DON'T PULL YOURSELF UP BY YOUR BOOTSTRAPS: A STUDY OF

ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S SUCCESS IN LATINX YOUTH DROPOUT

PREVENTION


by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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In recent years, the United States has focused attention and resources on increasing the number of students who graduate from high school, addressing an area of national concern: the large proportion of students who drop out of school prior to earning their diploma. As recently as 2004, more than 15% of high schools in the United States reported more students dropping out than receiving diplomas. Dropout issues are particularly prominent in urban and rural areas with high poverty rates. One reason for prioritizing dropout prevention is the high economic and societal cost associated with dropout. Students who fail to graduate face long-term consequences such as low wages, poor health, unemployment, and incarceration.

This mixed methods dissertation uses a case study approach to research a school district located in the Pacific Northwest that has been particularly successful in reducing the number of students who drop out prior to graduation. Four years' of district dropout data were used to analyze the trends in dropout reduction across four school years extending from 2015-2019 and an extant data set from the district's Student Needs Assessment survey was used to determine what differences, if any, there are in the self-reported experiences of Latinx students as compared to students from all other ethnic groups in the school district. In-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted with seven

different key personnel from the district were used to gather information about the strategies, approaches, and programs the district was using to achieve their dramatic results.

Results underscore the importance of having a shared goal, shared "ownership" of the students, listening to student voice, teaching the process of relationship building, access to and use of holistic data and hiring and supporting staff in efforts to reduce dropout rates. Findings suggest that social capital is the key construct supporting increased student graduation, with academic confidence, familial support, student voice, and options capital all contributing to the establishment of solid relationships that are at the center of the district's success. Suggestions for future research and implications for practice are discussed.

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I dedicate my dissertation as a homage to my grandparents Ovanes and Annik Shahbazian and my granduncle Minas Shahbazian. They fled the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and their only possessions were their education, their language, and their faith. From very early on, they instilled the love for learning in me because their enemy was ignorance. Ignorance had taken their land, home, livelihood, culture, joy and dignity. But they wanted a different life for me; one in which education offers hope and possibility beyond past adversities yet draws on them for resilience.

I dedicate this dissertation to the new generation, my son Sebastian who was born in the United States of America, known for the best universities in the world and where academic efforts are rewarded.

A place of departure.

Diaspora.

A place of arrival.

Thank you, grandparents!

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**CHAPTER I**

**INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE SYNTHESIS**

Reducing the number of students who drop out of high school remains a national priority for educators and policy makers (Alexander et al., 2001; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007; Rumberger, 1983). One reason for such prioritization is the fact that in recent history, more than 15% of high schools in the United States belonged to the category of "dropout factories" where 50% or more students failed to graduate (Belfanz & Letgers, 2004). Most "dropout factories" are located in urban and rural areas with high poverty rates.

One reason for prioritizing dropout prevention is the high economic and societal cost associated with dropout. Students who fail to graduate face long-term consequences such as low wages, poor health, unemployment, and incarceration (Belfield & Levin, 2007). It is imperative that this priority spurs a call to action because as Balfanz and Letgers (2004) argue, "we must no longer tolerate the squandered potential, limited life chances, and social malaise that result from poorly educating our nation's youth" (p. iv).

The good news is that as a result of national and local efforts, the average Oregon statewide graduation rate has increased to 80% (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) and the number of students enrolled in "dropout factories" has declined nationwide (Balfanz et al., 2012).

**Shining a Light for Others to Follow**

In Oregon, one large district (hereafter referred to with the pseudonym Verdi School District [VSD]) leads the state in an upward trajectory of increasing graduation

rate to 90%. Over the last few years, VSD has aimed at increasing the district's

graduation rate through the implementation of a dropout prevention program. The

objective of the dropout prevention program is to continue to increase graduation rates

and serve all students by narrowing the opportunity gap between immigrant, migrant and

low income Latinx and affluent White students. Over the past five years, the district has

reported both a reduction in the number of students who dropped out and a decrease in

the gap between the percent of Latinx and White students who complete high school. In

school year 2015-2016, 197 students dropped out. In 2016-2017, the number was 166. In

2017-2018, the total number of dropouts fell to 114, a low level that was maintained in

2018-2019, when 116 students dropped out. And, relevant to my proposed dissertation, it

is important to remark the difference in the percentage of White and Latinx students

completing school was similarly reducing in this time period. In 2017, there was a 6.48

percentage point difference in completer rates (86.08% non-Latinx vs 79.60% Latinx

students). In 2018, this number dropped to 5.55 percentage points (85.66% vs 80.11%),

and in 2019, it fell to 4.82 percentage points (87.97% vs 83.13%). This year-over-year

upward trajectory in school completion and dropout reduction suggests that VSD may

have important lessons from which other districts can learn.

### *VSD's Dropout Prevention Efforts*

In 2016, Oregon voters approved Measure 98, an initiative designed to develop

and grow career and technical education, and dropout prevention approaches by

providing funding that school districts began receiving in the 2017-18 school year. VSD

used this funding to hire three full-time graduation coaches (grad coaches), one student

support and wellness (SSW) counselor per high school, as well as one total district

student support systems teacher on special assignment (TOSA). The idea of hiring grad coaches was not new. The District had already hired a part-time grad coach with a grant from the Nike School Innovation Fund. The initiative proved successful, and the District decided to further fund it from Measure 98, staffing each high school with three full-time grad coaches, one SSW counselor and a District TOSA.

Although each high school has the freedom to adopt a personalized model and approach, grad coaches and SSW counselors have common features. They connect with students by learning their names, their strengths, their needs and their communities. In fact, most of the coaches come from similar demographic backgrounds and communities as the students. They build relationships with students who are identified as at-risk in the categories of *attendance*, *grades*, *number of credits earned*, and *behavior* with supports and resources. Their position differs from those of school counselors, teachers and administrators due to the flexibility of being mobile to find students who are not attending school and conducting home visits to connect with families. The TOSA also oversees the program and conducts professional development around using data tools, conducting home visits, and general role guidelines. Those in the TOSA role, "are not only helping students, they are also building trust with communities by meeting parents and families where they are. Several of them are from this community and are doing this work because it speaks to their heart. It says a lot about them and their desire to make a positive impact" (Measure 98).

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Students enter high school with established habits and attitudes about schooling. The decision to drop out of high school is not a single occurrence, but rather a progression that may commence as early as middle school with disengagement and withdrawal from school through poor attendance and lack of confidence in academic skills (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Entwisle et al., 2004; Fredericks & Eccles, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2006). In order to understand the process of disengagement, it helps to view it through both ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and cultural (Yosso, 2006) lenses. Uri Bronfenbrenner and Tara Yosso offer models that address disengagement through these perspectives while advancing hope for the future through a strength-based approach.

***The Social Ecological Lens of Uri Bronfenbrenner: A Checklist of Risk Factors***

Early adolescents face a myriad of developmental changes that include self-consciousness and the need for peer support and autonomy. Eccles and Midgley (1989) found that decision-making, class participation, high teacher expectations, and lack of aptitude comparison to peers relate to positive school motivation and engagement. In contrast, when students are not afforded these developmentally appropriate school contexts, disengagement increases in high school in a downward trajectory toward exiting high school (Finn & Owings, 2006; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Many students get lost in large impersonal high schools. These industrial-era schools operate like factories that have been given the impossible task of solving societal problems (Dorn, 1993). Dropping out of school is "a multi-dimensional life process" (Lessard, et al., 2008) that is described well by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner posits that people's development is associated with the ecological environment in which they live

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(Bronfenbrenner, 1977). I use the ecological approach when exploring the risk factors as a framework for the analysis and discussion. It is comprised of four interconnected systems that influence each other: the microsystem (the individual), the mesosystem (the relationships), the exosystem (the organization) and the macrosystem (the community) (see Figure 1).
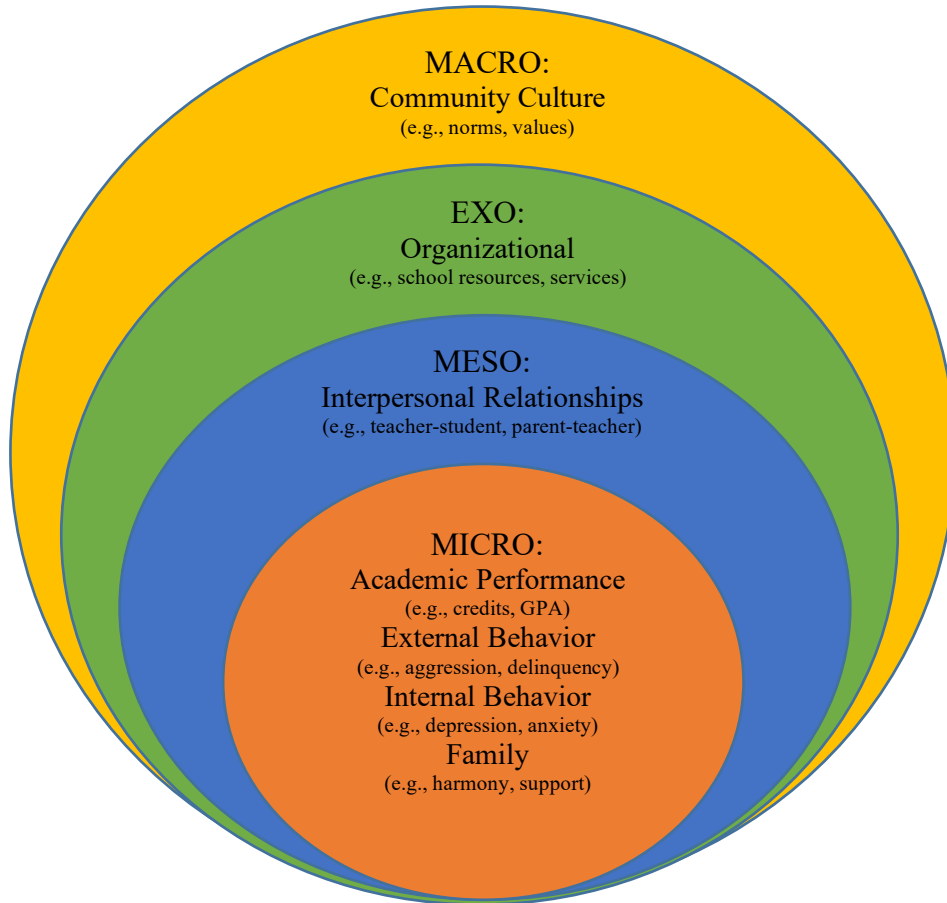


*Figure 1.* Social Ecological Model of Uri Bronfenbrenner applied to the school context.

**Microsystem.** At the center of the microsystem is the individual. Researchers have found that gender and behavior are risk factors for school dropout (Lessard et al., 2008). Previously, Rumberger (1995) found that males tend to drop out more than females. Recently, however, girls have been found to have higher probability of dropping

out than boys (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).  External behaviors such as delinquency and aggression (Fortin et al., 2004; Newcomb et al., 2002) and internal behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Marcotte et al., 2001) are personal risk factors for school dropout. The microsystem also includes the family. Low socioeconomic status is often reported to be a risk factor (Alexander et al., 1997; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Broken homes (Rumberger, 1995), conflict, lack of support and organization (Fortin et al., 2004; Potvin et al., 1999) have also been identified as risk factors. At the school level, low academic performance such as less course credits and failures, low cumulative GPA (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Bowers & Sprott, 2010b, Kasen at al., 1998) and grade retention (Rumberger, 1995) increase the dropout risk.

*Early Identification Predictors.* A plethora of studies focus on early identification predictors (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Davis et al., 2013; Gallup-Black & Sackman, 2015; Heppen, & Therriault, 2008; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010; Lehr et al., 2003; Mac Iver & Messer, 2013; Slaughter et al., 2018; Todd McKee & Caldarella, 2016). In order to provide the best intervention for dropout prevention, we need to know the factors concomitant with dropout. Rumberger (1987, 2004) found that demographic factors that predict dropout include gender-male, race- African American and Latinx, low socioeconomic status and contexts-rural and urban. Although these factors provide valuable information for potential risk, they are not alterable by school personnel. The stakes are high for correctly identifying predictors of dropout because district resources are limited, and students' needs are great. Unfortunately, many early warning indicators

have only 50-60% accuracy identifying dropouts (Balfanz et al., 2007; Gleason & Dynaski, 2002; Janosz et al., 2008).

Meanwhile, an extensive body of literature published in the last 30 years makes assertions about the accuracy of different dropout predictors. Bowers, Sprott and Taff (2013) compared the assertions of each research on precision, sensitivity and specificity using Relative Operating Characteristic (ROC) analysis. Bowers et al. (2013) found that the most accurate indicators treat dropout not with cross-sectional data, but "rather as a long-term longitudinal event history" using Growth Mixture Modeling (GMM) (Alexander et al., 2001; Bowers, 2010a, 2010b; Jimerson et al., 2000; Pallas, 2003).

