

Global Education Episode 17: How children experience hope

Rebecca Vukovic

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Hello and thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine. I'm Rebecca Vukovic.

How do children experience hope? And, what does it mean to be hopeful? These are some of the questions I discuss with my guest, Dr Avivit Cherrington, in today's Global Education podcast episode.

Dr Cherrington is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa. She stopped by our Melbourne office for our interview today where we chat about some of her latest work with rural South African children and their conceptualisations of hope.

We talk about what it means to be hopeful from an Afrocentric worldview; its emphasis on belonging, connectedness and community; and how children around the world experience hope in their own settings. To begin though, I ask Dr Cherrington to tell us about her professional background, and to give us some insight into the work she's currently doing at Nelson Mandela University.

Avivit Cherrington: Okay hi, Rebecca and listeners. I started off as a psychologist, specialising in child wellbeing and learning. And in South Africa you have to do a year of community service and so I ended up working with a non-government organisation in communities and that entailed travelling around to different rural communities, marginalised communities, working in prison systems, safety houses and working with children and families towards optimal development in learning. And from working with communities, I kind of realised that the school system is really the best place to work with children because in rural communities and families, there were so many issues and so many problems. HIV/AIDS is a big issue in the country so there aren't a lot of adults, positive role models, and so I understood that if I really wanted to make change in community, I needed to cross over from community psychology to the education system.

And that's where I entered the academic world. So now I'm working at Nelson Mandela University, the Faculty of Education, looking at the teacher education programs and how can we really make teachers agents of change? What is education in a South African context and how does education play a role in holistic development, not just cognitive development and content learning?

And then I'm also aligned with the Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation. There's a lot of change happening right now in South Africa in terms of: What is the purpose of university? Who should have access to university? And How relevant is university towards an African purposed curriculum and the needs of African children? So it's kind of a dual role of looking both at the Faculty of Education and looking at education as change.

Rebecca Vukovic: Really interesting. And in 2017, a few years ago now, you published a study on rural South African children's conceptualisations of hope. So what were your aims for this study?

AC: So what happened was I was travelling around and being in communities and at the same time reading a lot about intervention programs. We were funded by USAID and PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) and some European funders as well. And I was reading all these reports saying that African children are hopeless and that poverty takes away people's hope. And yet I wasn't seeing that. I was experiencing a lot of hope and a lot of resilience and a lot of celebration, despite all the poverty and the disadvantage. So I realised that there weren't really a lot of theories and models that explained a way of being, wellbeing, hope, from an Afrocentric perspective – and an Afrocentric perspective is quite different to a Eurocentric perspective in terms of the focus on relationality and collectivist-oriented communities. And so I understood that a lot of these measurements and surveys that were coming in were very sort of one-sided and they were talking about hope as an achievement base, success as goals and that's not really, from an African perspective, where you would place hope.

And so communities were measuring so low, and yet that wasn't what I was experiencing and that's when I thought, well I want to understand actually what does hope mean for an African community? For African children? So that are we actually placing programs for community development and for children properly? Or are we kind of, assuming that this is what they need and actually it's not well aligned? And so that's what I did. That was my aim – to really understand as an African communities, African children, growing up in a rural community, growing up in the context of HIV/AIDS and crime, and all the things that are happening in rural communities: What is hope to them? And how could we really foster that?

RV: So then how did you go about conducting this study?

AC: So I used to travel from community centres and so I knew this community centre for about three years, and I started with the community. I approached the traditional Chief, the traditional office and I approached the care workers and the Board of Directors, government people and we started talking and I kind of explained this is what I'm interested in, this is what I want to do. And so those conversations took almost a year before we even started engaging with the children, because they are gatekeepers and I wanted this to be respectful and to be owned by the community.

And then we basically recruited the children from there. So, having explained to the community workers what I wanted to do and why, having discussed what they thought was important and not, we sort of designed it together. The prompt was really to have no more than 12, no less than six, children from primary school age that they felt could benefit from a hope intervention. So it was really up to them to select and they came up with a list of children aged nine to 12. And then we kind of engaged for a year-long process with the children, with the youth care workers as well, to generate and understand what hope was.

RV: I've read some of responses from the children and they really are quite insightful. The children said that hope is about having a better life, one without stress and one where you're able to look after yourselves and have your family around them. And of course, this is just a sample of some of the responses. So could you share with listeners some more about the findings?

AC: Sure, so it was really interesting that even the adult care workers were really surprised because I think they kind of went along with my ideas about hope but kind of on their own thinking '... but these are orphan children, these are registered as needing support from government, these are children who have experienced all kinds of challenges. Why would they be talking to you about hope?' And they were, I wouldn't say resistant, but they were like 'surely there's other children we could work with' and I'm like 'No, no, I specifically want children ...'. And even they (after a year-long engagement) were like, 'Wow, these children have so many strengths and these children are amazing and they became these Hope Champions'. They call them 'Hope Champions' and they have value in the community, which was amazing because aside from really conceptualising hope, it also allowed me to see that this is an amazing quality for psychologists, teachers, health professionals to work with. It's a tool, because bringing in hope that is already there, but really fostering and engaging with it brings amazing results in terms of community development.

