

Testing an Intervention to Impact Student Engagement & Hope among Urban Students: A Social Determinants of Health Framework

Significance: Educational attainment is one of the most robust determinants of health in adulthood. Student engagement, the effort and persistence of students in their learning, promotes academic achievement and is broadly predictive of better physical and mental health for all youth. Hope, the perception that one's goals can be achieved, predicts both higher academic achievement and health outcomes among adolescent populations. Interventions that can increase student engagement and hope and thereby positively impact educational outcomes have potential for improving adolescent and adult health. Interventions based on constructivist theories, particularly those which use project-based learning (PBL) may be particularly effective in increasing student engagement. However, sufficient research has not yet examined if and how PBL practices in health education can increase the hope and engagement of urban students of color. Lack of evidence for the effects of PBL for urban students of color restricts the creation and adoption of evidence-based educational practices and policies aimed at developing hopeful, engaged youth.

Specific Aims: In order to fill these gaps, the present study aims 1) to evaluate the effect(s) of a project-based health education class on student engagement and youth hope among urban students of color and 2) to examine what elements of a project-based health education class engage urban students of color.

Approach: High school students in eight selected Milwaukee Public School District schools will be assigned to either the intervention or control health class and recruited to participate in the study. Students in both classes will be asked to complete questionnaires at the beginning, middle, and end of the intervention. Students in the intervention classrooms will also be asked to participate in focus groups to be conducted at the end of the course.

Innovation: The specific aims of this study are theoretically driven and methodologically robust. The application of hope theory as the primary explanatory framework, the selection of a study population of urban youth of color, and the use of mixed research methods to resolve the questions posed are innovative in the field of positive youth development and shift public health and educational research paradigms.

Anticipated Results This study will provide evidence of the impacts of PBL health education on student engagement and youth hope among urban adolescents of color. It will also provide a qualitative description of which pedagogical elements support student engagement in this population.

Conclusion: Supporting the development of engaged, hopeful youth is essential to building a resilient and healthy citizenry. Public health research must establish a strong evidence base about educational interventions that enhance student engagement and hope and apply those in schools and communities across contexts. This will support the translation of research on the social determinants of health to practice and advance progress towards health equity.