However, although GMM may be the most accurate way to predict dropout, this approach might be too complex to be practical in school settings. School personnel need easy-to-calculate indicators that make use of readily available data. Bowers et al. (2013) reported that the second most accurate indicator for dropout is low or failing grades. Their study provided guidance on what they termed the Chicago on-track indicator, which includes low course credits and failures in grade 9 (Allensworth & Easton, 2007), low non-cumulative GPA (Bowers, 2010b), and three or more first semester course failures (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). With its accuracy, convenience, and easy calculation requirements, the Chicago on-track indicator is a powerful identification tool that educators can use to identify students who may need support to get back on-track for graduation.

Student grades are collected on a regular basis and offer an accessible and meaningful data point with high face validity for educators (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Bowers et al., 2013, Bowers, 2010a, 2010b). Although researchers have historically perceived

grades as subjective and inaccurate (Brookhart, 1991; Cizek et al., 1995-1996; Cross & Frary, 1999), recent studies have found that grades provide a multi-dimensional assessment not only of students' academic ability, but also of their behavior toward society and their personal agency to advocate for themselves (Bowers, 2009, 2011; Klapp Lekholm, & Cliffordson, 2008, 2009; Willingham et al., 2002). Teachers' grading criteria often include not only curriculum knowledge, but also class participation, behavior, and societal expectations at large (Klapp Lekholm & Cliffordson, 2009).

**Mesosystem.** The mesosystem consists of interactions that occur within the microsystem. Lessard, Fortin, Joly, Royer, and Blaya (2004) posit that teacher-student relationships (TSR) are the second most important factor that is associated with school dropout, lagging slightly behind academic performance. Indeed, a positive relationship with a teacher has the potential to improve academic outcomes and engagement with school. In addition, communication between parents and teachers/school are also important in determining risk (Potvin et al., 1999).

**Exosystem.** The exosystem includes larger social systems such as the district and the School Board. The impact of these larger systems could be significant in the day-to-day interactions with the students. For instance, implementation of programs such as Migrant Education Program (MEP), Career and Technical Education (CTE), Freshman Success, and many others, have the potential to provide the bloodline for students to thrive. I will further explore the exosystem in the ways it connects with the Cultural Community Wealth that students bring to their school.

**Macrosystem.** The macrosystem represents the cultural norms, attitudes, values and beliefs that are held by the society in which the student is living. In regard to

American high schools, these include norms about age and employment. For example, graduation is considered an age-specific norm for a teenager (Dorn, 1996). Teenagers are also expected to have school rather than work as their primary focus. Furthermore, the high school diploma has become an essential credential for employment. Latinx students bring their unique cultural norms and beliefs that are additive to their experience of school. These cultural capitals will be discussed in the next sections.

**The Community Cultural Wealth Model of Yosso**

The Bronfenbrenner ecological model values the interactions of the individual with its environment. In the context of schools, the mesosystem and the exosystem have the potential to interact and support the macrosystem of students' community cultural wealth. The social ecological model refrains from blaming the individual. Instead, this model focuses on the interrelated connections found in the school setting. However, there are connections that are unique to the context of specific ethnic cultures. Gómez Quiñones (1977) defines culture as material and nonmaterial, fluid, and characterized by learned and shared behaviors and values. Yosso (2006) expands the traditional definition of culture to community cultural wealth, "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77).

By utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT), Yosso (2006) shifts away from the deficit analytical research lens which renders Communities of Color as places of poverty and disadvantage. Instead, she adopts a new lens, placing their skills, knowledge, and cultural wealth as an asset that often goes unrecognized by dominant ideologies (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Villalpando & Solórzano,

2005; Yosso, 2006). Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (see *Figure 2*) centers on the additive, strength-based approach through a minimum of six kinds of capital: aspirational, navigational, linguistic, social, familial and resistant (Yosso, 2006).

As with the previous definition of culture, these capitals are not fixed, but rather in a constant flux, not separate, but rather mutually interactive. For instance, the aspirational capital of maintaining high hopes for the future (Auerbach, 2001, Delgado-Gaitan, 1992, 1994; Solórzano, 1992;) intersects with social, familiar, linguistic, resistant and navigational capitals through supportive adults, family advice (consejos), bilingualism, resisting dominant narratives of oppression and having navigational goals that go beyond their "parents' occupational status" (Gándara, 1995, p. 55). Schools have the potential to engage in practices that either "push out" students (Valenzuela, 1999) or welcome them by supporting their cultural capitals.

**Aspirational Capital.** *Aspirational Capital* relates to the dreams and hopes of people toward their future. Immigrants arrive in the U.S. with high aspirations of getting a second chance in life and improving the standard of living beyond the circumstances that their prior life presented. For most immigrants to the United States, these aspirations focus on what is known around the world as the American dream—a social mobility in which anyone can achieve wealth regardless of their background. Thus, Latinx parents have high hopes for their children despite their own educational outcomes (Gándara, 1982, 1995). Schools promote *Aspirational Capital* by helping students think about their future careers through teaching lessons that are inclusive of students' interests and culture as well as through conveying the expectation that students will continue their education beyond high school. Some schools offer classes in AVID (Advancement Via Individual

Determination) intended to encourage students pursue their college and career aspirations.

**Navigational Capital.** *Navigational Capital* refers to the capacity to operate within a system. It requires knowledge of written and unwritten laws and norms and resourcefulness to access this information. This capital often manifests in the ability to quickly code-switch between cultural capitals (e.g., linguistic and social) depending on the context. For newcomers, this capital may be challenging at first, but familial capital often fills the gap with advice and information. Although Latinx youth face inequality and racism (Pierce, 1974, 1989, 1995), they utilize personal agency while navigating through educational, health care, judicial, and workplace systems (Williams, 1997). Schools provide the resources necessary to help students navigate the educational system. These resources include teaching students how to stay on track with graduation requirements as well as providing credit recovery options for those who are not on-track. In addition, students learn that there are alternative high schools available in case the traditional model is not the best fit. Finally, students are introduced to career and college pathways as early as elementary school.
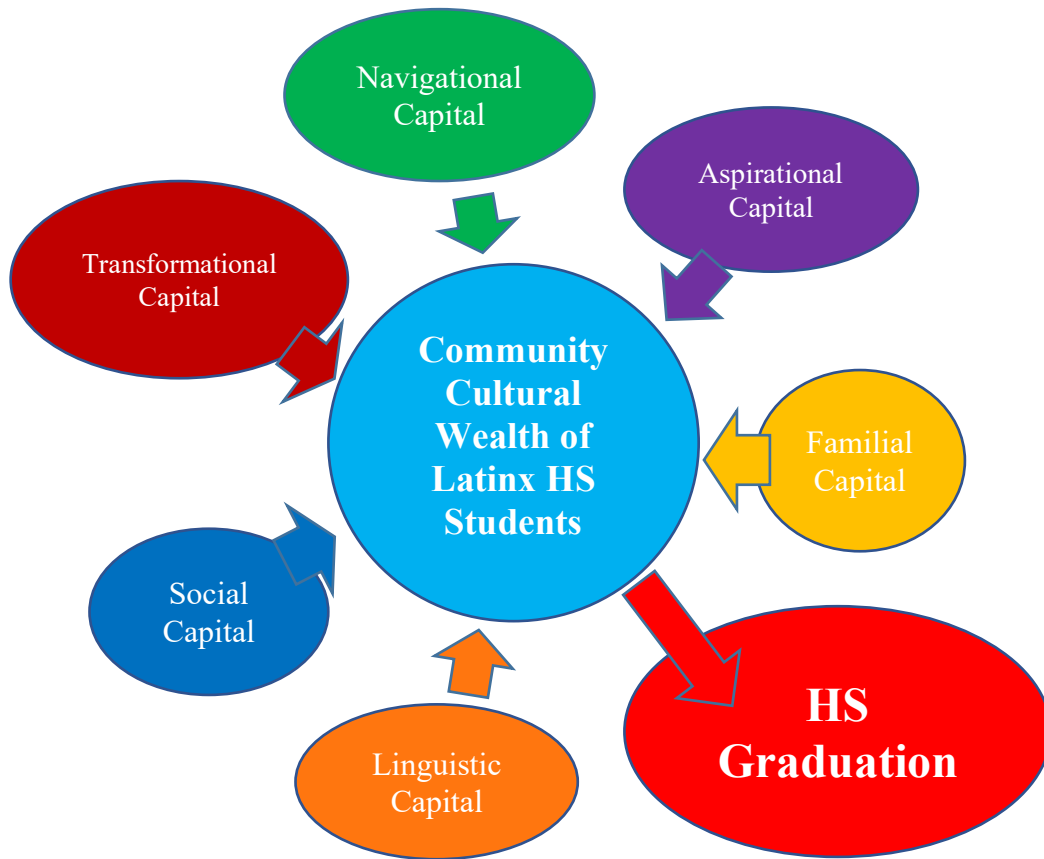
*Figure 2.* A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from: Yosso, 2006

**Linguistic Capital.** *Linguistic Capital* represents language that goes beyond a string of sentences. With its symbolism, cultural relevance, and social importance, linguistic capital permeates all other capitals and is deeply woven into the fabric of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). Latinx students arrive with a bag full of knowledge of their native language. All too often, however, English-only ideologies result in subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) that "strip[s] away students' identities" in which language plays a crucial role (p. 10). Research about the merit of bilingualism (Anzaldúa, 1987; Cummins, 1986; Darder, 1991; García & Baker, 1995; Gutierrez, 2002; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999) addresses linguistic capital. Latinx students often draw on their linguistic capital to translate for their parents and other adults (Faulstich Orellana,

2003). Schools acknowledge students' *linguistic capital* through providing translations of home communication, surveys and more. In addition, some schools provide bilingual and dual immersion programs and honor bilingualism through awarding the Seal of Biliteracy along with the high school diploma.

**Social Capital.** *Social Capital* represents the relationships that students form with others. These social networks provide support and a buffer against adversity (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001) and mainstream institutions (Gilbert, 1982; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Sources of social capital include family members, friends, teachers, counselors and anyone with whom the youth form a trusted relationship. Schools invest in promoting students' *social capital* by placing value in relationship building between students and adults, such as teachers, athletic coaches, counselors and graduation coaches, who have the potential of serving as mentors and positive role models. Such relationships provide guidance in a variety of ways. An adult mentor might help students with decision-making and conflict resolution. As adolescents prepare to enter adulthood, schools provide the context in which social relationships may develop and thrive. Thus, social capital is not only a micro individual asset but also a macro "communal good" (Lee & Burkam, 2003, p. 362).

**Familial Capital.** *Familial Capital* applies to the resources that kinship (immediate and extended family members) provides. For Latinx youth, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and friends may play just as important a role as mother and father. Familial capital also offers communal connections through the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Olmedo, 1997; Vélez-Ibáñez, & Greenberg, 1992). Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) originally defined funds of knowledge as the historical accrual of

abilities, knowledge, assets, and ways of interacting that can support students' academic progress when recognized, valued, and bridged from the family to the classroom setting. Schools support the students' *familial capital* by providing the family with access to the students' grades as well as discussing students' educational progress during teacher-parent conferences and events such as back-to-school night. In addition, many schools try to provide a welcoming environment for parents to be involved in their child's education. Finally, schools connect parents with community resources.

**Transformational Capital.** *Transformational Capital* stands for the capacity to challenge inequity and stand strong in the face of adversity. Latinx youth resist discrimination in a transformative way by drawing on their strength, resilience, and self-reliance to get ahead. According to Villenas and Moreno (2001), Latina mothers instruct their daughters to "*valerse por si misma"* (value themselves) and resist negative messages based on racism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Resisting these messages rather than internalizing them has the potential to transform structures of oppression (Pizarro, 1998; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Schools strive to provide a climate where students feel safe and welcome. Ideally, school climate promotes an expectation of academic success. In this ideal climate, students develop personal agency and feel that their voice is heard and can impact change. If such change is not possible, students who attend schools where *transformational capital* is supported, understand why such change might be limited.

**The Value of CCW lens in Today's Schools**

All students benefit from the CCW's lens. However, this lens is particularly useful for Latinx students for variety of reasons. First, Latinx is the fastest-growing minority group in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2006, 2008). They are primarily

foreign-born, likely to be younger and first-generation, who speak a native language other than English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Second, besides the substantial anticipated growth of Latinx groups, Smith, Domenech Rodríguez, and Bernal (2010) found that a cultural adaptation tailored to the context of a single ethnic group, as an alternative to various, enhances outcomes. So, rather than focusing on all the subgroups, I propose a study centered on the cultural capital of Latinx students as a unique and additive ethnic group. Third, the graduation outcomes for Latinx students are among the lowest. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), no more than 27.8% received a high school diploma, only 13% received a bachelor's degree and merely 5.4% received a graduate degree.

In addition, I have both personal and professional reasons for wanting to focus on the Latinx student population. Although I come from a different ethnic background (Armenian), my professional experience has intercepted with the Latinx culture in my capacities as a Spanish immersion teacher and Dual Language Immersion (DLI) coordinator. I have been fortunate to intercept my own experience as a war and political refugee, immigrant, and English language learner with my professional practice of working with Latinx students, families, and culture.

