EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINX PARENTS OF CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS

Cristie Granillo, Nishita Matangi, Beatriz Gonzalez, Lynn Raine, Susanne Montgomery

LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY HEALTH

INTRODUCTION

Students missing school has doubled since the COVID-19 pandemic. Students from racially and ethnically diverse and low-income communities are overrepresented in the population of students who are missing 18 or more days of school in a calendar year, classified as chronically absent (Romero & Lee, 2007). While there are multiple reasons for this, for Latinx students specifically, additional barriers emerge due to language, immigration status, and lack of cultural understanding (Sattin-Bajaj & Kirksey, 2019). It is critical to understand barriers that prevent students from attending school as they impact academic outcomes that lead to disengagement from school, and loss of foundational skills to advance through the K-12 system (Gershenson et al., 2019, Chang & Romero, 2008). Exploring the factors that contribute to missed school for Latinx elementary students can provide a tailored understanding of barriers and facilitators for attendance behaviors in addition to tangible ways to improve school attendance.
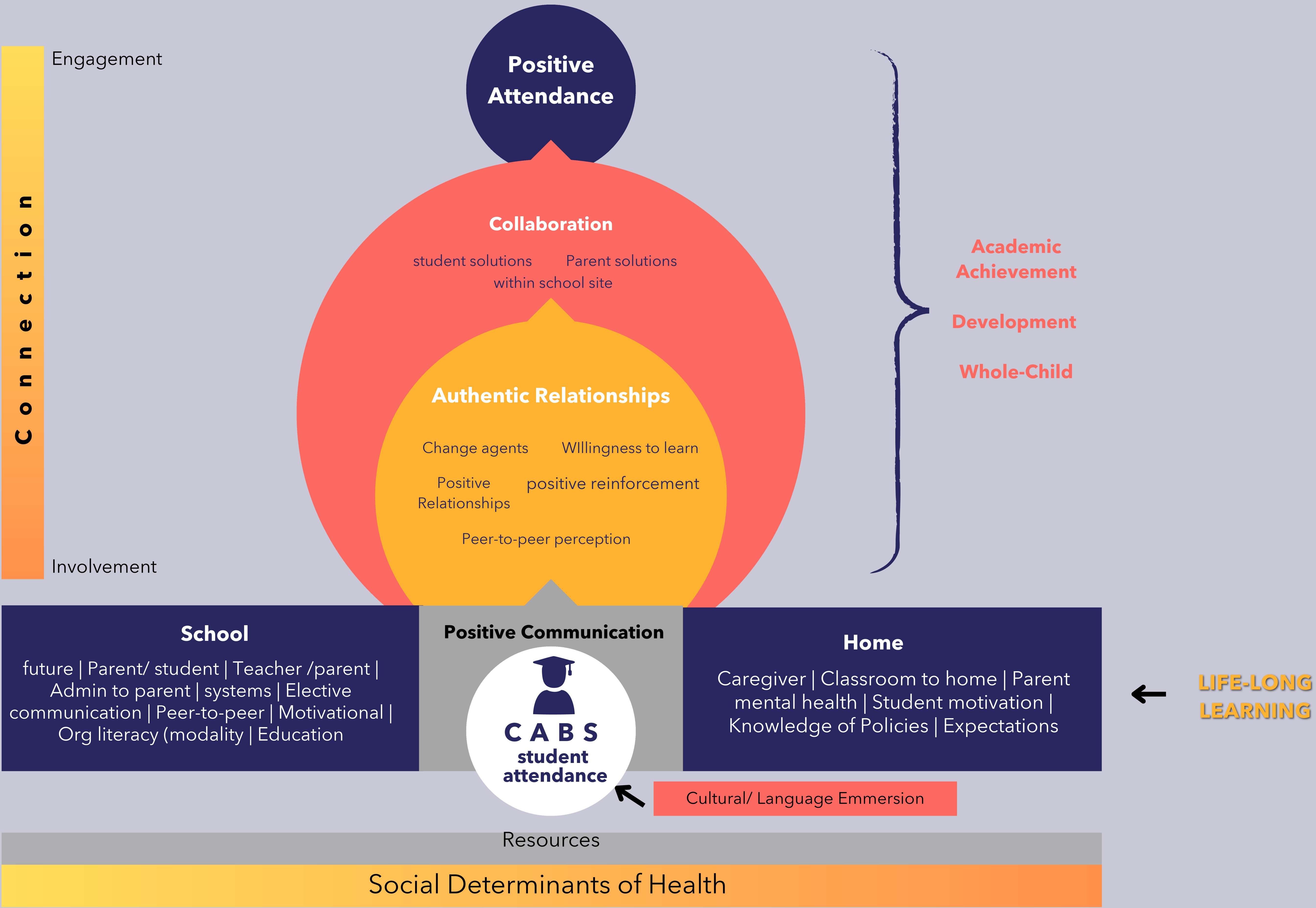
PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspective of parents and school administrators on the status of chronic absenteeism for Latinx elementary students specifically from an urban low-income school district.

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RESULTS

METHODS

Sixteen key informant interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides with parents, and school administrators (principal, teacher, counselor, attendance specialist, parent leader, and community liaisons) along with a parent focus group that was conducted as a member check in. Transcripts were analyzed with two coders independently using Charmaz's grounded theory methodology through initial coding (line by line), toward axial coding to explore core categories and theoretical integration resulting in a functional theory.

CONCLUSION

Three categories emerged across participant narratives: 1) positive communication, (2) authentic relationships, and 3) collaboration culminating in an overall theme of connection. Attendance for Latinx elementary students and parents is relational emphasizing the collectivistic nature of Latinx culture. Emphasized through finding was the importance of Spanish language and the role of life-long learning for students that goes beyond k-12. Building a strong sense of connection between home and school with a cultural lens and commitment to the importance of life-long learning is essential for positive attendance.

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

""if their communication is open and it's not, you know, not just pointing fingers, then even the students are more inclined to like, okay, well, I need to go to school."- School district personnel

Communicating with parents and just in a lighter manner. Not always communicating because either something went wrong or something.

"[School personnel] explained [to] me… some school like, they don't know the reason why this kid is not going to school. You know, it's so they get you trouble without knowing, the reason… go to talk to them and tell them the reason without, you going to all that."- Parent participant

AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

"In this school, this principal is very aware, she is out of school every day…she talks and when she sees us or because your son didn't come because he is absent, she has direct communication…I do love the principals who are aware of their children. It's like oh, if it's like I am principal and I lock myself in my office and there the teachers figure it out." -Parent participant

"The **relationships that the teacher establishes with students** to make them feel so loved and welcomed and safe that they want to continue to come in." - School administrator

"How I always appreciate it when they talk to me on the phone."- Parent participant

COLLABORATION

""I'm not saying that 100 percent, but always when we get together with parents… Sometimes I can't attend meetings. There are times when I can't be in a program or something. But t**here are parents or fellow friends of mine who come and tell me this happened**, this was it. But I'm always trying to be informed."- Parent participant

"I feel that the relationship in communication with the teacher has worked, because sometimes you do need to get involved in my child's education as well. It's just that its conjoined parent and teacher."- Parent participant

"It was really nice because she [School personnel] looked out of me, so I felt like the school was helping me." - Parent participant

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