# CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP: LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT LEAD TO INCREASES IN ACCESS TO AP COURSES FOR LATINX STUDENTS

Jesús F. Martinez

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2020

APPROVED:

Elizabeth Murakami, Major Professor
Sandra Benavidez, Committee Member
Miriam Ezzani, Committee Member
Ricardo Gonzalez, Committee Member
Johnetta Hudson, Committee Member
Misty Sailors, Chair of the Department of Teacher Education and Administration
Randy Bomer, Dean of the College of Education
Victor Prybutok, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School

Martinez, Jesús F. *Closing the Opportunity Gap: Leadership Practices that Lead to Increases in Access to AP Courses for Latinx Students*. Doctor of Education (Educational Leadership), December 2020, 88 pp., 6 tables, 3 figures, 5 appendices, references, 87 titles.

Using an exploratory case study approach, this study examined the school leadership factors that contribute to building Latinx student social capital as well as the best practices for creating a more equitable AP program. Through this qualitative study, the organizational and leadership factors of the AP program at Stripes High School (pseudonym) were examined, and how these factors contributed toward closing the opportunity gap. This study used semi-structured interviews with district and campus leaders and an AP teachers focus group to determine leadership beliefs and actions that were successful in building an accessible and equitable advanced academics program for Latinx students, as well as an AP student focus group to triangulate the findings. The results of this study showed Latinx students, already lacking social capital, also face many barriers of different forms: systemic, structural and cultural in their educational opportunities for AP courses and exams. The case study campus overcame these barriers and increased equity by allowing Latinx students more access to AP courses and exams through district- and campus-level administrators working to remove barriers and hire and support the most capable and socially aware AP teachers who aim to grow and nurture the students who they serve. Based on the results from this study, there are two major recommendations for school leaders to consider in their effort to close the opportunity gap for Latinx students in AP coursework. These recommendations include offering open access to all students and hiring and training teachers who understand and value equity. While this study uncovered many factors at Stripes HS that collectively served to provide an equitable AP program for Latinx students, these recommendations were the highest leverage ones.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, friends, and colleagues for their endless support, inspiration, and motivation throughout this journey. A special thanks to David, Julian, Guero, Valdo, Tony, and Chayo for all the good times, all of the laughs, and all of the conversations throughout the years, I am truly fortunate to have your friendship. I would not have made it through this journey without you, Monica, thank you for your support and for the time we spent focused on our respective journeys. Lupita, thank you for being a great person and a great sister! *A mis padres: les agradezco mucho todo los consejos y todo el apollo. Esto es para ustedes!*

To my many colleagues, thank you for being an active inspiration in my life daily, most of my ideas come from collaborating with such great minds.

I could not have done this without the patience, support, and encouragement of Dr. Ezzani and Dr. Murakami; thank you for challenging me and inspiring me throughout this dissertation. Dr. Gonzalez, Dr. Hudson, and Dr. Benavidez, thank you for your feedback and for your patience throughout my dissertation journey. A very special thank you to Dr. Juan Carlos Martinez and Luis Gonzalez, this study could not have been possible without your friendship, support, and assistance—*muchas gracias!*

Finally, this study is dedicated to all educators who strive day in and day out to level the playing field for all students. Keep fighting the good fight. *Si Se Puede!*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Page

Tables



Figures

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

As a first-generation Latinx and a product of public schools, I experienced first-hand the challenges often faced by Latinx students when it comes to attaining access to an equitable educational experience. I also understand the language, cultural, social, and academic gaps that one must overcome to prepare for college. I grew up poor in a community that was 96% Latinx and 99% economically disadvantaged. Going to school was more often an exercise in survival rather than an academically rigorous and an enlightening coming-of-age experience. First−eighth grades were marred with learning the language and navigating the unwritten social codes of the streets that carryover into the school. I was often bored in classes while teachers attempted to gain control of the students or focus on students who were reading below grade level. It was not until my acceptance into a magnet high school, specializing in academics with a focus on science and engineering, that I was actually challenged academically. It was then that the boredom in school ceased. I was introduced to and enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses and quickly came to the realization that I was not where I needed to be academically.

My personal experiences in public education informed my professional beliefs and behaviors when I entered the field of education. As an educator, my personal mission was to inspire all my students—most of whom were low-socioeconomic status (SES) students of color—to achieve and excel academically through rigorous coursework and quality learning. I knew that feeling of being underprepared and ill-equipped to reach my full potential academically. As a teacher, I taught AP English in an urban high school with a 96% Latinx student population and knew that in order to prepare my students adequately for a rigorous national criterion-based exam, I had to *fill-in* their educational, language, and cultural gaps. This

challenge, faced by most educators of AP courses for underserved students, is the reason many educators feel it is not worth it to offer AP courses to low-socioeconomic students of color at the same rates and access as their White counterparts. When I became a high school administrator, my position was to ensure the same attention and efforts placed on meeting the State's high-stakes test standards were placed on offering opportunities for advanced academics for all students.

## Statement of the Problem

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, much of the focus of school reform has been on closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students of color and their White counterparts (Perna, 2005). Legislatures at both the state and federal levels have fixated on ensuring that schools are held accountable for low-performing student gains and growth on standardized exams (Ferguson, 2001). Most policies and initiatives ignore advanced academics and top-performing students, especially high-achieving underserved students (Ferguson, 2001). A hazard of these reform movements that focus primarily on standardized testing as a measure for teacher effectiveness has been that too much attention is given to the low-achieving students while the high achieving students are ignored and seen merely as automatic passing scores. This is especially evident in urban high schools regarding the availability and accessibility of AP courses, which would challenge and develop those high achieving students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012).

Since the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) and with its re-embodiment—the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA, 2015), the federal government has made closing the achievement gap between minority students, low-socioeconomic students,

and their counterparts a priority. This focus has translated to public school systems concentrating primarily on improving low-performing minority and low-socioeconomic students' passing rates and performance on standardized tests. While graduation rates have increased, college readiness has declined among incoming college students (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012).

College readiness became the focus of the part of the NCLB legislation known as the Access to High Standards Act (2004) due to an evident increase in remediation courses required upon high school graduates' enrollment in college. A lack of results by the nation's schools, regarding adequately preparing students for college-level coursework, resulted in heightened national focus and attention. Moreover, the obvious discrepancies between urban schools and their private-school counterparts in college readiness standards raised the issue of equity and brought to the forefront the lack of access to AP exams and rigorous coursework for minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Before looking at the equity and accessibility of AP programs, one must first understand the connection and relevance that AP coursework has to college readiness. AP exams and their corresponding courses are part of the College Board's (2019) AP Program, which is designed to consist of a curriculum of high academic rigor with quality that meets the standards of college-level learning. The AP exams may be taken by students in high school for the opportunity to obtain college credits when passed (College Board, 2014). The positive correlation between passing AP exams and a students' eventual college graduation chances has been explored and documented and deemed valid. According to Dougherty, Mellor, and Jian (2006), "We conclude that the percent of a school's students who take and pass AP exams is the best AP-related indicator of whether the school is preparing increasing percentages of its students to graduate from college" (p. 2). Even the U.S. Department of Education (2004) deemed AP coursework as

college preparation curriculum and encouraged the incorporation of the AP program as a means of elevating academic standards. The AP program was mentioned in NCLB (2002) and the 2011 Race to the Top initiative (GovTrack.us., 2019) with federal funds allocated specifically for school AP budgets and incentive programs designed to increase student access and participation in AP coursework. Several studies have shown that students that pass an AP exam experience greater academic success in college and graduate from college at higher rates than their non-AP peers (Dougherty et al., 2006; Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Without a doubt, successfully passing AP exams as a high school student is the right track for college readiness and, therefore, may be used as a good measure of a school district's ability to produce college-ready graduates. Schools with more developed and successful AP programs produce students more apt at succeeding in college and graduating within 5 years. Unfortunately, many urban schools serving low-socioeconomic and minority students do not possess developed or successful AP programs due to systemic issues regarding student identification, teacher preparation and expectations, and limited curriculum offerings (Ferguson, 2001; Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012).

While legislation at the state and federal levels fixate on ensuring that schools are held accountable for low-performing student gains and growth, most policies and initiatives ignore the top-performing students; this is especially evident in public high schools with large populations of students of color or low-SES (Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). Despite the efforts for increased equity and access for all students, urban public schools are still lacking in these areas regarding advanced academic courses and college readiness, especially for first-generation Latinx students (Basch, 2011). The scarcity of organization and structure of advanced academic programs in such schools negatively affects minority and low-SES students. Due to these disparities, students may not have the same

opportunities their private-school and suburban counterparts have readily available to them (College Board, 2014). Some of the factors affecting inequities in program implementation include minimal organization, a lack of parental involvement and support, a lack of social capital for students, and a lack of collective efficacy for teachers in urban high schools. For this study, advanced academics will be defined as Pre-AP courses and AP courses.