The primary objective of this research study is to present a description of a successful program and document the interventions used by VSD to reduce their dropout rate, highlighting what district leadership and school personnel have done to positively impact their students' completer graduation rate. In addition, I will analyze students' self-reported experiences at school through their responses to a district-administered survey which students helped to draft. In doing so, I also wish to provide a generalizable,

conceptual framework that links Latinx students at-risk with the additive capital of their culture. Ultimately, I hope this study might provide insight to local and state policymakers to provide similar supports in which community cultural wealth can be a mechanism for improving educational outcomes for at-risk Latinx students.

**Research Questions**

The study specifically addresses the following research questions:

**R₁**. What is one school district doing to improve graduation rates?

**R₂**. What differences, if any, are there in school dropout trends between Latinx and White students in a school district that reports increasing graduation rates?

**R₃**. What differences, if any, are there in the self-reported experiences of Latinx and all other racial groups in the school district?

$R_{3.1}$ Are there aspirational differences (e.g., students' perceptions of fitting well with the traditional high school and high perceptions of teachers' approachability, different ways of teaching, job satisfaction, inclusive curriculum, college and career expectations as well as understanding, autonomy and technology access related to homework completion)?

$R_{3.2}$ Are there transformational differences (e.g., students' perceptions of safety, welcoming school climate, having a voice in school matters that can impact change and if not, having the understanding of why that is not as well as availability of social emotional supports)?

$R_{3.3}$ Are there familial differences (e.g., students' perceptions of parent or guardian's knowledge of ways to support educational goals, student status, access to grades/attendance, available resources and comfort coming to school)?

R<sub>3.4</sub> Are there navigational differences (e.g., students' perceptions of knowledge of college and career pathways, graduation requirements, credit recovery, and available alternative options if the traditional school is not a good fit)?

**CHAPTER II**

**METHODS**

My research study combined both qualitative and quantitative perspectives in a mixed method design. Additionally, it recognized the student perspective in the context of their own cultural capital as it related to academic outcomes. Consistent with the study's purpose and prior research, I conducted interviews with key members of the district, explored retrospective longitudinal data on dropouts, and analyzed data from the district's *Needs Assessment Survey* to describe the district's approach to decreasing dropouts, document dropout trends, and analyze students' experience in Verdi School District (VSD) through the CCW lens.

**Setting**

VSD is located in a large urban Oregon community, primarily residential and business, with a population of approximately 589,000. VSD is one of the largest districts in the state, serving over 20,000 students (54.04% elementary, 15.24% middle school, 30.73% high school) in 32 traditional schools and four alternative options (one K-8, one online school, one charter school, and one alternative programs campus). Enrollment for high school students (grade 9-12) was approximately 6,200, with 45% White and 38% Latinx students. Approximately 26% of all students were English Learners (ELs), 15% had Special Education Status (SPED), and 47% were designated as economically disadvantaged. Table 1 presents school district demographics for the four graduating cohorts in the study. As shown in the table, the district is showing increasing graduation rates and declining school dropout rates over time. Over the same time period, the

proportion of Latinx students in the district has been increasing while the proportion of white students has been declining.

Table 1

*School District Demographics (9-12 grades) in 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-2019*

|  | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Enrollment | 6,317 | 6,208 | 6,208 | 6,208 |
| White | 49% | 49% | 46% | 45% |
| Latinx | 34% | 34% | 37% | 38% |
| English Learners | 24% | 26% | 26% | 26% |
| Econ Disadvantaged | 47% | 47% | 47% | 47% |
| Students with Disabilities | 15% | 15% | 15% | 15% |
| Graduation Rate | 81.68% | 84.10% | 84.47% | 86.24 |
| Dropout Rate | 3.07% | 2.58% | 1.88% | 1.84% |

**Participants**

Participants included a variety of people employed in the district (for the qualitative interviews to address RQ1) as well as data from two different samples of students (to address RQ2 and RQ3). In all, I interviewed seven VSD employees, identified by the district as likely to have insight on the topic: an assistant superintendent (AS), a data specialist (DS), a credit recovery options teacher (OT), a college and career pathway director (PD), an alternative principal (AP), a graduation coach (GC), and a student support services teacher (ST).

***Student Subsample 1: Extant Data on School Dropout***

The first subsample of students represented the school dropouts from 4 cohorts (2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19) from all of the high schools in the district. The sample included 600 students, of whom 205 were White, 343 were Latinx and 52 were from other racial backgrounds. Because I was specifically interested in the trends in dropout between Latinx and White students, the 52 students from other racial backgrounds were excluded from the analyses related to RQ2.

***Student Subsample 2: Extant Data from the District Needs Assessment.***

In addition to focusing on the school dropouts, I also studied a second sample that included all students (graduates and non-graduates) who completed the district's *Needs Assessment Survey* during the 2019-20 school year. The total number of respondents to this survey was 3,422. Table 2 presents the demographic data for Subsample 2.

Table 2

*Demographic Data for Subsample 2 in the All-Students Sample*

| Variable | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Enrolled grade 9 | 1129 | 33 |
| Enrolled grade 10 | 996 | 29 |
| Enrolled grade 11 | 648 | 19 |
| Enrolled grade 12 | 642 | 19 |
| Enrolled Grade 13 | 5 | <1 |
| African American | 85 | 3 |
| American Indian/Native Alaskan | 18 | <1 |
| Asian | 288 | 8 |
| Latinx | 1003 | 29 |
| Native Hawaiian | 47 | 1 |
| White | 1621 | 47 |
| Multiple | 358 | 11 |

**Measures**

To address RQ1, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of seven district employees. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, the online video conferencing platform, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. To address RQ2 and RQ3, I used district-provided extant quantitative data on school dropout and extant qualitative data from the *Needs Assessment*.

The Oregon Report Card groups student outcomes into four categories: (a) four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), (b) completion rate, (c) five-year graduation rate, and (d) dropout rate. In addition, cohorts of students comprised of first time ninth graders with a 4-year expected graduation are created as a way to report graduation or lack of it to the State. The four-year AGCR includes students who receive a regular diploma that meets the district and state requirements in four years whether or not they have moved in or out of the state. The completion rate includes "students receiving a regular, modified, extended, or adult high school diploma or completing a GED" (Oregon Department of Education, 2019) within five years. The five-year graduation rate consists of students who continue in high school for a fifth year and receive a regular diploma. Finally, the dropout rate takes account of students who drop out during the school year, do not re-enroll, and whose records show that they did not move to another school.

*School Dropout Data*

VSD has a robust and continuous data collection mechanism that tracks their students from K-12. For this study, I used de-identified official data tracking the district's dropouts. Table 3 provides the manner in which the variables were coded.

Table 3
*Code Definitions*

| Field Name | Code | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| Enrolled Grade Codes | 0 | Student enrolled the district in 9th grade |
| | 1 | Student enrolled in 10th grade |
| | 2 | Student enrolled in 11th grade |
| | 3 | Student enrolled in 12th grade |
| Gender Codes | 0 | Male |
| | 1 | Female |
| TAG Codes | 0 | Student does not have a Talented and Gifted classification |
| | 1 | Student has a Talented and Gifted classification |
| Economically Disadvantaged Codes | 0 | Students is not eligible for free and reduced-price lunch |
| | 1 | Students is eligible for free and reduced-price lunch |
| SPED Codes | 0 | Student does not have a Special Education classification |
| | 1 | Student does not have a Special Education classification |
| EL Codes | 0 | Student does not have an English Learner classification |
| | 1 | Student has an English Learner classification |
| Former EL Codes | 0 | Student has exited the English Language Development (ELD) program |
| | 1 | Student has not exited the ELD program |
| Homeless Student | 0 | Student who does not lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence |
| | 1 | Student who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence |
| Migrant Codes | 0 | Student does not have a Migrant classification |
| | 1 | Student has a Migrant classification |
| CTE Participant Codes | 0 | Student who has not earned .5 or more Career and Technical Education credits |
| | 1 | Any secondary student who has earned one-half (.5) or more credits in any technical skill course part of an Oregon state- approved CTE program. |
| CTE Concentrator Codes | 0 | Student who has not earned one or more CTE credits |
| | 1 | Any secondary student who has earned one (1) or more credits in technical skill-based courses as part of an Oregon state-approved CTE program, of which at least one-half (.5) credit must be designated as a required course. |

According to the Oregon Department of Education, a dropout is a student who withdrew

from school and did not graduate or transfer to another school that leads to graduation.

The dropout data identified all students who had dropped out between the 2015 and 2019

school years. Appendix A lists the definitions of the variables included in the dropout data set.

**Needs Assessment Data**

The third subset of participants included all high school students who took the *Needs Assessment* (NA). The NA used in this study comes from a district-administered self-report measure of students' experience along with the demographic data of enrolled grade, race/ethnicity, and gender. The original 35-item NA assessed adolescents' experience with school services, personnel, academic expectations, college and career pathways, homework and included one open-ended question. For this study, I ran a factor analysis of the NA, and then selected a sub-set of 25 items from the NA that clustered into the following four factors: academic confidence, student voice, familial support and alternative options as they relate to students' school experiences. Thus, the Needs Assessment used in my dissertation is best viewed as an adaptation of the District's full Needs Assessment.

The first section, *academic confidence*, included nine items that were linked to fitting well with the traditional high school and high perceptions of teachers' approachability, different ways of teaching, job satisfaction, inclusive curriculum, college and career expectations as well as understanding, autonomy and technology access related to homework completion (e.g., "*I understand the homework assignments and can complete them by myself.*"). The second section, *student voice*, was comprised of six items, connected to students' perceptions of safety, welcoming school climate, having a voice in school matters that can impact change and if not, having the understanding of why that is not as well as availability of social emotional supports (e.g., *"In my school I*

*have a say in important matters affecting our school"*). The third section, *familial support*, contained five items that were associated with parent or guardian's knowledge of ways to support educational goals, student status, access to grades/attendance, available resources and comfort coming to school (e.g., "*My Parents/Guardians know how to support my educational goals.*"). The fourth section, *alternative options*, contained six items, related to knowledge of college and career pathways, graduation requirements, credit recovery and available alternative options if the traditional school is not a good fit (e.g., "*I know exactly what I need to graduate on time.*").

All responses to items were provided on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree*, 1= *disagree*, 2= *neutral*, 3= *agree*, 4= *strongly agree).*

**Procedures**

To identify people to interview for RQ1, I contacted an assistant superintendent from VSD and asked for suggestions about staff who might be able and willing to provide insight into the things the district had been doing over the past five years to reduce student dropouts and increase graduation rates. The assistant superintendent provided me with a list of seven names and also emailed each of the people she had identified to request that they cooperate and agree to be interviewed. All seven of the district employees whom the assistant superintendent had identified as potential interviewees agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted in February of 2021. Each interview was conducted on the online video conferencing platform Zoom. Prior to the interviews, each participant was sent the consent form for this study. At the start of each interview, I reviewed the consent form with the individual about to be interviewed to ensure that they understood the purpose of the research, their potential involvement in it,

and the voluntary nature of their participation. Once consent had been obtained, I moved to the interview questions. Each interview included one main question with up to five follow up questions. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. At the end of each interview, I thanked the participant for their input.

The extant dropout data were collected over a period of four years and embodied a sub-set of the data tracked from the district's main Early Warning Indicators (EWI) dataset. EWI data were collected and updated on a daily basis by school personnel. The EWI dataset identified which students were at risk based on attendance, grades, credits accumulated, and discipline. The extant dropout data were gathered at the end of each school year to be presented to the State Department of Education.

The District created the *Needs Assessment* (NA) in 2015 in order to learn from students what was going well or not. The intention was to surface what students thought versus what administration thought was happening to them. Subsequently, the NA has been administered every two years in order to assess growth.

The NA was administered via email during school hours near the end of the school year in classroom settings by the students' Advisory teacher. The NA took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was offered. In 2019, 3,016 high school students (grades 9-12) and 2,749 middle school students (grades 7-8) completed the assessment, a response rate of 48% for high school and 89% for middle school students. For this study, only the high school responses were analyzed.

*Data Preparation*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the Zoom platform's transcription service, and later corrected by me in the sections where the transcription failed to accurately capture what had been said. This process resulted in 81 pages of transcribed interviews.

To explore the ways in which CCW might provide useful insight to improve the VSD dropout prevention efforts, I analyzed data from the NA using an adaptation to the CCW lens, informed both by my factor analysis of the NA data and the qualitative data obtained through the interviews with district personnel. To do this, I categorized items from the NA into four forms of Cultural Capitals (*academic confidence, student voice, familial support*, and *alternative options*) to create four separate sub-scales (See Table 4 for a description of the items in these sub-scales). Because the NA does not address language, linguistic capital was not included as a sub-scale. However, it is worth noting that the NA promotes the additive value of linguistic capital by providing the option of administering it in Spanish as well as in English.

