, anecdotal examples of people who have overcome racial and class barriers are evidence that all people have equal opportunity); and *hope deferred* (something might change individually or structurally in the future to create more opportunities; this vague, improved future is offered without any concrete action to bring it about).

²Duncan-Andrade (2009) also details three types of **critical hope**: *material hope* (people working with youth provide material and intangible resources and help youth build life skills); *Socratic hope* (youth and educators critically analyze social injustice together, and examine possible paths to a more just society); and *audacious hope* (people working with youth have a sense of solidarity with the youth and with the wider community they serve, as opposed to seeing young people as different or disconnected from their own lives).



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