In my experience as a Latinx student and product of public schools, I learned the value of AP coursework firsthand and benefitted from the academic rigor and college preparation afforded me through my enrollment in a magnet high school. As an educator, I know the disparities in availability and access to AP courses that exist in comprehensive public high schools with primarily underserved students or students from low-SES. On the other hand, there are schools beating the odds and offering these rigorous courses to traditionally underrepresented students, where Latinx students are excelling. In the current study, I examined the effects of best practices in a large, public high school and identify how public-school leaders can increase access to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework for Latinx students. In addition, there is a need to examine the effects that these practices have on Latinx students' social capital.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the necessary leadership practices for closing the opportunity gap to AP coursework for Latinx students. Based on my study, this can be defined as leadership actions for increasing access to AP coursework, from a district and campus level in conjunction with changes in organizational structures that build Latinx student social capital. Significant research exists on how the AP program increases college readiness (College Board, 2014; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Schneider, 2009**)**; however, there is little research on how schools implement, organize, and develop successful advanced academics programs and

how those factors support Latinx students' success and build social capital for them. For this study, social capital was defined using Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework. Social capital was defined by Stanton-Salazar as the basis for the role of *institutional agents* in the lives of Latinx students and as a means of defining the relational ties that propelled the students towards academic excellence.

As educators know, there are many factors that lead to increases in student participation. In this study, I examined the access and equity factors from a leadership standpoint at both the district and campus level and triangulate them with students' lived experiences to further enhance the perspective of the Latinx experience through AP courses.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was determined by the claim that developing an accessible and equitable AP program can close the opportunity gap regarding AP courses. This can be accomplished through effective leadership practices and district and campus-based structures. Student achievement and college readiness are logical byproducts of increased access to AP coursework based on research (College Board, 2014; Dougherty et al., 2006; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Schneider, 2009). This framework draws upon the research on effective leadership practices and closing the opportunity gap for minority and low-SES students (Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Perna, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). Figure 1 depicts the elements of the framework that support the need for the current study.

To frame this study properly, it is also important to define the opportunity gap that exists in AP courses and observe this phenomenon in the context of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework. Through this framework, I examined leadership at the district, campus, and classroom level, and their influence on building Latinx student social capital. The connection

between these organizational leadership practices was also explored to see how they—in combination—influence an increase in AP course offerings to improve Latinx student access to AP courses and exams.

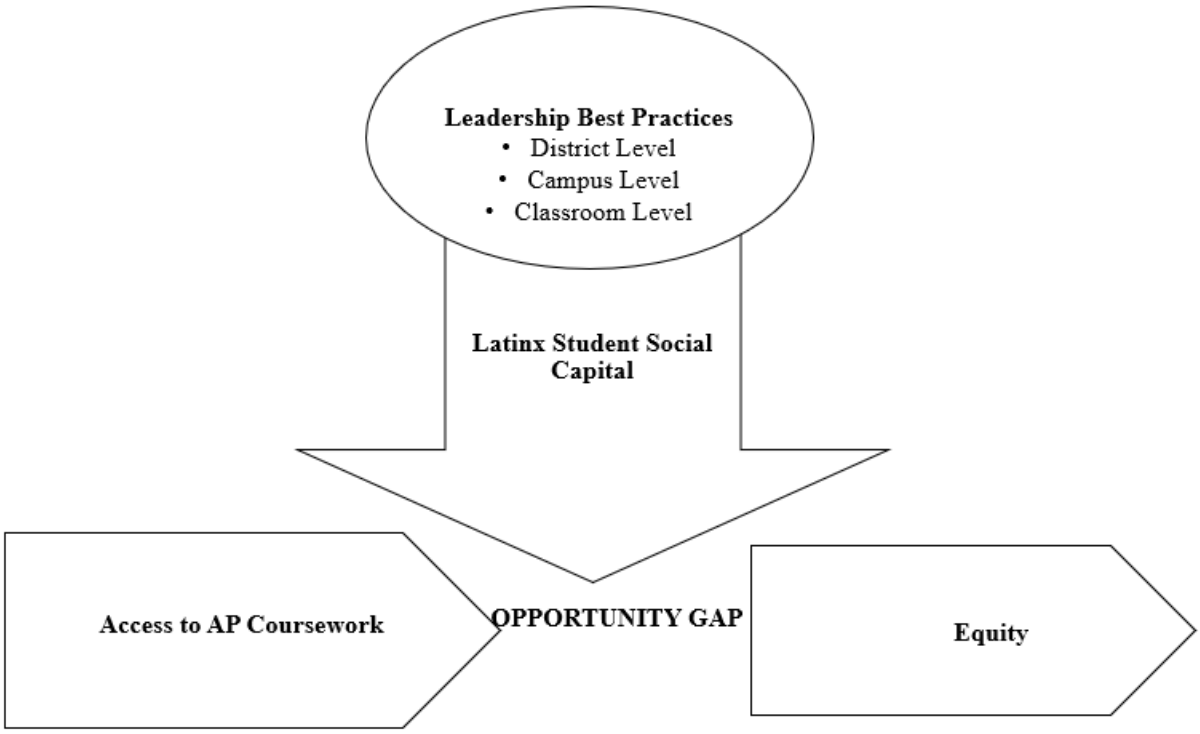


*Figure 1*. Conceptual framework. This framework depicts the correlation between district-based, campus-based, and classroom-based leadership factors in building Latinx student social capital as defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011) and Ream and Stanton-Salazar (2006), in order to bridge the opportunity gap with regards to college readiness for Latinx students.

## Research Questions

With this qualitative study, I explored the following research questions:

1. How do organizational structures, implemented at the district and campus level close the access and equity gap to advanced placement courses for Latinx students?

2. What types of leadership best practices, as specific policies and practices provide access to and participation in advanced placement courses by Latinx students?

3. What evidence is there that Latinx students are building social capital accessing and participating in advanced placement courses?

For the data collection of this exploratory qualitative case study, I used semi-structured interviews with district and campus leaders and an AP teachers focus group to determine leadership beliefs and actions that were successful in building an accessible and equitable advanced academics program for Latinx students. These leadership beliefs and actions were triangulated with data collected directly from a focus group of Latinx student graduates of Stripes High School (pseudonym) to validate its authenticity and relevance further. In this context, I also attempted to define best practices for developing, organizing, and implementing an effective AP program that leads to a culture of excellence for Latinx students.

## Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the threats to external validity that can confirm, explain, or clarify findings (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). In particular, external validity is heightened through multiple resources, observations, and evidence. The delimitations for this study are listed:

1. The high school chosen for this study was purposeful and was determined by student demographics, AP participation and results, and campus and district size.
2. Participants for this study were selected through consultation with school administrators including counselors and principals.
3. This study's focus was the perceptions and experiences with the AP program from the perspective of Latinx students and no other student groups.
4. This study specifically focused on the high school AP program and not on other academic programs.

## Limitations

The limitations in a qualitative study related to internal validity. Principally, the design of this qualitative case study was bounded and confined in studying educational practice and programs that could inform educational policy (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, Merriam (1998) indicated that qualitative case studies are limited since the researcher is the primary instrument

for data collection and analysis. Since the selection of participants largely depended on the recommendations and references of school administrators, biases may exist dependent on perceived credibility and relationships. Additionally, since this study is centered on personal experiences and insights, it may be difficult to identify clear factors that positively affect the access to and enrollment of students in AP courses. Limitations for this study included,

1. In this study, I was the main instrument for collecting and analyzing data.
2. This investigator relied on a case study design which may inhibit generalization across other similar schools.
3. Selection of participants depended on individual recommendations and may present bias in the selection process.
4. The findings from this study relied primarily on personal experiences and perspectives that may differ based on personal beliefs, backgrounds, and individual bias.

## Significance of the Study

The rationale for this case study was to contribute to the existing research on access and equity for Latinx students and to augment the quantity of available literature in the areas of advanced academics, development of student social capital, and closing the opportunity gap for students of color in high schools. Information drawn from this study could assist urban high school leaders with improving their performance on AP courses and increasing their students' access to AP courses and exams through the implementation of successful district and campus programmatic structures and student social capital. The need to close the opportunity gap for historically underrepresented students in the AP program is evident in the literature (Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Perna, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002).

## Definition of Key Terms

The following terms, phrases, and concepts used in this study will be condensed to the following definitions:

- *Advanced placement*. AP refers to the program of college-level classes that the College Board (2019) established in 1955, as a means for high school students to enroll in college-level courses taught by high school teachers. Students enrolled in AP classes gain higher-level thinking skills and have an opportunity to earn college credit if they score a three or higher on the national AP exam (College Board, 2014).

- *College Board.* The College Board is a not-for-profit membership association made up of schools, colleges, and other educational organizations that attempt to connect students with college success (Chajewski, Mattern, & Shaw, 2011; Olszewski-Kubilius, & Clarenbach, 2014). The College Board is best known for facilitating the Scholastic Aptitude Test, commonly referred to as the SAT, and the AP national exam.

- *Equity*. This term refers to equal access for students and an opportunity to participate in all school programs (Center for Global Education, 2019). In this study, this concept specifically applies to the concept of accessibility of AP courses.

- *First-generation student*. This term refers to students who are the first generation in their family to attend college; students whose parents did not attend college (Fernandez, 2018).

- *High-achieving student*. This term refers to a student's proclivity to work hard to perform at high levels. Kingore (2004) explained that "High-achieving students are noticed for their on-time, neat, well-developed, and correct learning products" (p. 87). High-achieving students have a strong desire to succeed and a strong academic work ethic; they are self-motivated and strive to exceed classroom expectations.

- *Latinx students*. “Latinx is a gender neutral term often used in lieu of Latino or Latina that refers to individuals with cultural ties to Latin America and individuals with Latin American descent” (Hispanic Network, 2017, para. 1).
- *Open enrollment*. This term refers to a system where all students have the opportunity to enroll in an AP class (USCRossierOnline, 2013). Students are encouraged to enroll in AP classes based on their interest and effort in a given subject, as opposed to meeting a gatekeeper requirement.
- *Opportunity gap*. This term refers to the ways in which race, ethnicity, SES, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014).
- *Traditionally marginalized students*. This term refers to students who typically may not have access to various school programs based on their ethnicity or SES (King, 2017).

## Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I presented the introduction to the study with relevant background information for the climate of AP, as related to the study, as well as the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, conceptual framework, research question, rationale for the study, significance of the study, and definition of key terms. Chapter 2 is a literature review related to the AP program, literature related to closing the opportunity gap for Latinx students, as well as the relevant literature connected to leadership practices that are relevant to the study. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology of the study and the procedures used to gather data, as well as the limitations of the study. The results and findings of

the study are covered in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, the connection of the literature to the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further study.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is an overview of the literature and research related to factors for increasing access for Latinx students to AP courses in high school. In this study, I sought to identify the necessary organizational steps and best practices that public high schools can utilize to implement an advanced academics program that focuses on increasing access to AP courses for Latinx students. I took a three-pronged approach at observing the issue of access to AP courses:

- The history of the AP program in schools in the United States and the connection between AP coursework and college readiness
- School leadership's role in closing the opportunity gap for students of color, specifically, Latinx students, to AP courses
- Factors that contribute to an increase in social capital through access, quality, and equity to AP coursework

While literature exists depicting the disparities in participation of Latinx students to AP courses and literature related to the benefits of AP courses and their connection to college readiness, the missing aspect correlates to the factors that contribute to a successful high school program in closing the AP opportunity gap and building social capital for Latinx students. This study will help bridge the gap in the literature and in turn provide viable suggestions for closing the opportunity gap in high school AP programs that are majority Latinx in student population.

## Historical Background

High school advanced academic programs appeared in most American public schools in the 1960s as a federal mandate in response to the 1957 Russian satellite launch, Sputnik, which prompted a U.S. focus on educating the academically gifted in public schools in mathematics and science for the purpose of national security (Oakland & Rossen, 2005). At the onset of public school advanced academic programs, academic giftedness was determined using course grades

and standardized test results (Hertzog, 2005; Lidz & Macrine, 2001; Lohman, 2005; Oakland & Rossen, 2005). In 1988, the Javits Act expanded the appraisal of giftedness to include creative thinking, leadership, psychomotor ability, and artistic ability (Oakland & Rossen, 2005). In recent times, the appraisal and perception of giftedness evolved to include emotional resilience, persistence or grit, and stable self-management in a more inclusive attempt to identify factors for student achievement potential (Lohman, 2005). These assessments of giftedness are often the determining factors in district and campus-based decisions for placement of students in advanced academic programs that lead to high school AP courses. These programs sometimes become de-facto ability tracking systems when students enter high school unable to take certain courses due to prerequisite course requirements.

In looking at the relevance of AP courses to student college readiness, one must first understand the connection and research that links AP coursework to college readiness. AP exams and their corresponding courses are part of the College Board's AP program, which is designed to consist of a curriculum of high academic rigor with quality that meets the standards of college-level learning. The AP exams may be taken by students in high school for the opportunity to obtain college credits, when passed (College Board, 2014). The positive correlation between passing AP exams and a student's eventual college graduation chances have been explored, documented, and, at this point, deemed valid. "We conclude that the percent of a high school's students who take and pass AP exams is the best AP-related indicator of whether the school is preparing increasing percentages of its students to graduate from college" (Dougherty et al., 2006, p. 2). Even the U.S. Department of Education (2004) deemed AP coursework as college preparation curriculum and encouraged the incorporation of the AP program as a means of elevating academic standards. As previously mentioned, the U.S. Department of Education is

confident enough of the academic rigor of AP coursework and exams that AP coursework is specifically mentioned in the NCLB (2002) and the Race to the Top initiative (GovTrack.us., 2019). In addition, federal funds are allocated specifically for school AP budgets and incentive programs designed to increase student access and participation in AP coursework. Studies show that students who pass an AP exam experience greater academic success in college and graduate from college at higher rates than their non-AP peers (Dougherty et al., 2006; Hallett, & Venegas, 2011). Without a doubt, successfully passing AP exams as a high school student is the right track for college readiness and therefore may be utilized as a good measure of a school's ability to produce college-ready graduates. Schools with more successful AP programs produce students more apt at succeeding in college and graduating within 5 years.

Unfortunately, low participation and access to AP courses for non-White and economically disadvantaged students historically affected college acceptance and completion rates of these groups (College Board, 2014). The disparity between access to AP courses in public schools raises issues of equity, rigor, and quality regarding advanced academic courses in schools that are majority minority or consist of high percentages of economically disadvantaged student bodies. Generally, students in urban schools have less access to AP courses and fewer opportunities to take advanced courses, due to these courses being offered only at more affluent schools. While there are significant improvements in access to AP courses nationwide, this issue has shifted to the quality of the AP courses being offered (Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Schneider, 2009). For example, economically disadvantaged students, as defined by being eligible for free or reduced lunch, comprised 48.1% of the public-school graduating class in 2014, but only 27.5% of students took AP exams and 21.7% of students achieved a passing score during high school (College Board, 2014).

The most prevalent issues in equity and access to AP courses in economically disadvantaged schools is one of low expectations and an unwillingness to hire or recruit adequately competent teachers that can deliver the rigorous instruction to prepare students for an exam that is nationally recognized and calibrated (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). These findings by Hallett and Venegas (2011) led to the conclusion that making AP courses more accessible to students without a focus on the preparation and professional development of the teachers instructing those courses will not yield desired academic results. Other researchers went a step further and questioned the legitimacy and cultural competence of using AP course completion as a means for determining students' acceptance to college (Davis, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2015; Hallett & Venegas, 2011). One of the prevalent excuses for the lack of access was students' unwillingness to take AP courses while in high school due to their lack of interest and lack of preparation. However, after the attention that the NCLB (2002) and other national initiatives brought to AP courses, these justifications generally went by the wayside, leaving a more accessible advanced academic playing field for non-White and low-SES students, as evidenced by the gains in students of color taking AP exams from 1997−2012 (Davis et al., 2015; College Board, 2014).

## Teacher Quality

Research has found that teachers are the number one predictor of academic success in students (Darling- Hammond, 1999; Hattie, 2003). Hattie (2003) found that students taught by expert teachers exhibited an understanding of concepts that are more integrated, more coherent, and at a higher level of abstraction than students taught by other teachers. This lack of experience also leads teachers to allow standardized testing to play a dominant role in identifying students for advanced academics. Ford (1995) stated that as school districts saw increased racial

and ethnic diversity, educators relied on biased standardized tests to identify students. These tests almost guaranteed lower test scores for culturally diverse groups that were unfamiliar with middle class American values, norms, and traditions. Because of the near exclusive reliance on test scores when making placement decisions, gifted programs demographically remained predominantly White and middle class (Ford, 1995).

Ferguson (2001) noted that students who have positive reciprocal relationships with teachers have higher outcomes and receive more academic support. A positive relationship that is built on trust provides the teacher support that students need.

## The Opportunity Gap

Opportunity gaps are described as "complicated, process-oriented, and much more nuanced than achievement" gaps (Milner, 2010, pp. 7–8). The make-up of opportunity gaps shifts the attention from "outcomes to inputs - to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational and ultimately socioeconomic outcomes" (Welner & Carter, 2013, p. 3). Rather than concentrating on student academic shortcomings or deficits as the term achievement gap" does, opportunity gaps focus on the oppressive institutionalized systems that lead to these gaps. Milner postulated that all students deserve opportunities to succeed, but oppressive systems give advantages to some over others. Similarly, educational debts are owed to underserved and underrepresented students in education (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Ladson-Billings argued that closing the achievement gap only reduces the deficit, while still not affecting the overall debt, so policy and practical decisions must focus on lowering the educational debt and closing opportunity gaps. Opportunity gaps, in this sense, can be compared to economic debts, thus, the achievement gap is like an economic deficit. Furthermore, Welner and Carter (2013) argued educational debt arises

from a long-term failure to produce equitable conditions and a failure to address deficits. AP courses have an impact on the opportunity gap in that they are directly related to later educational attainment. Students who take AP courses during high school may earn college credit and are better prepared for a college career. AP students are also more likely to complete an undergraduate degree and advance to graduate work. In a study to determine the role of AP in graduate work attainment, "70% of individuals who had taken one or more AP courses or exams during high school had obtained an advanced degree, compared with 43% of those who had not taken an AP course or exam" (Bleske-Rechek, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2004, p. 219). As such, the benefits of increasing access to AP courses in schools has the potential to change educational attainment in a major way.

## The Opportunity Gap and Latinx Students

In schools that have a large population of students of color, there exists a prevalent and noticeable lack of access to rigorous coursework and advanced academic classes. Along with this lack of access, societal and cultural factors for students of low-SES also exist, factors that can prevent minoritized students from choosing to take advanced coursework in high school (Ballon, 2008; Burchinal et al., 2011; Cowan-Pitre, 2014; Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009; Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Luna & Revilla, 2013). These combined factors account for what will be referred to throughout this dissertation as the *opportunity gap*. Many of the public schools that are mainly students of color in their student demographics can be characterized as lacking educational resources, having inadequate and neglected facilities that are underfunded, and employing ineffective or inexperienced teachers (Cowan-Pitre, 2014; Luna & Revilla, 2013). Most of these schools are serving populations that are living in poverty, which has a negative effect on tax funding and the available funds for schools. Carpenter and Ramirez (2012) found

there is an equal valuing of education between Latinx and White students and that both groups share the sentiment that in order to secure a future career, they need, at a minimum, a high school diploma. Latinx students, oftentimes, must overcome many factors associated with cultural and socioeconomic issues such as entering school with a limited academic vocabulary, limited overall academic preparation, and issues with grouping or tracking (Ballon, 2008; Burchinal et al., 2011; Geisler et al., 2009). Compound these factors with the inadequate access offered by the schools Latinx students attend and you have the features of the *opportunity gap* that exist in public schools.