Table 4

*Description of Cultural Capitals of the Needs Assessment*

| Capital Items | Scale |
| --- | --- |
| **Academic Confidence** (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Entwisle et al., 2004; Fredericks & Eccles, 2002; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006) | 0-4 Likert |
|     12. Secondary options (The traditional high school environment is the best fit for me to be successful.) | |
|     21. Most of My Teachers [Are approachable and supportive when I am struggling with a problem in class] | |
|     22. Most of My Teachers [Use different ways of teaching that help me achieve the knowledge and skills I need to know] | |

Table 4

*Description of Cultural Capitals of the Needs Assessment (Continued)*

| Capital Items | Scale |
|---|---|
| **Academic Confidence** (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Entwisle et al., 2004; Fredericks & Eccles, 2002; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006) | 0-4 Likert |

    23. Most of My Teachers  [Are excited about teaching and enjoy what they do]
    24. Most of My Teachers [Teach lessons that include my culture and interests]
    25. Most of My Teachers [Expect me to attend college or any after high school education]
    32. Homework [I understand how it is connected to what I am learning in class]
    33. Homework [I understand the assignments and can complete them by myself]
    34. Homework [I have technology or access (computer & internet) to what I need to do the work at home]

| **Student Voice** (Pizarro, 1998; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Villenas & Moreno, 2001; Yosso, 2006) | 0-4 Likert |
|---|---|

    26. In My School [The climate is welcoming and expects academic success for all students]
    27. In My School [I have a say in important matters affecting our school]
    28. In My School [My opinions impact change]
    29. In My School [If my opinions do not impact change, I have a clear understanding of why not]
    30. In My School [I feel safe]
    31. In My School [Social emotional supports (Counselors, Support & Wellness Counselor, Youth Contact, etc.) are easy and readily available to access]

| **Familial Support** (Gonzalez, et al., 1995; Olmedo, 1997; Vélez-Ibáñez, & Greenberg, 1992; Yosso, 2006) | 0-4 Likert |
|---|---|

    16. My Parents/Guardians [Know how I am doing in school]
    17. My Parents/Guardians [Know how to support my educational goals ]
    18. My Parents/Guardians [Know how to access and use Parent VUE]
    19. My Parents/Guardians [Understand/know what school resources are available to me and my family]
    20. My Parents/Guardians [Are comfortable coming to school to access/advocate for resources that are available to me and my family]

| **Alternative Options** (Pierce, 1974, 1989, 1995; Williams, 1997; Yosso, 2006) | 0-4 Likert |
|---|---|

 9. I have a career and college pathway that interests me
10. Secondary options (I know exactly what I need to graduate on time)
11. Secondary options (My classes are helping me to think about my future career)
13. Secondary options (If the traditional high school environment is not the best fit for me, I know other schools or programs that are available to me)
14. Secondary options (I know what options are available to me if I need to recover credits to graduate on time)
15. Secondary options (I know who to ask for help if the traditional high school is not fitting my needs)

**Data Analysis**

This descriptive study was intended to describe the VSD efforts by addressing three research questions. To answer RQ1 *(What is one school district doing to improve graduation rates?),* I used qualitative analysis of interviews and district artifacts (e.g., website). To answer RQ2 *(What differences, if any, are there in school dropout trends between Latinx and White students in a school district that reports increasing graduation rates?),* I report frequency counts and trend lines to provide a lens by which to visually compare dropout trends between Latinx and White students. To answer RQ3 *(What differences, if any, are there in the experiences of Latinx and other races?),* a number of analysis were performed to explore students' experiences in high school settings. First, a statistician ran an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using the students' responses to the Needs Assessment from the total sample ($n = 3,420$), and using SAS PROC MI (Version 9.4) to impute one full dataset. The imputation model included demographic characteristics (grade, school, race, and gender) and all variables under study. The fully conditional specification method (Van Buuren, 2007) that assumes a joint distribution of variables was used to generate the dataset and is appropriate for non-normal data. Estimates were produced by using the extraction method of principal component analysis with Varimax with Keiser Normalization rotation. Finally, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore differences between racial groups in their responses to the variables of the four factors of *academic confidence, student voice, familial support and alternative options*.

**CHAPTER III**

**RESULTS**

In this chapter, I present the results of my study, organized by research question.

**Interviews**

To answer RQ1 (*What is one school district doing to improve graduation rates?)* and to gain a better understanding of the practices that resulted in increase in graduation rates, I interviewed seven VSD employees, identified by the district as likely to have insight on the topic: an assistant superintendent (AS), a data specialist (DS), a credit recovery options teacher (OT), a college and career pathway director (PD), an alternative principal (AP), a graduation coach (GC) and a student support services teacher (ST). All interviews were transcribed, and all transcriptions were coded to identify themes (see Figure 3). Participants' insight about what contributed to the district's increase in graduation rates included the overarching theme of building relationships among all stakeholders as a way to support the unique needs of each student and provide the maximum opportunity for access and success in a personalized way.

***Shared goal***

The participants stressed the importance of having a shared goal based on their commitment to the district's mission and vision that guide the structure and allocation of resources. One participant noted that the district's mission is to "engage and challenge all learners to ensure academic excellence" and the vision is a "shared ownership, responsibility, and commitment to success among all stakeholders."

SHARED "OWNERSHIP" of Students "

SHARED GOAL

College & Career PATHWAYS

LISTENING to Student Voice

Building RELATIONSHIPS through

Hiring & Supporting STAFF

TEACHING THE PROCESS

HOLISTIC DATA
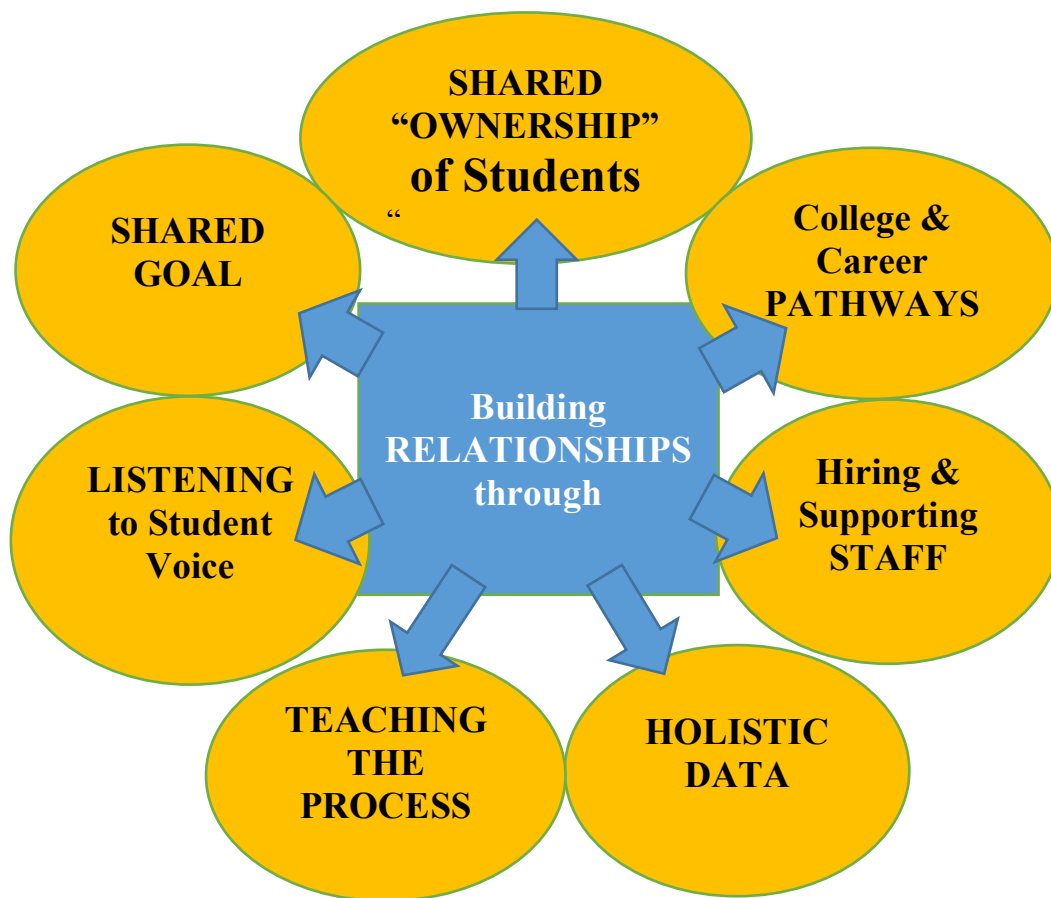
*Figure 3.* A model of common themes.

Another participant provided an illustration of what this approach means in action:

> … you need to know what your mission is, what your vision is. Then you put your structure to support that and then your resources to support that. What happens in most organizations is that they get bogged down in this structure-resource thing, and they don't know where they're going. When it comes to the structure, I would rarely sit in my office because most of the things I need to do are in a school (the game is in the school). If I have to answer emails, I don't sit in my office …I take my computer, and I'll hunker down in the cafeteria of a high school. Why do I have to be in an office when I'm going to learn so much more there? I'm going to talk to kids, and I'm going to see staff…
> I'm consistently saying the same message over and over and over and over because I just feel like education is forever looking for the silver bullet that's going to solve everything, and the reality is it's just about knowing the kids, high quality teaching and learning and helping them get on a path to whatever they're

getting. There's no magic bullet. It's just work, and it's just staying focused and not chasing this program or that training that you know is not going to work.

You know it's really funny, I had a teacher one time. I was doing this training…for elementary leadership collaboration, which is four times a year. We bring teachers together and they represent all the schools, and we teach the same thing, so they can teach it into their schools… So, I always do the kickoff, and I always try to do a hard story … and when the teacher she comes over and she goes, "Are you going to give us some sappy story about equity and then tell us that we need to stay focused on language and rigor and college and career?" And I said, "Yes, I am. You don't know how happy that makes me. You are going to sit in the audience and roll your eyes, because once again I am saying the same thing. That makes me happy beyond compare because when you're going to make a decision about what you're going to do in the class next week you will be like, "Oh, maybe I have to think about language, rigor and college and career because that's what I've heard for seven years. (AS)

### *Holistic Data Helps to Connect and Build Relationships*

A clear message that came out of the interviews was the idea that it is not only the structure and resources that support the mission and vision, but the district's data system, which was custom-designed to enable them to connect and build relationships. VSD has invested in a data system that tracks students during their entire K-12 experience. It is called District Capacity Assessment (DCA). DCA provides an avenue to track students' performance over time, and it is not limited to test scores. It also includes holistic information about students. Because the data system is so robust and holistic, the district uses it to inform their practice. The data system becomes a tool to *identify, connect,* and *disrupt*, thus, making education more personable and making it harder for students to get lost in the system. One participant explained:

…the data reveal not just that a student got a 76% in science, but also that she was in choir and in eighth grade she was part of the robotics club, and so you get this holistic view of kids. You can look up an individual kid, and you can pull it by attendance, or by whatever you need, and it has real on-demand updates every single night. That's been really a game changer because anybody [who has access to district-level data] can look at it…Real on demand data has been a turning point, because you can't chase kids if you don't know them. And you just can't know them by a percentage of how many classes they failed or passed, but by

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knowing all the angles…We're trying to make it smaller because kids get really lost. (AS)

Not only can educators look for historical patterns in attendance, behavior, and academics to identify students at-risk early on, but they also have access to historical teacher records. One participant identified this as an essential part of what makes the system so useful:

> … you can see students' attendance from kindergarten all the way up to 12th grade. You can see…attendance patterns. …For example, I see a drop in sixth grade, and I can literally see who that student had as a sixth-grade teacher, and I can email them, or I can call them and say, "Mr. Sanchez (pseudonym), do you remember this student? Can you please tell me a little bit more about what happened at this point? Why they had this great attendance up until that point and then all of a sudden there was a significant drop?" (DS)

The data system not only holds historical data, but it also identifies students at risk on a weekly basis and sends a report to educators. Another participant discussed the importance of these notices when it comes to connecting students to trusted adults:

> Every single Monday it [DCA] sends a list of all the kids that are 'missing in action' in the entire district to every administrator in the district. Every kid that's a 10 day drop whether in high schools or not is on that list… Elementary principals have our kids for seven years. So, they build this great relationship with them for seven years and off the kids go and they have no idea anything's going on. But when they get that list, they can click on the student's name. And it will go straight to that student's entire page in DCA, and I can pick up the phone and go, 'Hey, you know Carlos (pseudonym)? What's up with him? I see he hasn't gone to school for 10 days.'