And with the findings, what we added was a relational and collective level of hope. So the children saw hope on a contextual level. So the first thing was a person could only have hope if

they have hope in their context. So they need to feel safe, they need to have a home, they need to have love, they need to have food. So those were the basics but then it became more of a personal hope. So then it was, when you have all those things, it becomes your responsibility now to make sure you're living a hopeful life. And then once you have hope, it becomes your duty to now give other people hope – and that's the relational aspect. So that hope isn't something that you have on your own, it's something that you build up so that you can then share. And doing hope was very, very important for these children. And once you're able to do it on a relational level, they spoke about hope in the community, because what's the point of being hopeful if your community is not hopeful?

And again, this is from a collectivist, Afrocentric point of view. It's so crucial because your value as a human being is the value of where you belong. And if your whole community is in despair, then how can you be the only one who has hope? So then your duty becomes to build a hopeful community, and to all work together towards social cohesion, towards peace and harmony, towards getting along. And that was a very interesting perspective to come from little children who are aged nine to 12, to kind of understand that things that they were seeing like alcoholism, like domestic violence, like abuse and crime, they understood that those things were happening because the community as a whole had lacked hope. And if they could somehow work together and build hope in the community, maybe people wouldn't be doing those things. I thought that was quite amazing for nine-year-old children, in a rural context, who people sort of disregard, to have such insight into what was happening in their world.

RV: That's so interesting. And then, from a school perspective, how does understanding how children experience hope and wellbeing, allow schools to focus on the needs of these children?

AC: I think what I learned a lot was that relational hope, which I think we don't put enough focus on. For children, the first thing was belonging and attachment. You can only start to build hope when you have belonging and attachment. And so that's very important and when we look at schools, schools are systems, just like communities are and they work on various levels and I often think that schools have forgotten that connectedness, that relational space in the classroom. It's not just about reading and arithmetic and learning, it's all about a process of being and becoming. And for these children it was very, very important to feel that they belonged, to feel that there was a sense of identity, and then you could give hope and you could be hope. So I think that in a schooling context is very important.

And I think another finding that was very relevant to this – which I'm working [on] in my own research and work with the Faculty of Education – is the children spoke about being a 'holder of hope'. So, they said that hope can never be gone completely but when you feel like you've lost a lot of your hope, you mustn't throw it all away, you must give it to someone to hold. And then you can go to places, like a police station or a clinic or a school, where they can help you rebuild your hope. And so when I further asked them, what is this holder of hope? And it was a very precise phrase they were using, and it kind of conjures up this image, of here's a keepsake, hold this for me, it's very valuable. And it's this responsibility of holding someone else's hope while they get their life together, so that they can have it back. And that idea sort of grew on me in terms of teachers, because teachers nowadays are so much more than just pedagogists. And this whole idea of when I'm going through a rough time, to have someone that I can trust to hold onto whatever little semblance of hope I might have, so that I can rebuild it. And I thought that's an amazing role for a teacher to have, and so I'm starting to look at the idea of teachers as agents of hope and change and what that entails for both the learners, for the school, for communities – to have schools that are beacons of hope.

RV: And obviously you travel a bit for work and you attend events and conferences. So then, in your experience, when it comes to hope and feelings of hope for the future, are the experiences of children in South Africa unique, or do you think it's something that children around the world experience?

AC: I think in some aspects it's global. I think the Afrocentric worldview, I would say is unique to an African world view – and I'm quite aware, I don't want to generalise because Africa is a continent made up of so many languages and ethnic groups and cultures, but I do think there is a collectivist-oriented worldview that is probably universal amongst many Indigenous populations around the world. This idea that a human being is connected, connected to other members of his or her community, past and present, connected to the land, connected to the

world, connected to each other. And that has been lost, and not only in Indigenous populations has it been quite significantly lost, but I think worldwide.

When I visit schools in all kinds of socioeconomic brackets, children are disconnected. You know, families are broken, children are dealing with a lot of issues, the sense of community is gone, we all live in different sort of geographical areas, families breakaway and travel – and that is crucial for a child that's developing, to feel a sense of connectedness to a community, a sense of belonging. And I think that this is where we see at risk, this is where we see children start to align with negative role models, we start to see behaviour that is angry and frustrated. And so, to me, that sense of connectedness and engagement is universal. It should be happening in all schools around the world, but my work is more so with Indigenous populations because of the history of oppression and violence and trauma that Indigenous populations have experienced all over the world. That sense of identity that was so crucial in their way of life and their way of being, needs to kind of come back.

And I see with a lot of children is a lot of programs towards hope and success and resilience is focused on mastery, it's focused on success and achievement. But a child coming from a collective oriented worldview, or from an Indigenous connected type of worldview, you first need to belong. You first need attachment, you first need to know that you have a sense of identity and connection, and only then when you feel that you are connected will you then start to achieve and succeed and grow and flourish. So, for me, often the focus with intervention programs are aimed at helping children learn and succeed, extra support, remedial – but we're missing a key thing, which is children really need to be connected to each other, to their community, to their teachers, to have a sense of value, to have an identity of who they are and who they value in the community and who their past is, who their present is and who their future is. That's important, I think, globally.

That's all for this episode. If you're interested in learning more about Dr Cherrington's work on this topic, I'll pop a [link to the research paper](#) in the transcript for this podcast, which you'll find at teachermagazine.com.au. If you'd like to hear more podcasts from Teacher, you can download any of the episodes in our archive, just visit acer.ac/teacheritunes or soundcloud.com/teacher-acer

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