In their study, Wyner, Bridgeland, and Dilulio (2007) found 47% of students identified as gifted are in the top quartile for income; while only 9% are in the lowest quartile. Furthermore, high poverty schools are less likely to offer advanced courses, and if offered, students are less likely to take them. Sixty-five percent of students in college preparatory classes are from high-SES families, whereas 28% are from low-SES families (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). Research results show that effective strategies for early identification for participation in Gifted and Talented Program (GT) programs are particularly important for low income and/or cultural minority children (Daugherty & White, 2008; Passow & Frasier, 1996).

## Cultural Realities of Latinx Students

As postulated by Espinoza-Herold and Gonzalez-Carriedo (2017), poverty remains a major obstacle in the educational attainment of Latinx students, but other factors, such as the quality of schools and teacher preparedness also influence their educational attainment more directly. These factors, coupled with inexperience with or misunderstanding of cultural and language factors, also negatively affect Latinx student educational attainment in public schools

(Espinoza-Herold & Gonzalez-Carriedo, 2017). Further amplifying the need for cultural training for teachers and staff.

Students of different backgrounds vary widely from the accepted, dominant culture in public schools across the United States; oftentimes, these students do not espouse the accepted roles of their White counterparts with regard to academic performance and participation. Good et al. (2010) postulated that many students of Latinx backgrounds may not find their place in the competitive and driven world of American public schools, due to their contrasting cultural values that espouse relationships and cooperation. Latinx students and their families also struggle with communication and advocacy in schools due to their limited English-language speaking skills. Other factors, such as teenage pregnancy and economic barriers, also cause Latinx students, even those native to American culture, a disadvantage regarding their educational attainment and opportunities (Basch, 2011).

## Economics Barriers for AP Exams

One major criticism of the AP program, since its inception, has been the fees associated with taking each exam, a price that many feel is too high for economically disadvantaged students (Schneider, 2009). These fees become a considerable barrier to access, especially for students in urban, low-SES schools. Each AP exam costs $92 and students that qualify for free or reduced lunch are eligible for a $30 reduction by the College Board. While several national initiatives had the primary aim to remove the financial barrier created by the fees for economically disadvantaged students, these economic factors cannot be overlooked (Chajewski et al., 2011). These equity criticisms and contentions are what the federal government hoped to curtail by providing significant funding for subsidizing student AP exam fees and AP teacher training fees for school districts. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education decided to reinstate

federal AP program incentives and exam subsidies, including $21.5 million to subsidize AP exam fees (Davis et al., 2015).

## Tracking

Another barrier to access to AP courses for Latinx students is tracking or the placement of students with similar academic ability levels in courses together. Ballon (2008) stated, even though the practice of purposeful tracking generally has been phased out of public education in the U.S. due to issues with discrimination, students are still placed into academic tracks based on academic ability with course appropriateness. Since this type of grouping is determined by levels of student performance, and since students of color, including Latinx students, generally achieve lower scores on standardized tests, these students become overrepresented in lower-level courses while White students are overrepresented in honors or AP courses (Cowan-Pitre, 2014). In urban schools or rural areas where families live in poverty, advanced programs are not always offered at the schools where students attend, further amplifying the lack of access to rigorous courses for high-achieving minority students (Ballon, 2008; Cowan-Pitre, 2014). A concrete example of this is middle school mathematics programs that allow only students labeled as gifted to take Algebra 1 in eighth grade; this de-facto coursework tracking becomes a limiting factor for who is eligible to take AP Calculus in high school.

## Latinx Students in Texas

The state of Texas has seen sizeable growth of Latinx students in public schools over the last 20 years. Latinx population figures have continued to rise and account for over 60% of the population growth in Texas (Eschbach, 2009). By the year 2040, Latinx people will account for at least 80% of the population growth in Texas. In Texas schools, Latinx students account for almost 50% of the student population. In the 2007-2008 school year, there were over 4.6 million

students enrolled in Texas schools; of that total, Latinx were the largest student group at just over 2.2 million. White students were the second largest group at over 1.6 million and African American students the third largest under seven hundred thousand. The greater contrast however, can be seen in graduation rates. White students had a 93% high school graduation rate while Latinx students had an 85% graduation rate; comparably, dropout rates in Texas indicated a 10% gap between White students and Latinx students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). While these gaps are concerning, college enrollment and attainment rates are even more skewed. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), Latinx students accounted for 34% of total students enrolled in higher education as compared to 59% for White students. For the percentage of Latinx students enrolled in college, only 15% obtained a 4-year degree as compared to a 66% rate for White students.

These gaps are further amplified when looking at participation in AP courses. Since enrollment in AP courses is open to all students in Texas, over 1 million of the 2.2 million Latinx students enrolled in secondary schools are considered eligible to enroll in AP courses. However, of these 1 million Latinx students eligible to enroll in AP courses, only 19% were enrolled. By comparison, White student enrollment was just over 28% and African American at a low 16%. Enrollment for Asian students was the highest at 44% (TEA, 2010).

## Types of Capital

In dissecting and examining social inequity, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction is one of the most well-known explanations to the phenomenon (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Bourdieu (1986) hypothesized that formal educational systems are a mechanism in the perpetuation of inequality; more specifically, he argued that inequality persists due to the

unequal distribution of forms of capital—economic, cultural, and social. Bourdieu (1986) further broke down his concept of capital as,

> Economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and social capital made up of social obligations, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (p. 47)

As stated in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, some forms of capital may be converted into other forms. Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, and Martinez-Garcia (2013) took this a step further and postulated that cultural capital could generate economic and social capital, and vice versa. While all forms of capital influence inequality, I will focus primarily on social capital, which is the conceptual lens through which to look at ways to build social capital in Latinx students.

## Social Capital

In this study, I rely on the concept of social capital, as defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997), as the basis for the role of *institutional agents* in the lives of Latinx students and as a means of defining the relational ties that propelled the students towards academic excellence. Social capital is a concept that refers to the resources that are linked to relational ties (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001). These relational ties can consist of relationships, both familial and personal; they also can consist of social networks or institutions, such as schools (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Lin (2001) stated, "the theory of social capital focuses on the resources embedded in one's social network and how access to and use of such resources benefit the individual's actions" (p. 55). Based on these foundations, social capital is how a person's network is used by said person, and how that network acts upon the person, in return.

This interaction, like other forms of capital, can be either positive or negative (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001).

## Institutional Agents and Empowerment Agents

Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2011) concept of an institutional agent defines and distinguishes the difference between an agent that works for an institution and an institutional agent. Through positional and personal resources, institutional agents within educational institutions can reduce race and social inequalities, as well as function as resources of knowledge and opportunity that allow often-overlooked students to overcome social structural barriers. As stated by Stanton-Salazar (2011), "At its core, authentically-supportive relationships between working-class minority adolescents and eligible institutional agents require the construction of interpersonal trust, solidarity, and shared meaning in the context of institutional realities (p. 33). In this manner, these institutional agents serve to help otherwise disenfranchised students connect to opportunities. Through exchanges of social capital, agents can contribute to providing students the ability to experience school success and social mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The social capital framework and the concept of institutional agents provide me a means to examine the roles of campus and district administrators, counselors, and teachers, and their potential for influence. By gaining insight into the influence of the members of these institutional agents, I examined how practices by these individuals lead to an increase in access and equity to AP courses and exams.

Another important and relevant aspect of the social capital framework is that of critical consciousness. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined critical consciousness as "the ability to perceive and interrogate the social, political, and economic forms of oppression that shape one's life and to take collective action against elements of society (or social structures)" (p. 35). It is a critical

awareness regarding the policies, structures, and practices in education that prevent students from achieving their academic goals. Based on their awareness of a disproportionate class structure and relatively high status in education, institutional agents—in this case, the campus and district administrators, counselor, and dean—can use networks to advocate for students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Stanton- Salazar (2011) also introduced the concept of "empowerment agents," he defined this as "a concept which highlights the motivational and ideological characteristics of those adults willing to go counter to the established and hierarchical social structures" (p. 35). In an educational system, these are the teachers, administrators, and other staff that seek to directly make a difference in the lives of students, and who are deeply aware of the inequalities and injustices faced by their student populations. Stanton-Salazar (2011) further defined empowerment agents by tying the concept to Fraire's (1993) notion of *critical consciousness* as those willing to become positive agents for change amidst societal and institutional injustices, to the point of risking their own standing within the accepted societal and institutional structures. In order for schools to positively affect the educational attainment and close the opportunity gap for Latinx students, they must be staffed with empowerment agents.