> When I was at the district office, there were three kids that I called off that list. I remembered one of the students, Bobby (pseudonym) was very smart. She was a Latinx student, and she had been in multiple foster homes. When she showed up on that list, I called her and said, 'This is Ms. Fisher.' She said, 'Ms. Fisher from elementary?' and I said, 'Yes.' Bobby responded, 'I haven't seen you in about six years. What do you call me for?' I said, 'You're on the drop out list, and you're smarter than that, and you're better than that. So, what's it going to take to get you back? What do you need to do?' and she goes, 'To be honest, I was doing the GED program, and I was going to go to college because I want to be a mechanic like my dad. But my car broke down, and I don't have any money to buy the parts, and I can't get to school.' And I said, 'Get on the bus.' And she goes, 'They

don't have a bus to go to Miller.' And I go, 'Do your little brother and sisters get on the bus?' And she goes, 'Yes.' And I said, 'Get on the bus and walk five blocks.' She was concerned about what the little kids would think. I asked her to give me 24 hours, and I called the bus driver and told him to say to the other kids that she is an adult supervisor. I told the bus driver, 'Get her off the bus when she gets to Lincoln street. She's walking to Miller.' Three weeks later, she calls me, 'I passed my GED!' Yes, we have to rely on the relationships. Whether it's your first-grade teacher or your twelfth-grade counselor or your seventh-grade science teacher or your elementary school principal who tell you, 'I am going to chase you down!'(DS)

Another key bit of information data provide are grading and teaching practices. Thus,

educators can reflect and disrupt their own biases. One participant commented on this:

I also have the ability to pull up reports on a teacher so it's key on reflection of teaching practice. For example, I can see a teacher's distribution of grades per class, and I can see the F distribution by race, ethnicity, etc. So, I can self-reflect and self-analyze as a teacher on what is my class demographic and based off of my demographic is my grade distribution leaning more one way than the other. Are we truly grading on the standards that we are trying to teach or are we trying to light in some behavior in their writing? And behavior is not a standard, so why are you going to grade a kid on, for example, coming tardy to your class? That is not a standard in any core content area…how do we disrupt this pattern, how do we interrupt it, are we making the exception of, "Oh this kid of color is close, so I'm just going to bump it up." No, it's about holding a high expectation for all students. And it's also a self-reflection on you as the educator to improve your practice not just make exceptions by simply changing the letter grade in your grade book. (DS)

Traditionally, data measure the success of the student. However, this method is

reminiscent of the bootstrap myth which implies that all people, regardless of their life

circumstances, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps to achieve success. As one

of my participants stated, "It's hard to pull up bootstraps when you don't even know you

can put boots on" (AS).

Instead of blaming the individual, data reveal a deeper narrative that measures the

success of the system in supporting the student:

… at first, we were looking at the data to measure how a student is succeeding. Now what we're starting to look more at, "How do we use data to be anti-racist

and anti-oppressive? and How do we use data to measure the success of our systems? For example, if we have referral data, we could say it shows us that our Latino males are more likely to use drugs than are our White students. Or we could say our Latino males are getting caught or they are not being supported to resist. Let's make sure we're looking at the data and understand what we're measuring. And have a discussion about what we can have control over and can change. So, it's like measuring the soil…. A farmer isn't going to stand up and scream at their corn, "You didn't grow out there, we are done with you, we're not growing corn right. It's how we water; how we provide what was needed to grow healthy corn. That's what we want for our students, "How do we make sure that we're providing what is needed for them successful in a system?" and so that's the hard part" (ST).

Another participant reflected on the importance of being aware of personal biases when analyzing data from the DCA:

> … when we are looking at our data, specifically for mental health and social emotional learning and how do we know that it's not with a biased lens. Because sometimes when we package data that also tells a narrative and can be unintentional…"How do we tell that, in a way that's just, here's the data, and not to portray something that we are perceiving rather than perpetuating a narrative?" (PD).

### *Teaching the Process of Building Relationships*

The first step in building relationships with students is knowing them by name, strengths, and needs. Participants describe a culture shift that aims to humanize rather than marginalize. The support teacher noted the district's emphasis on "First teach the human and then add the content…high standards increased support." The alternative principal also brought up the importance of relationships, saying:

> Our district leads a K-12 support of high schools and graduation rates, but the emphasis is on relationships. I say that because in traditional education, the three are Reading, Writing, Arithmetic. So, this has been not to replace that, academics are still important, but the student and teacher partnership, with parents and so that's been an emphasis.

During our interview, the options teacher noted the importance of finding ways to help make learning enjoyable and meaningful for students:

Often kids are treated as damaged goods, a lot of them lost the joy back to second grade school and we do an awesome job in education of sucking the joy out of learning. I mean we are pros at it. Pretty amazing how we are. It saddens me, I have a grandson that lives with us right now and he's doing kindergarten. And the joy and excitement of learning and all that and I always ask myself, "When did we suck that joy out and not truly understanding individuals and learning styles?"

The assistant superintendent talked at length about the ways in which district employees are committed to knowing their students well and connecting with them on an individual basis. She said:

> … our credit recovery teachers deal with individual situations. When Sarah (pseudonym) had to leave for two weeks because her grandma got sick or Jo (pseudonym) had to go to Mexico, because his aunt was getting married, [the OT]. would say, "Okay, we got you!" It's this "we got you" kind of mentality that builds multiple ways for students to be successful. Sometimes students work individually with teachers and sometimes we ask them, "Well, what is your long-term goal?  You're five credits behind. Your goal is to get into the military? Okay, so let's just get you these credits, so you can get there." It's not like, "Let's get you in a system to get to a B or an A," but we want to [relate to kids] get an even flow with kids.

The options teacher also spoke eloquently about the district's emphasis on honest relationships:

> So instead of trying to force a kid in the system, look at the kid as a package, build a relationship with them, get them set, so when they get done with high school, they have a foundation, and then the doors start to open up for them. So, it's all about the long game in my world. It's immediate relationship stuff but it's about the long game with the students… You can bring in different factors (e.g., socioeconomic) that have different effects on different students and different people. But ultimately valuing a person as an individual and a human being. They feel that they know that all that stuff goes out the door. All that stuff just goes out the door when someone walks into my environment. I accept them as an individual. How did they get to where they got to? What do we need to do to help them be successful and grow as an individual and help them feel value in success? That's the goal, they can always catch up in academic areas, that's not really as big of an issue as people think (OT).

The second step in building relationships is teaching communication skills while making

sure both parties feel safe. Often students struggle with communicating with their teacher.

The options teacher noted:

> All people really want to you to say is, "I validate that you may feel this way." I
> help students deal with the difference between feeling your emotions and feelings
> if they're okay, but also then looking at concrete facts and then going through the
> process, "What kind of questions did you ask this teacher? Have you
> communicated?" And that usually hasn't happened, so then what I'll do is, in my
> program I'll help a kid with the communication process with the teacher. I always
> have the teacher's back, I always let them know, "We're not getting the full story
> here. You guys know this. I've done this forever, I have graduated kids, I've been
> a parent. I get it. But I need to go through this process so bear with me and know
> that I have your back. First, as far as an educator, what are you doing with the
> student? And that helps teachers feel like they're not attacked, and they're
> empowered because most teachers care, and they've done all these things, and so
> you need to also validate the adult in the process. Those are intangibles that we
> look at in our program to try to make them successful, validating everybody
> involved in the process.

The third step is building trust between the individuals as well toward their own

learning. One participant described a very different credit recovery that is based on the

curriculum:

> Kids get to me, and they don't trust anybody, anything. They don't trust their own
> learning. And I've seen relationship also means establishing trust and then also
> finding ways that you can help them experience small success. Again, I'm about
> the long game…But you got to pick your teachable moments. You have to be
> very aware, very diligent to stay with the kid because you don't know when those
> teachable moments are going to come along…If you went into a credit recovery
> class back in the day … the validity of the work they were doing was very low, it
> was open a book, answer some questions, teachers tried to supply stuff that was
> constantly out of date. It just was not a valid process, so my thought was why not
> have a program based on all the curriculums so students can access it and then
> you can jump in as a teacher, add to it, take away from it. I can have a math
> teacher look at my math and say, "Okay, really quickly, what do you think I
> should focus on for recovery for semester one algebra and focus on for two? Then
> I'll go in, and I'll take the other stuff out of that course." They know they're
> getting those foundations, and then I take the job of trying to individually break
> down the walls of how to do math sometimes. Math is an incredible course to
> teach kids how to persevere and problem solve. It's a life skill, so when I'm
> working with math it's not always, "Can you be a pro at math?" It's about

persevering through something that causes you great anxiety, fear and anger and being able to get through that and then be able to sometimes articulate it verbally (OT).

The traditional credit recovery classes also have stigma associated with them. The name "credit recovery" was replaced with "academic options" to display the rigor and the flexibility of the program at each high school. One participant called the process of removing the stigma "learning recovery." Just as students learn the content, they also learn what it feels to succeed and fail:

Actually, making kids learn the concept is learning recovery with a different way of going about it. Say kids fail biology and then, they repeat biology. There's a high statistical chance, they are going to fail again because you're doing the same thing again that they struggled with.

But even for the majority of students, the traditional high school model is not all inclusive. In some cases, being flexible in aligning cross-curricular standards allows students to show proficiency and earn a passing grade. The data specialist explained:

…if they met the standards versus, they have to do 15 worksheets for math and then they have to do 15 things for physics and then they just don't do the 30 things, or they do some here, some there, but they still can't get enough done to show proficiency. That's trying to have the students' situation fit this standard schooling system, which again it's not this one-size-fits-all model…I'm just talking about my work with the ninth-grade core teachers, because a big focus was ensuring that they don't earn more than one F, the full year in a core class (social studies, math, science and English).

The fourth step in building relationships is validating students for their resilience and success. The support teacher uses student-first language when acknowledging and giving credit to students. Notice how she directly addresses students, using "you" language, thus not "othering" them with a third-person pronoun and the ownership mindset of "we" when referring to staff:

When a kid is standing up as valedictorian and says, "I never would have made it without so and so", we want you to be part of your timeline and part of your

experience. We don't want anyone who graduates or succeeds feeling like they owe anybody for that, but "You did it, you stood up, you have that resiliency, we're here, side by side with you and we're going to believe in you until you believe in yourself, this is you, and you deserve that pride and that moment of just glory for your successes and that shouldn't be ours.

We want our kids to know that "Your story is who you are and you have succeeded in spite of it, you have succeeded because of it, and every fold and every layer and every scar that you have is part of who you are and every part of that is what allows you to change the world the way only you can because there's no one else in the world can have the impact that each individual can".

The final step in building relationships is reaching out to parents. They need to feel validated and part of the process. Participants shared their success and experience with parents. The student support teacher said:

We tell parents, "You need to send us the most valuable and precious thing that you have in your world, which is your child, but you don't get a say over the teacher, you don't get a say over the classes they have to take, you don't get a say over our discipline system, we're forcing you to send your kids to us, and then to trust us. And in a system that is oppressive and racist that causes so much harm, How do we reconcile that? How do we heal that? And so, when we are working with parents, we don't blame them for the lack of success, we partner with them and take responsibility for our end of it. We owe something to our parents, because they give us the gift of their children to help raise and to help teach. I'm having more outreach with families and so traditionally school systems will do a lot of consultation with family so like, "Give us information, so we can make decisions but depending on who you are, you may not see that decision actually helping you. So, then it's like what's the point of me giving you feedback, if it doesn't actually have an outcome. So, changing that instead of a consultation, how do we partner. "I'm sure that you feel connected to the system into the change and how do we respond to you so that you feel heard as an individual within this larger system that we're building? Which is heavy work for all of us, so it also means that you can't be asked to be engaged and then be like I don't have time. We're either all in or not, but we will do this together (ST).

The options teacher echoed the importance of building an honest partnership with parents when trying to help their children at risk of not graduating:

You validate that they love their kid, that they're doing a great job, you find something positive. And then you say, "Hey we got this together." And I like to use a lot of humor…there are parents who'll jump down your throat or they'll project differently or say it's your fault. They're not mad at you. They don't know

what to do. So, to bring them into the fold and team with them and let them know, "It's your son or daughters. We'll follow through. We'll just keep trying. We're in it together. So, I'm not blaming you, you are not blaming me. When we come up with a plan and it doesn't work, roll the dice again. I believe you should come up with ideas and solutions, why beat yourself up, we know the problem we know it hasn't worked. We don't need to sit there and beat someone up over something. It is what it is. So how do we move forward? What's the next try? That didn't work, let's try this. I'm not afraid to try something just because it failed somewhere else, or it might fail. If you don't do that, then you'll never know what's around the next corner. You can't get all caught up with worry. You just got to do what you can do and that's hard.

### *Shared Ownership Helps Relationships*

Shared ownerships ensures that students are connected to their comprehensive

school even if they go to an alternative setting for some time. They are never pushed out

but rather there is an understanding that they need more individualized support. The AS

describes this difference:

> Some school districts push their dropouts or near dropouts to their alternative school. They have 95% graduates while their alternative school only has 32%. We don't do that. Our kids who go to alterative school are still owned by our high school. The reason we do that is to promote a partnership. If I'm at the comprehensive school, and I sent Sebastian (pseudonym) to the alternative school, I'm invested in how he's doing. I say, "Yes, he's still showing up on my 10th grade form every week. Wait, how's it going? I haven't even heard from him. I'm going to call the alternative school and see how it's going." There's somebody that supervises the program at the alternative school, but the comprehensive high school still owns the student who is still on their graduation rate list. So, when they're going to clear the lists out, they need to know what is happening with Sebastian.

The student support teacher reaffirmed a similar philosophy in their interview:

> …we're trying to change the culture of instead of baton passing of "this is now your responsibility," because they're in this program and…we're just adding on the support, as opposed to transitioning support for kids. These kids need to be snuggled like a blanket not to be passed off like a baton…They still get the diploma from the traditional high school and their graduation rate is part of that traditional high school.