## Social Capital and School Leadership Theories

Social capital and existing school leadership theories work in conjunction with each other. Some school leadership theories include transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership involves school leaders motivating their teachers and staff by offering rewards for services rendered (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). This form of leadership could include the principal rewarding teachers with access to materials in exchange for compliance with a new program. Theories of transactional leadership complement the social capital theory, since exchange and reciprocity are central to most iterations of social capital, specifically with

regard to trust. Transformational leaders, however, often use transactional leadership as their core foundation but augment the simple exchanges of material rewards through a proactive attempt at individual motivation. This often includes increased awareness among followers about collective goals and initiatives, and ultimately leads followers toward achieving high performance outcomes (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Leaders such as these attain a higher level of trust among staff through their proactive and inspirational approach; trust is often the basis for staff accepting change (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood, 1992). Transformational leaders inspire others to go beyond their own interests to pursue collective or higher order goals (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). The transformational leadership theory complements the social capital theory, as collective interest and trust are fundamental aspects of social capital. As is evident, school leadership theories and the social capital theory share many of the same characteristics and features.

## Latinx Students and College Aspirations

In the United States, most Latinx students and their families aspire for a college degree as a means of achieving success (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Solórzano, 1992). However, the sad reality is that Latinx high school graduates are less likely than Whites to enroll in a 4-year college or university (Perna, 2000), and are far more likely to attend a community college or a school close to home (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Another distinguishing factor for Latinx students is that they are more likely to seek information about college primarily from family and friends (Gonzalez, 2011; Perna, 2000). Because of this, family and friends become a critical influence in Latinx students' college aspirations. Because of this limited access to viable college information and the contingency of a student's family background, Latinx students' social capital can be limited (Perna, 2000). Since most of their information about college and the college application process

may come from family members, Latinx students are often at a disadvantage when compared to their White counterparts (Perna, 2000). Furthermore, since most Latinx parents did not attend college, they are not equipped to help their children navigate the college application process or to help guide their children's college-going aspirations. In order to fill the college knowledge gaps of their parents, students often turn to peers to fill these knowledge gaps, thus, for Latinx students, peers become a vital source of information and influence (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004).

## School Factors that Lead to Increase in Equity

While the problem of a lack of access and equity to AP courses and exams is thoroughly documented and studied, not much research focused on methods for increasing access and equity. The most commonly attributed factors for improving equity are policies that espouse open access, teacher collective efficacy, appropriate and effective professional development practices, and transformational leadership practices with a culturally responsive focus. As stated by Hernandez and Murakami-Ramalho (2016), many urban schools with majority students of color, high poverty, and a high population of students who are considered English language learners, have leaders who are also of color; these leaders have shown to have a higher impact on improving student educational outcomes than their White counterparts. Hernandez and Murakami-Ramalho's research on Latinx school leaders also highlighted the need for leadership practices that meet the needs of students through active and engaging school environments that focus on social justice and relatability to the school community needs.

## Summary

This review of the literature provides an overview of the history of AP courses and exams, college readiness as it relates to rigorous coursework in high school, and the development

of AP programs. The literature displayed a connection between the cultural and societal barriers faced by Latinx and other students of color with regard to access to AP coursework and exams. It also showed the connection between achievement and enrollment gaps in AP courses in schools of poverty in urban and rural settings due to their lack of resources, appropriate training for teachers, and inexperienced staff. This chapter provided a definition for the term opportunity gap as it will be used in this study. Factors that lead to a closing of this opportunity gap present in the literature were also discussed in this chapter, including de-tracking and implementation of effective leadership practices that lead to building of social equity in Latinx students.

According to the literature reviewed, a gap exists regarding ways in which campus leadership can help close the opportunity gap for AP courses for majority Latinx student populations. Reviewing the literature also shaped the hypothesis that leadership practices, at the district and campus level, can positively affect Latinx student access and equity and, ultimately, help with closing the opportunity gap.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to identify the necessary organizational structures, from a district and campus level, and best practices that high schools can utilize to implement an advanced academics program that focuses on increasing Latinx student access and performance in advanced academic courses. In this chapter, I delineate the research design, including the methodology, sampling, data collection plan, and data analysis.

Students in urban high schools consistently have had both lower access and performance on AP exams when compared to their suburban counterparts (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). This discrepancy is amplified when considering first generation Latinx students, due to the language, cultural, and college-access gaps (Geisler et al., 2009; Good et al., 2010; Luna & Revilla, 2013). Latinx students, especially first-generation, remain underrepresented in higher education institutions (Perna & Kurban, 2013). This imbalance in opportunity results because most Latinx students rely mainly on public-school personnel—administrators, counselors, and teachers—to access the coursework necessary to become college-ready (Bragg, 2013). However, urban high schools, often attended by students of color and those from working class families, tend to prioritize high school graduation instead of preparation of students to graduate from higher education institutions (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2011). The inequity in opportunity results in a lack of college access for Latinx students that produces lower educational attainment when compared to their higher-income, White counterparts.

Despite the challenges that many urban high schools face, some schools have been successful in closing the access and equity gaps with regard to AP exams for Latinx students (Ferguson, 2001; Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012). As the existing research shows,

disproportionate access to and participation in AP courses persist for students of color, specifically, Latinx students (Ferguson, 2001; Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012). The research also shows the immense benefits of AP courses regarding college readiness and college attainment (College Board, 2014; Davis et al., 2015; Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the necessary organizational structures, from a district and campus level, and best practices that high schools can utilize to implement an advanced academics program that focuses on increasing Latinx student access and performance in advanced academic courses.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation was an introduction to define the problem and the purpose of the study. In Chapter 2—the literature review, I delineated the opportunity gap in urban schools and the lack of social capital for Latinx students. In this chapter, I describe the methodology and research design used in this qualitative case study that aims to examine how and in what ways school leaders close the access and equity gap to AP courses for Latinx students. The following research questions guided this study.

1. How do organizational structures, implemented at the district and campus level close the access and equity gap to advanced placement courses for Latinx students?
2. What types of leadership best practices, as specific policies and practices provide access to and participation in advanced placement courses by Latinx students?
3. What evidence is there that Latinx students are building social capital accessing and participating in advanced placement courses?

## Research Design

Using an exploratory case study approach, I examined the school leadership factors that contribute to building Latinx student social capital. Through this qualitative study, I studied the organizational and leadership factors of the advanced academics at Stripes High School (pseudonym), and how these factors contributed toward closing the opportunity gap. This

research was conducted using an exploratory case study methodology. According to Yin (2009), case study is a method to explore a case and gain insightful understanding and explanations of real-world behavior. Therefore, an exploratory case study was the most appropriate design. Using this approach, I developed an understanding of effective school policy, practices, and processes used for closing the opportunity gap and was able to narrate the common experiences and traits that are shared by successful Latinx graduates of Stripes High School. This qualitative case study allowed me the opportunity to collect insightful data to explore and describe real-world behavior, based on the lived experiences of successful Latinx student graduates of Stripes High School. Table 1 summarizes the research design and timeline for the current study.

Table 1

*Research Methodology for Exploratory Case Study*

| **Research Questions** | |
|---|---|
| 1. How do organizational structures, implemented at the district and campus level close the access and equity gap to advanced placement courses for Latinx students? | |
| 2. What types of leadership best practices, as specific policies and practices provide access to and participation in advanced placement courses by Latinx students? | |
| 3. What evidence is there that Latinx students are building social capital accessing and participating in advanced placement courses? | |
| **Methodology: Qualitative, Exploratory Case Study** | |
| Site Selection Criteria | Participant Selection Criteria |
| • Highest performing mid-sized district based on regional data of participation in AP courses for Latinx students<br>• High school in district with highest Latinx student population | • AP teachers of the campus with 3+ years' experience<br>• AP coordinator/administrator District-level advanced academics coordinator<br>• 4 Latinx students or graduates (Stripes HS alumni)<br>• Students who took at least 4 AP courses at Stripes HS |

*(table continues)*

| Methods/Tools for Data Collection | | |
|---|---|---|
| Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with district-level advanced academics coordinator, campus-level AP coordinator/Admin., campus-level AP counselor; five college-going Latinx student graduates; focus group of AP teachers who participated in advanced academics PLC 3+ years; documents and artifacts about AP courses and exams; recorded interviews with *Voice Record* iPhone app; use Rev.com for transcription of interviews | | |
| **Timeline:** | | |
| Phase 1:<br>August 2017−Feb. 2019 | Phase 2:<br>Feb. 2012–June 2020 | Phase 3:<br>June 2020−August 2020 |
| • Conduct review of literature (Aug. 2017-July 2018)<br>• Develop interview protocols (July 2018)<br>• IRB Process (Feb. 2019) | • Interviews of advanced academics coordinator, AP admin or counselor<br>• Focus group of Latinx students and alumni of Stripes HS<br>• Teacher focus group<br>• Coding of all interview and focus group data, including documents and artifacts provided from the participants. | • Analysis of data<br>• Report of findings |

*Note*. Adapted from Hesse-Biber (2017).

Through the exploratory case study design approach, I examined the leadership, organizational and structural factors of the school, and how these factors lead to increases in social capital for Latinx students. I also developed an understanding of the effective leadership policies and practices used to provide access to AP classes and close the opportunity gap through narrating the common experiences and traits shared by successful Latinx graduates of Stripes High School. Creswell (2014) stated researchers "use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns and themes" (p. 39). To further this, it was important for me to stress the context and intricate situations within the school as important components of this case study (Yin, 2009). I used the qualitative case study approach to explore

how an urban high school's systemic policies, practices, and processes facilitate closing the opportunity gap in college going Latinx students.

This research design, specifically case study using a focus group and semi-structured interview format, allowed multiple levels of participants to engage in an informal dialog and provided insights, thoughts, and experiences, both with each other and the researcher. Creswell (2014) stated by using case study as a research method, one can "elucidate the particular, the specific," as opposed to creating generalizations (p. 157). Further, the case study allows the researcher to "capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation - because of the lessons it might provide about the social processes related to some theoretical interest" (Yin, 2009, p. 58). Employment of the case study enabled me to identify the strategies, structures, resources, and leadership that facilitate organizational change in support of Latinx students. This research could assist other district and school-level leaders in replicating this success in their own districts and campuses.

## Sample and Population

Creswell (2014) asserted in qualitative research that study sites are purposefully selected that can best help the researcher understand the central issue. For this study, I selected the site based on regional data. Data were collected from a northern region in Texas, Region X (pseudonym), with a student population of 835,926 students and a Latinx student population of 43.6%. Since the purpose of this study was to identify the necessary organizational structures, from a district and campus level, and best practices that high schools can utilize to implement an advanced academics program that focuses on increasing Latinx student access and performance in advanced academic courses, the regional data were sorted and all districts with a Latinx population of less than 35% were eliminated. The largest district in the region consists of a

student population of roughly 157,000 students with a 70% Latinx student population. This district offers many magnet schools and specialized choice schools that offer AP courses to all students enrolled. Since the aim of this study was to look at comprehensive schools and it is difficult to desegregate the specific campus data for a district this size, this school district was not considered in the study. Once those districts were discounted from the data, the data were further sorted based on district size, with the objective of identifying the next-largest districts with a Latinx student population of 25% or higher. What remained were six-mid-sized districts (student population of 25,000 to 60,000) in the region. A breakdown of this data is presented in Table 2. This table shows the comparison of the mid-sized districts in Region X for student population and percentage of Latinx students, and AP participation percentage compared with Latinx AP participation percentage.

Table 2

*Comparison of the Mid-Sized Districts in Region X*

| School District | Total Student Population | Latinx Population % | AP Participation % | AP Participation Latinx % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| District CB | 25,297 | 55.99 | 32.50 | 30.60 |
| District G | 56,582 | 53.11 | 36.60 | 29.00 |
| District GP | 29,362 | 66.23 | 29.80 | 28.70 |
| District I | 35,113 | 72.40 | 35.70 | 34.50 |
| District M | 41,022 | 58.08 | 23.90 | 26.30 |
| District P | 53,952 | 24.51 | 42.00 | 20.80 |
| District R | 39,314 | 38.49 | 41.30 | 27.40 |

I then looked at these remaining districts specifically for their total AP participation percentage (school year 2016-17 data) and these data were compared to the total Latinx AP participation percentage. The data are shown in Figure 2.

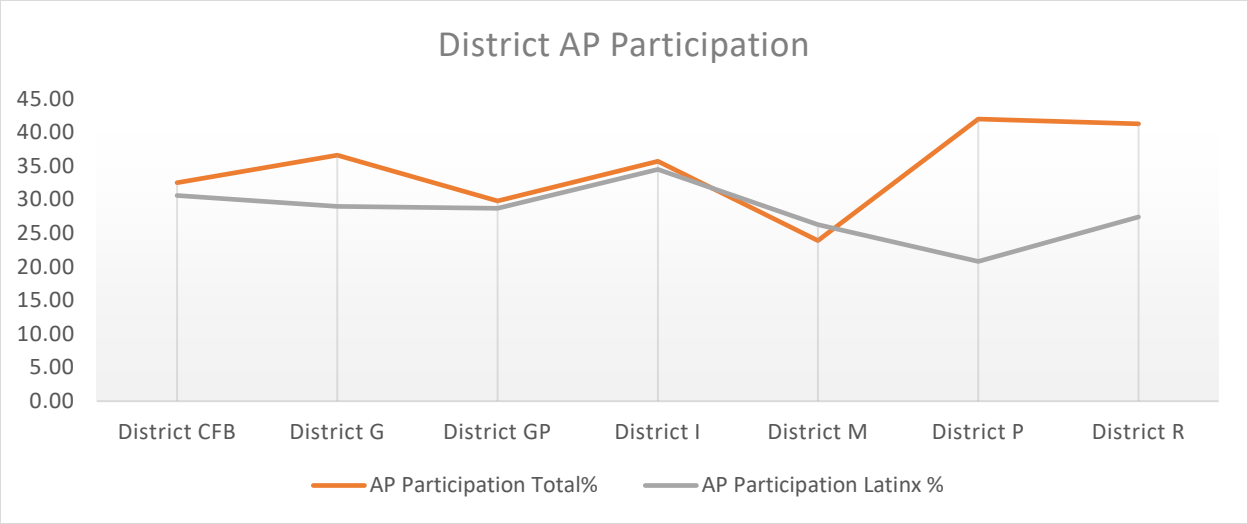


*Figure 2.* School year 2016-17 total AP participation data compared to Latinx AP participation data for qualifying school districts in Region X (Region 10 data, 2017).

From these data, District I (pseudonym) stood out from the other districts in that the percentage of AP participation for Latinx students was very close to the total AP participation for the district and it was the highest percentage of AP participation for Latinx students. The next phase of the selection process was to look at District I high schools and determine which school has the highest percentage of Latinx students participating in AP courses.

The comprehensive high school selected was one of three comprehensive high schools in School District I (pseudonym). School District I was in an urban city in a large metropolitan area. It had a student population of 35,113 students, 72% of which identified as Latinx. Of the total student body population, 78% are identified as low-SES. In the data, one comprehensive high school, Stripes High School (pseudonym), stood out regarding the Latinx student AP participation when compared to the other two comprehensive high schools and when compared to schools with similar demographics in the region.

Stripes High School, the selected site, was a 6A high school with enrollment of 2,730 students in Grades 9−12. A majority, 83.2%, of the students, are identified as Hispanic or Latinx,

while 8% of students are identified as Black, 1.8% Asian, and 6.4% identified as White. Of the entire student population, 78% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch and are designated as economically disadvantaged. A little over a fourth, 27.8%, of the student body is categorized as bilingual/multilingual learners. AP course enrollment at the selected site is 38% of students taking at least one AP course during the 2017-18 school year. The campus offers 27 different AP courses and has steadily increased student access to AP courses and exams over the 4 school years since the implementation of the advanced academics professional learning community (PLC). The advanced academics PLC initiative was intended to increase student access and performance in AP courses—close the opportunity gap—and exams, through effective PLC practices. The number of students taking AP exams at Stripes High School has grown by 76% from 442 students in the 2013-14 school year to 735 students in the 2017-18 school year. During this same period, the number of AP exams taken increased by 120% and the number of passing scores (3, 4, or 5) on AP exams increased by 111%. Due to the increases in access to, participation in, and performance on the AP courses and exams, this campus initiative, the advanced academics PLC, was also looked at for this study. Administrators, counselors, teachers, and students who worked at or attended Stripes High School for 2 or more years during the time of the advanced academics PLC were interviewed either through one-on-one interviews or a focus group to assess the factors that helped close the opportunity gap with regards to AP coursework.

The student participants for the study met the following criteria: Latinx current students or graduates of Stripes High School, have taken at least four AP courses during high school, have immigrant parents with no college education, and have other than English as the primary language at home. The purpose for this sampling was to have students who began their

educational careers with minimal social capital, and who, through their positive and rigorous educational experiences, have developed significant social capital. The participants invited to be a part of the study fit the guidelines and agreed to participate in a focus group. These students were interviewed in a focus group format using a semi-structured questioning format that was recorded and transcribed with the goal of understanding their high school lived experiences regarding AP coursework and exams, the effects on building their social capital, and to triangulate the findings from the leadership practices. The goal of the student interviews was to ascertain the effectiveness of the leadership practices and methods through triangulation of the information.

All students, teachers, and administrators were selected from the case study campus—Stripes High School (pseudonym; Stripes HS) and the advanced academics coordinator was a district-level administrator position. Latinx AP students provided data through a focus group interview, AP teachers provided data through a focus group interview, a campus administrator provided data through a semi-structured interview, and a district-level coordinator provided data via a semi-structured interview to investigate the research questions. The data obtained from these interviews was insightful in answering the research questions and were further analyzed to discover common themes and produce summaries for each level of interview in an effort to triangulate the data for the research questions.

## Participants

For my study, two focus groups and two semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain a clear picture of practices that increase equity and access to AP courses for Latinx students from all perspectives involved. The semi-structured interviews involved the district-level advanced academics coordinator and the campus-level assistant principal over the AP

department. The two separate focus groups were conducted with four AP teachers from a variety of subjects and experience teaching; and the student focus group involved four Latinx AP students from the school, two who graduated in the 2019-2020 school year and two who will be in 11th grade at the start of the 2020-2021 school year, all of whom have had their full high school tenure at Stripes HS. In selecting the participants for the focus groups, campus AP teachers notified their classes and asked for student volunteers; after deciding on a time to conduct the student focus group, four students were able to participate. Table 3 supplies a closer look at the demographic information for the student participants. Table 4 details the educational experience of each of the AP teacher participants in the study. The participants all agreed to openly share their experiences about AP and about their connection with Stripes HS as either a district-level administrator, campus-level administrator, teacher, or student. The interviews with both administrators were intended to obtain a better understanding of the specific actions, policies, and practices that have been implemented to increase access and equity to AP courses and exams; since the majority student population of Stripes HS is Latinx.