Shared ownership also means knowing where kids are so that they don't slip through the cracks. The assistant superintendent reflected,

> …when I started working with the high schools, I said, "Okay, so we had 268 dropouts. Who are they? What's their profile? What's the pattern? Who are we missing? What's going on?" and they said, "Well, we don't know. I guess, we get that from the state." I said, "What? They are *our* kids. Why are we asking the state about our kids? You have got to be kidding." In contrast, now you can ask any high school, "Who are the kids you're most concerned about?" and they may say, "Last year we lost 62 kids. I know where they were."…That shows the importance of the data tracking systems. Because you can't serve students if you don't know where they are. So, we've done a really good job and educators have really learned the joy of owning kids.

Finally, shared ownership provides opportunities for access and connection. One participant, an alternative principal, shared his passion:

> … an increase in opportunity for access for every student, and I believe that a big push for the success was to look at not only providing a good academic foundation, but also to support students interest and engagement in school through clubs, activities, sports, student leadership opportunities… the Black Student Union … was a good opportunity for some students to have identity at their school and to feel supported and more engaged. Their identity in not only their own culture and racial identity, but also their identity as a high school student." Another way to connect is students continue with the same graduation coach and counselor for four years, so that the partnership is consistent. So again, the support is there… the teachers and the staff know that student and also the student knows the staff, so there's that genuine connection in addition to just professional duty. And that's referred to as a grade level system, so there is what you call say team 9 or team 10 and there's a dedicated and allocated admin counselor, Grad coach, SPED support person and, of course, sometimes the parent if, when that's necessary also to support the student.

### *Providing Students with College and Career Pathways Strengthens the Relationship*

Not every student grows up in a household that explores career options. Therefore, the school has the responsibility to expose students to career choices and the pathways to achieve them. The ODE recognizes career learning areas: (a) agriculture, food and natural resources, (b) business and management, (c) human resources, (d) arts, information and communication, (e) health and biomedical and (f) industrial and

engineering systems. One participant, the AS, questioned whether students are ready for

college and career and identified the need for growth in that area:

> Do we really believe that they're all ready for college and career? Probably some of them are not… in our conversation about career in college ready we've talked to your son and my daughter since they were little. We've told them, "You're really great at music or you've got artistic abilities, or you seem to really like writing! Since you like music and writing, you can write jingles for marketing firms!" We've done that since they were little. But some kids don't have it. Our work in the next year is trying to figure out how to provide exposure to college and career…in elementary school we're looking at taking our six career learning areas and looking at the curriculum and being like, "Okay, there's a story in the second-grade curriculum, and it's all about you saving the forest. It's a nonfiction piece. We could go down the street and film the forestry guy who happens to be Latino and talk to him about what he does and what kind of job it is and what his passions are and we're going to hire own students to go in our own community and film connections with people and we're going to do this little script paying attention to helping our kids see people in careers and college-based careers and reflect on them.

The district is nestled in a diverse community with many opportunities to explore

career options with community members and industry partners. The college and career

pathway director describes her work:

> …bringing in Community partners has been such a focus. Especially in my work, we meet every other month with about 30 different Community partners and it really is, "Here's what we're thinking. Here's what we're doing. How does this help inform you, what are you thinking and doing?"… A lot of times students connect because they feel (even through nonverbal cues) supported. It can be the setup of your space or the energy that you provide  I think it's so important, more than ever, to bring our Community partners even closer. To say, "Here is where we're at. Here is the framework that we're using for social emotional learning. What questions do you have about that? What is your intake process look like?"

The students were active participants in creating the pathway programs through surveys

(Needs Assessment) and individual interviews. Since then, the program has grown. The

pathway director reflected on this growth:

> … When I first started, we had 18 career college pathway programs. Now we have over 40 in our career and technical education (CTE), and we have over 60 that are career college pathways (CCP)…the way we use that survey data is we

see what students either like (*I love this program*, or *I wish we had X program*). But then we also compare that data to the high wage/ high demand data for our city that we get through their economic growth and development team. So, we look at the student narrative data, and we look at our high/wage high demand data, and we build programs based on those two things. So, we've built an aerospace program for students that focuses on underrepresented youth in that industry (e.g., females and students of color), and this is going into our second year coming up. We built a construction pathway program, we've expanded our health science programs, we built a criminal justice program: all because we look at what students are saying. There is a theory of action that we have the students truly feel engaged in their learning in a hands-on way, and they can see themselves in it, and they can see where they're headed. Attendance, graduation rates, and even for own community growth and development should thrive. Industries don't have to be going all over to find people, they should have in their own backyard. That's also how we use that data.

### *Listening to Student Voice*

Listening is a foundation to improving any relationship. Listening to students

helps promote partnership and engagement in schools. Participants described the

importance of listening to students. The data specialist explained,

> …from the beginning, student voice has been the anchor**.** It's not adults determining and deciding in silo what's best for kids but it's bringing the kids and their voices. We first started when we presented to our School Board through student quantitative and qualitative survey data. We asked them, "What has worked for you? What is your experience on support? What is lacking? What do you need?" And so that really started to shape this specific process. Now we're organized into 11 different work groups, and we ask ourselves, "Okay, are students at the table? How are we capturing (their voice)? Is there a survey that is going to capture this component, even in the renaming process?"

The DS also remarked on the importance of incorporating students in the discussions:

> …what was interesting is when we would do our teacher professional development days, we would actually bring students around to the table (and these are ninth grade students too) to be a part of the grading conversation. And so that was powerful in itself, because it wasn't only coming from us as teacher leaders or the ninth-grade leadership team. It was the student truly not understanding what they were being graded on. If the student doesn't know what they're graded on, how do they know how to improve their grade? And how are they supposed to relay how they are being graded to their guardian if they are privileged enough to get that support in their home life. We didn't tiptoe around teachers and their grading data. We just rip the band aid off from day one. We

said, "Here's your personal data and here's how you compare to other teachers." We said, "The kids don't have time to wait for us. They have four years and they're gone. We don't have time to tiptoe around it and, quite frankly, the data is in front of you, because that's your data. There are no ifs, ands or buts about it. Bringing the kids to the table, because they truly had the questions of inquiry, about how they were being graded and like, why is the grading scale the way it is right? Why is it 80% summative and 20% formative? It's having to break those explanation down to their students also was like, "If I can't eloquently explain to them why, then why am I really doing it?"

Besides surveys and bringing students physically to sit "at the table," educators

listen to students' voice through empathy interviews. The AS explained this approach:

The staff has been trained to give empathy interviews, and it's a process we learned from Benedict McWhirter from the Prevention Science Program at University of Oregon. It is a way for me to connect with a student, to learn about them and not just say, "Hey Bob (pseudonym), I am worried about your grade. What's going on, buddy?" but it's like it's an interview, "So, you've been a student, and I will learn about you. You're important to me. So, tell me about your life. What makes you tick?" It's about being able to empathize and understand where students are coming from. Teachers deal with so many kids in high school…and so we've tried really hard to get them into grade level teams, with a Grad coach and then connect them with certain teachers and get them to do empathy interviews.

### *Relationships Building also Requires Hiring and Supporting the Right Staff*

Hiring the right people means understanding why certain educators are more

successful in building relationships with students and attempting to replicate their

mindset of problem-solvers. The assistant principal explained this philosophy:

It's a problem-solving approach instead of treating school like a factory. And then we had to pick the right person, and I told my principals, "Okay, who are you thinking about? You have to pick a person from your stuff that teachers respect, and kids know and who has the right heart and the right disposition. Do you know somebody?" Well, that went like explosion because it's not just their ability to work with kids but the ability to build trust. When a student needs to miss three weeks, I know that they're going to work with Katie Shelton (pseudonym) who has high expectations…It took us two years to get the right people in the right positions. Currently, all of our high schools have Options teachers, which have been key.

Another positive attribute of an educator is someone students can relate to because of their resilience in overcoming linguistic, racial/ethnic, economic and ability barriers in their own life. One participant described the importance of hiring people who "who speak their language." The assistant superintendent reflected on her decision to hire one particularly effective graduation coach:

> I'll tell you where I found Peter (pseudonym). He was my daughter's wrestling coach. A magical human. Every day I hope to find some people to help me because I need some people to help me help my kids. When I showed up to my daughter's wrestling, her coach said that he was thinking about going into teaching. I said to him, "Do you want a job. I'm going to give you a job." I literally pulled together some money and hired him midyear last year, because I didn't want him to go anywhere, so I just pieced together some cash. One of his phrases is, "I believe in you! So right now, you're going to borrow my belief until you believe in you. Don't even think about it. All you have to do is just say my coach believes in me, and you just don't think about it. Until you believe in yourself, then you give it back to somebody you know." The thing I love about this man is he grew up in [our city]. He made a lot of bad choices, spent some time behind bars, went into the military, and he knows everyone around here. ... So, when people say, "I've been in jail." He responds, "Okay. You know, I've been there, done that." When they say, "Well, I experienced poverty." He responds, "Yes, so what? Well, our streets are rough. I grew up here." So, we had our cohort rate from the year before, and we told Peter, "Here's some kids we haven't been able to touch." And he said, "Wait a minute, I know that kid's mom. Let's get the credit done." He can bring kids in like nobody else! He got five kids to graduate just because he knew the family. We have other educators that are really magical with kids too. But it's hiring the right people for the right job is the key.

Of course, even highly-qualified people might need additional training. VSD educators receive support with high-quality professional development. In fact, no penny is spared even if it means paying for airfare. The data specialist explained:

> … the ninth grade on-track work started with professional development. We got flown out to Chicago because they have done years of ninth grade on-track success work, so we got to be a part of that, and then we came back and rolled it out in our high schools. We got to implement smaller learning communities and

what we call *teaming*. We know ninth grade is one of the biggest indicators for on-time graduation…You have people who are able to go out and track the kids and get them re-engaged with having a Grad coach at each level, and you have one more added on layer of academic support…So, I'm helping students learn how to advocate for themselves, teaching them how to navigate the system. And just being able to answer their questions is big…One of the main roles of the grad coach is re-engagement and knowing where the kids are. If a student said they were leaving to go elsewhere, we knew exactly where they went, and when they were going to enroll versus saying, "I'm going to leave and go to another school." And that never happens and that's when students can fall through the cracks, right? Even at the transitional years. I was working at ninth grade for three years on, knowing them from eighth grade, so the outreach started before they even were in high school. So, it's knowing them before they get there, and they know that they have a familiar face in this big environment.

Supporting staff also means empowerment through wearing many hats. One participant, a pathway director, described the benefits of working in a small team:

**…** it has stretched my breadth of knowledge to know a little bit more about elementary and how to support that or even in areas of dual language, or family engagement. So, because we're so small, that also helps us connect in a different way, which is part of that future planning.

The options teacher also talked about the need for staff members to assume a variety of responsibilities:

The teacher takes ownership of this program, understand the philosophy of the program, and has that ability to build relationships with kids and relationships with their staff, and communicate with counselors. My job is very unique—I'm an administrator, I'm a counselor, I'm a teacher, I'm a program coordinator.

Finally, supporting staff means tending to people**.** The pathway director shared the importance of ensuring that staff's human needs are also addressed:

We organized mental health activities this last quarter for administrators and it was like 15 minutes of watercolor or 30 minute of yoga session. Different people signed up for different times and things that our administrators could engage in. I think that also tending to the people in the system has also been something I'm really proud of. But I think that that also helps to pay off on, "We know we're here, and we need to figure out these things, but we're also going to take care of

you, so that you also have enough that you can be with us on this journey as we plan forward. We know this is tough, but we have to keep going. We need to be ready to carry out that vision of what our district could be. But I think it's also tending to the people in the system, which I think probably every district across our country, probably in our world, right now is tending to because, like the impact of loss, the impact of feeling overwhelmed, isolation… There are so many pieces that are different in our own education system and with the people who are in it.

The interviews provided a rich understanding of the many ways in which VSD's approach to increasing student graduation rates is comprehensive, proactive, and relationship-centered, employing both the systematic collection and use of data and a passionate commitment to their students' future. The next two sections of this chapter present the results of my analysis of two different sources of extant data provided by the district: their dropout data from SY 2015/2016 through 2018/2019 and student responses to the district *Needs Assessment*.

**Dropout Trends (RQ 2)**

To answer RQ2 (*What differences, if any, are there in school dropout trends between Latinx and White students in a school district that reports increasing graduation rates?*), I looked at the dropout data from 2015 to 2019. The results showed two trends. First, there was a steady decrease in the number of students who dropped out. Whereas in 2015, the total number of school dropouts was 197, in 2019, it was 117. This trend was found for both Latinx students and White students. The number of Latinx students who dropped out decreased from 113 in 2015 to 65 in 2019. For White students, the decrease was from 71 in 2015 to 39 in 2019 (See Table 5). Second, the gap between Latinx and White dropouts provides some evidence of closing, although some disproportionality in dropout between these two groups remains (See Figure 4).