Table 3

*AP Student Focus Group Participant Information*

| Student (pseudonym) | Grade Level (2020-21) | Primary Home Language | No. of AP Exams | College Aspirations | Parent Highest Education Level attained |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vivian | graduated | Spanish | 10 | Starting at community college then transfer to 4-year institution | 4th grade |
| Vane | 11th grade | Spanish | 6 | Brown University | 12th grade |
| Luis | graduated | Spanish | 11 | Beginning at SMU in Fall (academic scholarship) | 9th grade |
| Arre | 11th grade | Spanish | 5 | Harvard University | 8th grade |

Table 4

*AP Teacher Focus Group Participant Information*

| Teacher (pseudonym) | AP Subject(s) (2020-21) | No. of Years Teaching | No. of Years as AP Teacher |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elizabeth | AP English Literature & Composition | 5 | 2 |
| Charlie | AP Government & Politics | 16 | 5 |
| Mr. G | AP English Language & Composition; AP English Literature & Composition | 10 | 3 |
| Anna | AP Computer Science; AP Computer Science Principles | 27 | 20 |

## Data Collection Method

Data collection in a case study involves an in-depth gathering of data from multiple sources of information, including observations, interviews, audiovisual materials, and other documents and reports (Creswell, 2014). Yin (2009) elaborated and emphasized that the collection of documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts are the means to understand and describe the case adequately.

Data for this case study encompassed information beginning from the 2013-2014 academic school year as a baseline for the effects of the formation of the advanced academics PLC during the 2014-15 school year. The AP course and exam participation and performance data collected spanned four academic school years, from 2014-15 through the 2017-18 school years. Data collection also included multiple sources—semi structured interviews, observations, information on campus-specific PLC practices, and other campus-specific AP data, documents, and reports from the College Board. In order to explore as many facets of the selected site as possible and to improve reliability, the data collected in this case study encompassed a thorough gathering of information from a variety of data sources and mixed-media (Creswell, 2014). Yin

(2009) elaborated and stressed the collection of documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts as the means to understand and depict the case effectively. The AP administrator was interviewed using the interview protocol in Appendices A and B in order to gain insight from the perspective of school leadership on the quality of the AP program. The selected students for the study were interviewed using the interview protocol in Appendix C to gain insight as to the cultivation of social capital through their experiences in high school. The teachers in the advanced academics PLC were asked to take part in a focus group interview in order to obtain their perspectives on the AP program. A copy of the focus group questions is in Appendix D. These qualitative methods in combination with AP testing data for Stripes High School from the 2013−2017 school years and specific advanced academics PLC artifacts will encompass the data for analysis collected for this study. A copy of the introduction email to the campus administrator and coordinator is in Appendix E.

## Data Analysis Strategies

The data obtained in this study was analyzed through a continuous process, reviewing interviews, observations, and document reviews. I looked for common themes in the data, asked questions, interpreted, and reflected on the information gathered throughout the research process. Creswell (2014) recommended the use of a step-by-step approach when analyzing qualitative data. I followed the steps for analyzing data set out by Creswell:

> Step 1: "The researcher is to organize and prepare the data for analysis. This includes transcribing interviews, typing field notes, cataloguing visual materials, and sorting and arranging data types." (p. 197)
>
> In this study, I arranged and organized the data based into two categories, PLC artifacts and student experience data.
>
> Step 2: "In this step, the researcher must thoroughly read the data to determine its overall meaning." (p. 197)

In this study, I read and examined each piece of data closely to obtain a better understanding of what the participants were saying, the tone of the ideas, and the depth, credibility, and use of the information.

Step 3: "Start coding the data. Coding is a process where the researcher takes the text data gathered during data collection, clusters similar topics together, and forms them into categories using participant specific terms." (pp. 198-199)

In this study, I coded the data using the process of open coding to recognize emerging patterns and themes. Once initial patterns and themes were identified, they were examined and developed further, through different methods including follow-up observations, subsequent interviews, and other data collection means (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Step 4: "Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people, as well as categories or themes for analysis." (Creswell, 2014, p. 199)

In this study, I developed the major themes associated with building social capital in students and how those attributed to closing the opportunity gap.

Step 5: "The researcher must determine how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative." (p. 200).

In this study, I highlighted the relevance of the themes through insight from the student interviews and their experiences and perspectives.

Step 6: "The final step involves the researcher making an interpretation of the findings or results." (p. 200)

In this step, I strived to make the connections between all of the data and how the advanced academics PLC closed the opportunity gap for Latinx students by building social capital and cultivating a culture of collective efficacy at Stripes High School. The data analysis were directed by the research questions and the conceptual framework and guided by Creswell's (2014) recommendations.

After conducting the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I transcribed the discussions using Rev.com and then uploaded the transcription data into spreadsheets for annotation, coding, and analysis. During this study, I also reviewed and analyzed campus-level documents such as summaries of AP testing scores and trends analysis, and reports from The College Board and triangulated the data with the information derived from the focus groups and interviews. I used in-vivo and descriptive coding to develop themes aligned with the research questions. Finally, through careful review of all data presented and analysis, I developed findings from the identified themes related to the research questions guiding the study and as well as through the theoretical lens of Stanton-Salazar's social capital model. The themes were deduced by taking the specific responses from the district and campus administrator interviews and triangulating them with the findings from the AP teacher and AP student focus groups. I began to narrow down the topics, by finding the consistencies in the student responses when compared to the administrator and teacher responses.

The questions were not all specifically towards asking about Latinx students, but more to obtain an understanding of how the administrators approached their role in a school with a majority Latinx population. In conducting the interview, I discovered the district-level administrator, Claire (pseudonym), had accepted a position with a neighboring district this school year and had transitioned to the role of Director of Advanced Academics there. It seems like her service and results while working in the district of Stripes HS had gained her some esteem in neighboring districts hoping to increase their own equity and access to advanced academics.

Once I synthesized the data from the focus groups, interviews, and artifacts, I answered the original research questions proposed in this study. The research questions were answered

using as many perspectives (district-level, campus-level, teacher, student) needed to obtain a full explanation.

## Limitations

The intended outcome of this case study research was not to generalize to the larger population, but to develop an in-depth exploration and understanding of a central issue (Creswell, 2014). Because of this, the results collected from this study were not intended to be generalizable to all schools or students but rather to provide much-needed insight into the role that an advanced academics PLC, more specifically, the collective efficacy of the group had on building Latinx students' social capital. Each individual story of the student participants provided relevant and useful insight towards the topic studied.

## Ethical Considerations: Positionality

I was the administrator who led the advanced academics PLC program at Stripes High School at its inception. I am familiar with the school, community, student population, and its context and therefore, had a more complete understanding of the policies, procedures, and practices in place, as well as the campus and district-wide culture. This site choice did present challenges and issues that are discussed in more detail throughout the study. In my previous role as assistant principal of the site in which this study was conducted, I had access to a wealth of intimate knowledge and contextual understanding, as well as experience. However, this role also presented the potential for bias. As the ex-administrator of the advanced academics program and one of the school leaders, students and teachers may have been reluctant to speak openly with me about their true experiences. It was possible that the participants did not see this as an opportunity to share their experiences or involvements in a candid manner. Furthermore, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) asserted that the power differential inherent in qualitative research

interviews poses a limitation. My positional authority as school assistant principal and program chair potentially could magnify this inherent power differential. This factor could have been further mitigated by the fact that I had not been a part of this school or school district for over three school years at the point of conducting this research. To diminish this concern, the student interviewees chosen included graduated alumni of the school and thus did not have a reason to feel my positionality so directly. In addition, prior to beginning the interviews with all students, I informed them their most honest and candid responses would enhance the study. To counter my positionality and potential bias in this study, I employed reflexivity. Reflexivity is a recognition that the researcher's biases created by background and experiences may shape the way they conduct and interpret research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher must express previous involvements with the research topic or subject and how these experiences can affect interpretations made during the study. Through consistently recognizing potential bias, to the extent possible, I minimized biases in collection and interpretation of data.

## Summary

Through this qualitative case study, I examined the factors evident in Stripes High School's advanced academics program that have contributed to building social capital in Latinx students and the leadership factors that served to close the opportunity gap with regard to AP courses and exams. I examined a variety of data, including collections of documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, site AP course and AP exam data, and physical artifacts: such as PLC documents and professional development forms as the means to explore the research questions effectively. In Chapter 4, I will provide the findings of this study.

# CHAPTER 4

# FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify the necessary leadership practices for closing the opportunity gap to AP coursework for Latinx students. Based on my study, this can be defined as leadership actions for increasing access to AP coursework, from a district and campus level in conjunction with changes in organizational structures that build Latinx student social capital. As a result of these findings, I modified my conceptual framework to better illustrate these findings as shown in *Figure* 3.

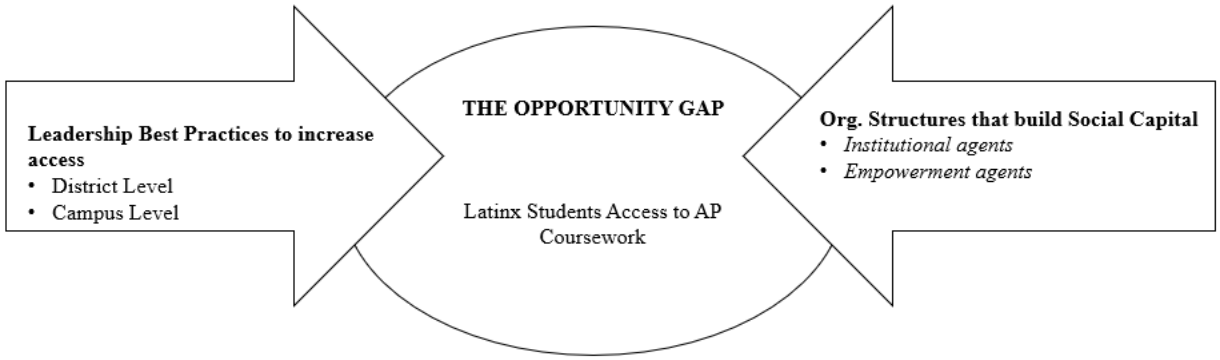


*Figure 3.* Updated conceptual framework. This framework depicts the actual findings of this study based on leadership best practices at the district and campus level for closing the opportunity gap to AP coursework for Latinx students in conjunction with the influence of institutional and empowerment agents on improving AP Latinx student social capital as defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2011).