Table 5

*Trends in Number and Percent of School Dropouts by Ethnicity*

| | 2015/16 | | 2016/17 | | 2017/18 | | 2018/19 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent | Count | Percent |
| Latinx Dropouts | 113 | 57.4 | 98 | 58.7 | 67 | 56.3 | 65 | 55.6 |
| White Dropouts | 71 | 36 | 54 | 32.3 | 41 | 34.5 | 39 | 33.3 |
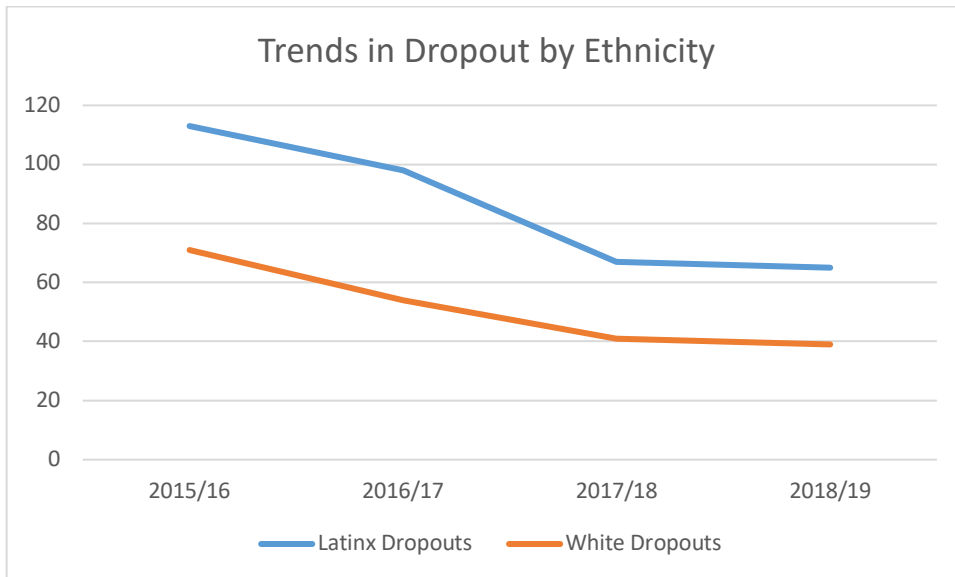


*Figure 4.* Trends in Dropout by Ethnicity.

**Needs Assessment (RQ3)**

To answer RQ3 (*What differences, if any, are there in the experiences of Latinx and other racial groups?*), a number of analysis were performed to explore students' experiences in high school settings. First, a statistician ran an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using the students' responses to the Needs Assessment from the total sample (I = 3,420). Estimates were produced by using the extraction method of principal component

analysis with Varimax with Keiser Normalization rotation. The results of the EFA are displayed in Table 7. As presented, the extraction comprised four factors representing approximatively 56% of the variance in student responses to the original items. Each of the extracted items had eigenvalues greater than 1. In addition, factor loading, items' means, and standard deviations were provided in the principal component analysis.

The first extracted factor, *Academic Confidence*, included nine items and accounted for 37.5% of the variance. Items loading on this factor were linked to fitting well with the traditional high school and high perceptions of teachers' approachability, different ways of teaching, job satisfaction, inclusive curriculum, college and career expectations as well as understanding, autonomy, and technology access related to homework completion. The second extracted factor, *Student Voice*, was comprised of 6 items and accounted for 7.9% of variance. The items loading on this factor were connected to students' perceptions of safety, welcoming school climate, having a voice in school matters that can impact change and if not, having the understanding of why that is not as well as availability of social emotional supports. The third extracted factor, *Familial Support*, contained five items and accounted for 6.2% of the variance. The items loading on this factor were associated with parent or guardian's knowledge of ways to support educational goals, student status, access to grades/attendance, available resources and comfort coming to school. The fourth extracted factor, *Alternative Options*, contained 6 items and accounted for 4.9% of the variance. Items loading on this factor were related to knowledge of college and career pathways, graduation requirements, credit recovery and available alternative options if the traditional school is not a good fit. The internal

consistency of scores on these factors, *Academic Confidence* (α = .89), *Student Voice* (α

= .72), *Familial Support* (α = .86) and *Options* (α = .86) were moderate to strong.

Table 6
*Factor Pattern Matrix on Needs Assessment*

|  | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academic Confidence | | | | |
| 12. Secondary options (The traditional high school environment is the best fit for me to be successful.) | **.435** | .347 | .116 | .294 |
| 21. Most of My Teachers [Are approachable and supportive when I am struggling with a problem in class] | **.734** | .217 | .207 | .121 |
| 22. Most of My Teachers [Use different ways of teaching that help me achieve the knowledge and skills I need to know] | **.648** | .336 | .166 | .129 |
| 23. Most of My Teachers [Are excited about teaching and enjoy what they do] | **.709** | .277 | .144 | .052 |
| 24. Most of My Teachers [Teach lessons that include my culture and interests] | **.535** | .409 | .144 | .148 |
| 25. Most of My Teachers [Expect me to attend college or any after high school education] | **.599** | .159 | .241 | .128 |
| 32. Homework [I understand how it is connected to what I am learning in class] | **.664** | .225 | .138 | .132 |
| 33. Homework [I understand the assignments and can complete them by myself] | **.654** | .078 | .211 | .190 |
| 34. Homework [I have technology or access (computer & internet) to what I need to do the work at home] | **.604** | .008 | .333 | .170 |
| Student Voice | | | | |
| 26. In My School [The climate is welcoming and expects academic success for all students] | .429 | **.622** | .172 | .089 |
| 27. In My School [I have a say in important matters affecting our school] | .150 | **.827** | .131 | .160 |
| 28. In My School [My opinions impact change] | .125 | **.841** | .093 | .161 |
| 29. In My School [If my opinions do not impact change, I have a clear understanding of why not] | .180 | **.738** | .092 | .149 |
| 30. In My School [I feel safe] | .434 | **.524** | .177 | .108 |
| 30. In My School [I feel safe] | .356 | **.537** | .196 | .176 |

Table 6

*Factor Pattern Matrix on Needs Assessment (Continued)*

| | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Familial Support** | | | | |
| 16. My Parents/Guardians [Know how I am doing in school] | .347 | .025 | **.740** | .117 |
| 17. My Parents/Guardians [Know how to support my educational goals ] | .285 | .187 | **.691** | .201 |
| 18. My Parents/Guardians [Know how to access and use Parent VUE] | .118 | .074 | **.791** | .050 |
| 19. My Parents/Guardians [Understand/know what school resources are available to me and my family] | .173 | .236 | **.736** | .218 |
| 20. My Parents/Guardians [Are comfortable coming to school to access/advocate for resources that are available to me and my family] | .226 | .237 | **.711** | .169 |
| **Alternative Options** | | | | |
| 9. I have a career and college pathway that interests me | .266 | -.055 | -.80 | **.432** |
| 10. Secondary options (I know exactly what I need to graduate on time) | .325 | .023 | .337 | **.543** |
| 11. Secondary options (My classes are helping me to think about my future career) | .453 | .236 | .082 | **.475** |
| 13. Secondary options (If the traditional high school environment is not the best fit for me, I know other schools or programs that are available to me) | .050 | .244 | .144 | **.630** |
| 14. Secondary options (I know what options are available to me if I need to recover credits to graduate on time) | .038 | .190 | .227 | **.700** |
| 15. Secondary options (I know who to ask for help if the traditional high school is not fitting my needs) | .140 | .325 | .251 | **.644** |
| Eigenvalues | 9.75 | 2.04 | 1.61 | 1.27 |
| % of variance | 37.5 | 7.9 | 6.2 | 4.9 |
| Cronbach's alpha | .89 | .72 | .86 | .86 |
| M | 3.28 | 2.90 | 3.36 | 3.21 |
| SD | 0.61 | 0.74 | 0.71 | 0.62 |

Note: $n$ = 3,420; principal component analysis factoring with varimax rotation. Bold = highest loading items on each factor. Mean scores for each variable reported in raw score form.

Next, an association between the four variables used in these analyses is shown as a Correlation Matrix in Table 7. All four factors were significantly correlated with one another, with 2-tailed $p < 0.001$.

Table 7

*Correlation Matrix between Variables*

| Variable | Needs Assessment | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Academic Confidence | Student Voice | Familial Support | Alternative Options |
| Academic Confidence | 1 | .65** | .58** | .59** |
| Student Voice | | 1 | .46** | .54** |
| Familial Support | | | 1 | .52** |

Finally, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted to explore differences between racial groups in their responses to the variables of the four factors of *Academic Confidence, Student Voice*, *Familial Support* and *Alternative Options*. Table 8 provides item means, standard deviations, *F* test and significance values, as well as sample sizes, organized by ethnicities.

The post hoc tests showed some significant differences between races (see Table 9). Based on the EFA I modified my original RQ3 sub-questions to reflect the factor loading. In response to $R_{3.1}$ (*Are there academic confidence differences (e.g., students' perceptions of fitting well with the traditional high school and high perceptions of teachers' approachability, different ways of teaching, job satisfaction, inclusive curriculum, college and career expectations as well as understanding, autonomy and*

*technology access related to homework completion?)*, the post hoc tests showed that Latinx students had statistically significant lower scores than Asian students.

In response to R$_{3.2}$ (*Are there student voice differences (e.g., students' perceptions of safety, welcoming school climate, having a voice in school matters that can impact change and if not, having the understanding of why that is not as well as availability of social emotional supports?*), the post hoc tests showed that Latinx students had statistically significant higher scores than White and African American students.

In response to R$_{3.3}$ (*Are there familial support differences (e.g., students' perceptions of parent or guardian's knowledge of ways to support educational goals, student status, access to grades/attendance, available resources and comfort coming to school?*), the post hoc tests showed that Latinx students had statistically significant lower scores than White and Multiracial students.

In response to R$_{3.4}$ (*Are there alternative options differences (e.g., students' perceptions of knowledge of college and career pathways, graduation requirements, credit recovery and available alternative options if the traditional school is not a good fit?)*, post hoc tests showed that there were no statistically significant differences between groups, $F = 2.3$ and $p > 0.05$.

Table 8

*Comparison of Racial Groups on the Needs Assessment*

| Variable | African American (n = 85) | | American Indian/Native Alaskan (n = 18) | | Asian (n = 288) | | Latinx (n = 1003) | | Native Hawaiian (n = 47 ) | | White (n = 1621) | | Multiple (n = 358) | | $F$ | p | Post Hoc tests |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | | | |
| Acad. Conf. | 3.1 | (0.7) | 2.9 | (0.7) | 3.4 | (0.8) | 3.2 | (0.5) | 3.3 | (0.6) | 3.3 | (0.6) | 3.3 | (0.5) | 6.4 | 0.001 | 3>1,2,4,7;6>1 |
| Student Voice | 2.7 | (0.8) | 2.7 | (0.9) | 3.1 | (0.6) | 3.0 | (0.7) | 3.1 | (0.7) | 2.8 | (0.7) | 2.8 | (0.7) | 11.3 | 0.001 | 3>1,6,7;4>1,6 |
| Familial Support | 3.1 | (0.8) | 3.1 | (1.1) | 3.3 | (0.7) | 3.3 | (0.7) | 3.5 | (0.7) | 3.4 | (0.7) | 3.4 | (0.65) | 9.0 | 0.001 | 6>1,3,4;7>4 |
| Altern. Options | 3.2 | (0.7) | 3.0 | (0.7) | 3.3 | (0.6) | 3.2 | (0.6) | 3.2 | (0.7) | 3.2 | (0.6) | 3.2 | (0.6) | 2.3 | 0.05 | 1>3,4,6;2>6 |

*Note:* Post hoc tests: 1 = African American, 2 = American Indian/Native Alaskan, 3 = Asian, 4 = Latinx, 5 = Native Hawaiian, 6 = White, 7 = Multiple

**CHAPTER IV**

**DISCUSSION**

**Summary of Key Findings**

This study was conducted in a mixed-income urban community. The participants of the interviews were key school personnel with a variety of job assignments. The interviews were conducted to gather the school personnel's perspective of factors that contributed to an increase in graduation rates. The qualitative data obtained through these interviews provided important insights into the district's work. These insights help to provide context for better understanding how the district has made such substantial gains in improving graduation rates. The extant data analysis provided supporting quantitative evidence of the impact of the district's efforts and highlighted some key differences between Latinx and White students, in response to the NA. Common themes from the interviews were shared goal, shared "ownership" of the students, listening to student voice, teaching the process of relationship building, holistic data and hiring and supporting staff.

Based on the exploratory factor analysis of the Needs Assessment and the results of the interviews, I adopted Yosso's CCW model to reflect key findings (see *Fig*. 5). This adaptation centers social capital as the key construct supporting increased student graduation, with academic confidence, familial support, student voice, and options capital all contributing to the establishment of solid relationships that are at the center of VSD's success.
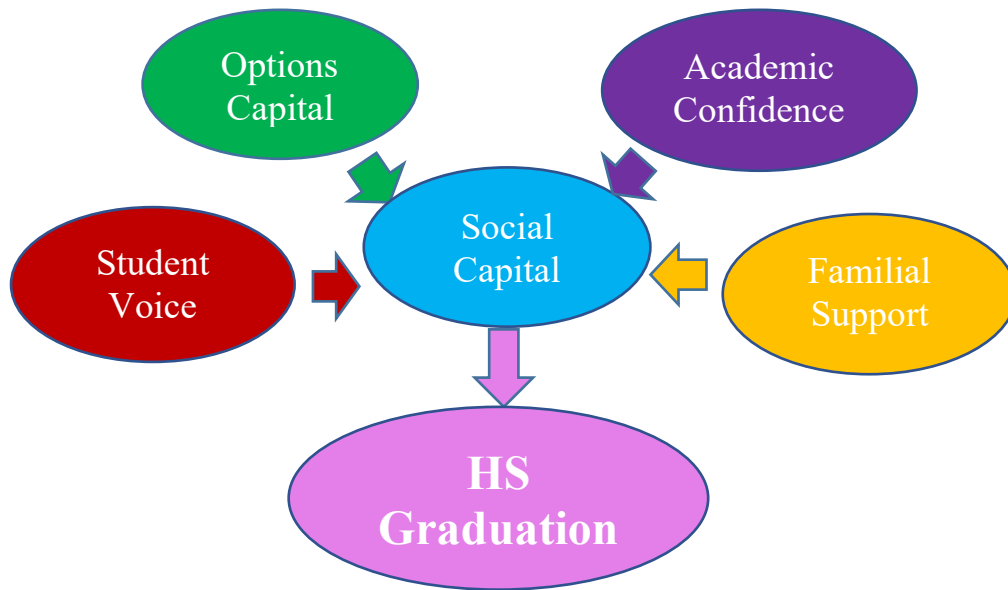
*Figure 5*. An adapted CCW model.

**Building Relationships: Placing Centrality of Social Capital**

The results of my study provide some understanding into the complex
phenomenon of high school experience with the available literature on high school
graduation. The finding of the importance of building relationships is in alignment with
prior research by Lessard, Fortin, Joly, Royer, and Blaya (2004) who posit that positive
social capital has the potential to improve academic outcomes and engagement with
school. Furthermore, it aligns with Yosso's (2006) CCW model. However, based on my
results, an adaptation to the model would better capture the essence of district success. In
the new adapted model, social capital provides support and a buffer against adversity
(Delgado-Gaitan, 2001) and mainstream institutions (Gilbert, 1982; Stanton-Salazar,
2001) and it is placed at the center, superseding all other capitals.

All participants regardless of their roles had a similar message. Everyone identified relationships as a critical component to the district's success. The people who work directly with students at risk, the Graduation Coaches, told me stories about making connections, supported by their personality, background and community knowledge when building relationships among all stakeholders. The Options Teachers had the "'we've got you' mindset." The Assistant Superintendent spent her time in the school cafeteria rather than her office, consciously building relationships with staff and students. The Support Teacher validated students' own ability for resilience and success. The College and Career Pathways Director created engaging new pathways in partnership with community members. One of the consistent themes was that building relationships was a process that includes knowing students by name, strength, and need, valuing students as an individual and a human being while teaching them communication skills with their teachers, building trust toward their own learning.

**Academic Confidence: Success Breeds Success**

Another adaptation to the CCW is replacing *aspirational capital* with *academic confidence* capital. Hopes and dreams can easily turn into disappointment and discouragement if they are not supported with real positive outcomes. Students can develop *academic confidence* as they progress through school, building on success after success, and believing in themselves. Conversely, they are most likely to disengage from school if they lack confidence in academic skills (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Entwisle et al., 2004; Fredericks & Eccles, 2002; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006). The centrality of social capital can aid students who lack academic confidence. One of the people I interviewed encouraged students with a contagious belief mindset, "We're going to

believe in you until you believe in yourself" (ST). Another called the process of turning kids around "learning recovery" (OT) during which students not only master the content, but also experience what is feels like to be successful. My analyses of the NA indicated that Latinx students scored lower on *academic confidence* than Asian students. Further studies to explore the reason for these results may aid the district in providing more supports to Latinx students in this area.

**Familial Support: A Differential Based on Access and Cultural Sensitivity**

*Familial capital* becomes a resource of support for students. Communication between parents and teachers/school are an important protective factor against risk (Potvin et al., 1999). Furthermore, the family offers "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Olmedo, 1997; Vélez-Ibáñez, & Greenberg, 1992) that are passed down generations. For my study, I identified this capital as *familial support* to capture the essence of positive outcome role in students' lives.

However, results showed that VSD Latinx student scored lower than White students on this construct. One reason for this result may be misperceptions and mismatch between teachers and Latinx parents on what parent involvement looks like (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). Latinx parents may hold "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133) that help them navigate the educational system through beliefs and collective wisdom of shared knowledge (Valdés, 1996) that is uniquely cultural. It is really important that schools reach out to Latinx parents, familiarize themselves with the "funds of knowledge" and communicate ways to becoming involved and supporting their children's education (Berzins & López, 2001) while still holding high regard for diversity of cultures, family structures, comfort level as well providing technology access to

students' grades and records. Results from the interviews showed that there is a high value in building relationships with parents by reaching out to them and making them feel validated and part of the process. It is worth noting that there was no distinction between racial groups when interviewing the participants. The Graduation Coaches had knowledge, background and linguistic association with the Latinx community, and visited the homes and knew the extended structure of the family. Still, Latinx students reported a lower level of parent / caregiver engagement than did their White peers.

**Student Voice: Powerful Tool for Resistance and Transformation**

In my study, I identified *transformational capital* as the construct of *Student Voice,* recognizing the asset and resilience in resisting discriminatory messages rather than internalizing them and having the potential to transform structures of oppression (Pizarro, 1998; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). The district took special care in giving voice to students when discussing grading practices, choosing college and career pathway offerings, and participating in clubs that celebrate diversity. In fact, the Needs Assessment was designed, in part, by students, and it is a tool to provide the district with insights into students' perceptions and change accordingly. Based on the information provided by the interviews, there is evidence that the Needs Assessment given every other year becomes a powerful professional development tool for teachers. It becomes a communication tool and an anchor, meant to reveal students' needs and interests and influence district decision-making.

One of the unexpected findings of this investigation was that the perception of *student voice* was higher for Latinx students than for White students. My original hypothesis was to assume that internal and external stressors that minoritized students

experience would lower their perception of a strong student voice. However, my finding was consistent with Yosso's (2006) argument that Latinx youth resist discrimination in a transformative way by drawing on their strength, resilience, and self-reliance to get ahead. In addition, interview participants placed high value on the development of *student voice* through empathy interviews, bringing students to the "decision-making-table," hiring staff with student-first mindset, and really listening to students as active participants in course offerings and grade justification. Results showed that Latinx students had significantly higher scores that White and African American students on the construct of *student voice.* Another transformational strength of the district was offering the Needs Assessment in Spanish, thus recognizing bilingualism as a strength.

**Alternative Options: Providing Students with Possibilities for Success**

In my study, I frame *navigational capital* as a measure of students' understanding of and access to *alternative options.* This construct reflects students' being resourceful and having the capacity to operate within a system with its written and unwritten laws and norms. The construct of *alternative options* is also inclusive of knowing credit recovery options, college and career pathways, and the alternative school options. The people I interviewed identified the district's commitment to remove stigma from credit recovery programs within the traditional setting by naming them *academic options* and hiring options teachers and graduation coaches who have a "we gotcha" mindset. Another participant expressed removing the stigma of alternative schools by creating a process rather than "that place" by building a grand hub where many options coexist: alternative school, CTE pathways, and many other programs. In addition, students are not passed on to alternative schools like a "baton" in a relay race. Instead, they are offered more

supports and individualized learning. Finally, they are still "owned" by the traditional school, showing up on their dropout lists, and students have the option of graduating with their traditional school.

**Microsystem: A Plethora of Risk Factors**

Data gathered through the interviews were also consistent with the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1977). However, the focus in my study ended up only on the microsystem because it encompassed only school-related factors. The participants talked about their training on the Chicago on-track indicator as a powerful identification tool that educators can use to identify students who may need support to get back on-track for graduation. Emphasis was placed on holistic-on-demand data that track not only grades, but the potential to tap on relationships built over the years to steer students in the right direction or provide solutions to problems in their life that directly lead to graduation. The data also measure the success of the system and it is not there to blame the individual.

These findings of robust data systems align with prior research that posited that student grades, collected on a regular basis offer an accessible and meaningful data point for educators (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Bowers et al., 2013, Bowers, 2010a, 2010b). What's different in VSD, in identifying students at-risk early on is that they look not only at grades, but historical patterns in attendance, behavior, and prior teacher connections that can positively influence students' outcomes. The participants also identified ways that data can reveal bias in teacher grading practices. For example, the data specialist can see a teacher's distribution of grades per class, by race, ethnicity, and other demographic variables, resulting in anti-bias self-reflection. Participants emphasized the importance of

having high standards for their students along with high supports in order to prepare them for college or career instead of engaging in the deficit ideologies of the "pobrecito mindset" (Garcia & Ozturk, 2017; Gutierrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Another innovation was proficiency grading that provided the flexibility in recognizing knowledge-based cross-curricular standards alignment rather than completing "30 missed worksheets" (KS). Such innovations and flexibility allow students to show proficiency, earn a passing grade and graduate.

**Limitations**

This study had several limitations. First, due to its design, it is impossible to draw causal conclusions. Second, the documentation of the VSD dropout prevention program may not be generalizable to other districts that may be different sizes or serve different student demographic groups. In particular, rural districts may be particularly disadvantaged in benefiting from this urban study. Third, there was a threat to validity when it comes to instrumentation. Data are only as good as the objectivity of the people who put them there. This study relies heavily on Early Warning Systems data. The reliability of such data may be limited by potential subjectivity when giving and entering grades and other data points. Similarly, when students enroll in a school, they or their parents self-report their demographics. This process can limit accuracy, a potential problem further compounded by the way variables (race, ethnicity, gender) are classified.

Another limitation of the study is that a single imputed dataset, rather than multiple imputed datasets, was used for the study. The single imputation method does not provide for uncertainty in the data, rather the imputed values were interpreted as observed

scores. This limitation potentially resulted in biased standard errors in the statistical models reported. The single imputation method was used, rather than the best practice multiple imputation method, because of lack of familiarity and experience with features of statistical software that can accommodate multiple imputed datasets. It should be noted that on the continuum of best practices for handling missing data, single imputation is the preferred method over other methods such list-wise deletion and mean substitution (Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010). Finally, some interventions students identify on the NA might have been site-specific. For example, alternative schools in VSD offer flexible scheduling that may not be possible in other sites even within the same district.

**Potential Implications for Practice**

Despite these limitations, my proposed study offers the potential for insight that might benefit both VSD and other districts interested in increasing their completer rates, particularly those that serve Latinx students. Data from my study suggest that the centrality of social capital can support academic confidence, students' voice, familial support and alternative options necessary to engage in learning and move toward creating a hopeful future for students' lives.

**Future Research**

Although my study provides some important insights for school leaders both in VSD and other districts, it also leaves some questions unanswered. Additional research might investigate ways to alleviate the mismatch and misconception between educators' perspectives and Latinx parental involvement and how to further expand the work of the social capital in that area. Furthermore, although it is true that social capital is of utmost importance in supporting students, families, schools and communities, it is also crucial to

work toward eliminating broader social biases that blame the individual for their lack of

success due to inability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

*Overview of Dropout Variables as defined by ODE 2007-08 Technical Report*

| Variable Name | Variable Description |
|---|---|
| Enrolled Grade Code | The grade the student is when they enroll at a VSD school |
| Race/Ethnicity<br><br>Gender | Students are classified into one of seven categories: American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic origin, White and Multi-Racial |
| TAG | Intellectually gifted students are students scoring at or above the 97th percentile on a nationally standardized test of mental ability. Academically talented students are students scoring at or above the 97th percentile on a standardized test of total English language arts or total mathematics. |
| Economically Disadvantaged | Students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch |
| SPED | The Students with disabilities student group includes all students served at any time during the school year up to and including the first school day in May by a Special Education program in which students are instructed and monitored based on decisions defined by an Individualized Education Program (IEP). |
| English Learners (EL) | English Learner (EL), when used with respect to an individual, means an individual who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English |
| Former EL | English Learner who has exited the English Language Development (ELD) program |
| Homeless Student Flag | Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence |
| Migrant | Signifies student eligibility for or participation in a program designed to assure that migratory children receive full and appropriate opportunities to meet the state academic content and student academic achievement standards. |
| Career-Technical Education (CTE) Participant | People who complete Career and Technical Education |

| | |
|---|---|
| CTE Concentrator | People who take a couple of Career and Technical Education classes |
| Enrollment End Date | The date a student was officially dropped from the district's system |
| Enrollment End Date Code | The reason the student left school |
| ADM End Date Type | Average Daily Membership (ADM) is based on 10-day truancy drop period |

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