In this study, I addressed the important problem of the historical lack of access and equity to AP courses and exams for Latinx students. Engaging with both district level and campus level administrators allowed the opportunity for first-hand accounts of the policies, practices, and initiatives that served to increase access and equity, while listening to the teacher perspective provided deeper insight to the application of such practices, and having the student perspective allowed for insight into the end result and the actual, lived experiences of the student participants.

In this chapter, I investigate how these findings all correlate, in an attempt to define and discover replicable practices that other high schools can implement to increase their equity and access.

## Findings by Theme

Through the lens of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital theory, I looked at administrators', educators', and students' experiences to identify policies and practices that improved Latinx student AP access. The findings focus on the perspectives presented in my theoretical framework and the following emergent themes: Open Access, The Teachers Make the Program, and Lack of Parental Involvement. The first theme, Open Access, is directly connected to the necessary leadership best practices at both the district and campus level. The second theme, Teachers Make the Program, is connected to both aspects of the modified conceptual framework in that there are leadership best practices associated with hiring and training teachers, and their role as purveyors of social capital for Latinx students is crucial. The third theme I focused on, Lack of Parental Involvement, has direct implications in the social capital aspect of my framework, and should also influence how district and campus leaders make policies aimed at improving Latinx student advanced educational attainment. I will elaborate on each of these themes, by topic, in the remainder of this chapter.

The emergent themes are supported through data found in campus artifacts such as the AP tutoring calendar, AP exam data tracking tool, interviews, and focus-group discussions. Each of the themes was triangulated with the information gathered from the student focus group to further analyze their validity using Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital theory. More specifically, social capital is a form of *institutional support* for Latinx students; how do

the systems, policies, and practices of district and campus-level administrators, and teachers reflect in the eyes of the students they serve with regards to building their social capital.

## Open Access

In speaking with the district and campus level administrators for Stripes HS, a common theme emerged—open access. Both administrators cited open access as the main reason for an equitable advanced academics program. The AP students and AP teachers further confirmed this during the focus group by stating that AP courses were easy to get into and hard to exit. The campus has a policy that requires parent permission for students to exit AP classes once they are enrolled during the school year. The campus administrator said,

> We require a parent signature, parent phone call from the counselor, or administrator and sometimes a parent conference to allow a student out of an AP course. Oftentimes students are quick to try to quit, for lack of a better term, their AP courses, and this usually works against, you know, the bigger picture of, of their college readiness and their future prospects.

This type of policy, while seen as unnecessary by the student group, serves as a check and balance feature for keeping students enrolled in AP courses.

The concept of *gatekeeping* is directly related to the opportunity gap in that it is the means by which access is denied and limited for Latinx students. While the leaders and educators at Stripes HS focused on the policy of open access to AP courses, it is also important to examine the systemic policies, historical and current, that lead to educational gatekeeping. Traditionally, schools have implemented policies such as tracking, minimum grade requirements, a lack of course offerings in AP, and the high cost of taking the AP exam as a few of the barriers keeping students from AP courses. In addressing these barriers, the campus-level administrator, Glen, spoke about the policies aimed at removing these barriers at Stripes HS:

> We have an open access policy for all students, the only requirement is student interest and desire to take the course. We don't have any real prerequisites. Our students just have

> to show interest to be honest, it's more of a system where once they're in it, it's hard for them to get out. And we do that on purpose. We require a parent signature, parent phone call from the counselor or administrator and sometimes, a parent conference to allow a student out of an AP course. We do not have prerequisites or guidelines for what is considered an AP student; we offer open access and we even offer AP courses freshmen year. Courses like AP Computer Science Principles, AP Human Geography, and AP Spanish—which is an easy one to help students feel a level of success and belonging in the courses. There is no minimum grade requirement or anything like that, our counselors allow anyone who has interest to enroll in an AP course.

This sentiment was further supported by the district-level coordinator:

> . . . by the time they leave us, they have enough experience, support to be successful in that college level program. And so, it's not, again, just data, it's how you use the data and what you do with it; and then we always included ethnicity and matching ethnicity in our program to the ethnicity of the campus. So that also really helped campuses look for and recruit students who may be in another system, wouldn't be invited, or encouraged to be a part of AP.

The system at the district level for Stripes HS allowed for equitable identification of Latinx students for the district's GT program; this ultimately serves to move students into AP courses at the high school level. The literature shows that many districts have large gaps in equity with regards to identification of minoritized students in GT programs and this level of gatekeeping leads to underrepresentation of such students in AP courses when they get to high school (Ford, 1995).

This mindset of removing barriers for students and allowing all students to feel welcomed and capable of taking AP courses is crucial to increasing access and providing an equitable program at the high school level. The teacher focus group unanimously displayed this in action through their responses about the school's vision for the AP program. Charlie and Anna mentioned open access specifically in their responses about the school's vision; and Mr. G and Elizabeth spoke about increasing student success for all students.

This was further echoed in the AP student focus group where all four students cited the school system as the reason for taking AP courses. Three of the students, Vivian, Luis, and Arre

spoke about being selected in the district GT program in elementary school and going through AP courses in high school as the natural path of the program. The other student, Vane, spoke about how her eighth-grade teacher encouraged her to take advanced courses and it was her reason for pursuing them in high school.

### Teachers Make the Program

Another major theme that emerged from the data was the prevalence of choosing the right teachers with adequate training in order to increase access and equity to AP. This was perhaps the most prevalent theme in the findings and every level I spoke with, the advanced academics coordinator, assistant principal, AP teachers, and AP students all testified to the power that teachers have in increasing equity and access to AP coursework and are perhaps, the vehicle for closing the opportunity gap for Latinx students. At the district level, Claire mentioned that she allows campuses autonomy with regards to choosing their AP teachers for the school year. However, Claire did provide insight into the importance of the proper mentality for AP teachers:

> I think campuses pretty much were adaptive figuring out that an equitable teacher's going to be somebody who doesn't say the first day of class: "this is going to be the hardest course you've ever taken. Are you sure you want to be here?" But instead that was somebody saying, "I believe that you can do this, and it's my job to help you get from where you are today to where you need to be in May."

This sentiment was echoed by the campus administrator who mentioned that AP teachers are not chosen by the traditional means of tenure at a campus, but more so on the teacher's ability to "teach the students in front of them." In the AP teacher focus group, this mentality was very prominent, not only in their words, but also in their tone and the level of care that they displayed for the students they teach. All the teachers mentioned that not all of their students are necessarily prepared for their courses when they initially arrive, but they all end up successful by the time they complete the course. Charlie, AP U.S. Government teacher, mentioned that since

his students are in their senior year, many are prepared by the time they reach his course due to the rigorous requirements of their previous AP coursework. The entire AP teacher panel agreed that they all hope to build upon their student's abilities to "write well" and to "think critically." In this sense, the mindset of the teacher can be described as collective and collaborative.

The AP students had very positive words of praise towards their teachers, with 100% of them believing their teachers are competent in preparing them for the AP exam and beyond. One of the students, Arre, used the term "extremely competent" when referring to his AP teachers. Vane stated AP teachers are "great at what they have done" and "they keep reeling us in everyday"—referring to how teachers kept the classes interesting and engaging. In answering the questions about their own knowledge about AP exams, all of the students in the focus group stated the majority of their knowledge about AP exams came from their teachers and their expertise with preparing them for the exams. This perspective stood out, because these students seemed to rely exclusively on their teachers for adequate knowledge and preparation for AP exams, and none of them mentioned any additional tutoring or work outside of that offered by the school. Vane stated it best:

> All my knowledge from AP exams just comes from teachers even though we do have other resources like the college board's official website and whatever and all the people online. It's always the teachers. If there's something new, they know how to work around it, how to work their own past hints and secrets of it.

This theme, repeated at all levels of the data gathering process, displays the importance of hiring, training, and keeping the best teachers in order to grow and nurture Latinx students and provide a layer of support that is consistently lacking in their lives. Under the lens of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital theory, AP teachers can be viewed as institutional agents transferring their inherent social capital to their Latinx students who otherwise would have no opportunity for such access.

A major aspect of the AP teacher's perceived competence from the student perspective, seems to stem from their access to rigorous AP-specific trainings called Advanced Placement Summer Institute (APSI). These trainings are held in the summer and provide the AP teachers subject-specific and AP test-specific insights from experts and test-writers over 3–5 days. I learned that all the AP teachers from the focus group had attended an APSI every summer and that the district pays for the training in full. AP teacher Charlie spoke of the tremendous insight and knowledge gained from the APSI sessions and the level of expertise of the presenters and the benefit from collaborating with AP teachers of the same subject from all over the region. Frist-year AP teacher, Elizabeth, spoke about being prepared to teach her AP course by attending APSIs and being groomed through the campus prior to teaching AP by being allowed to attend these trainings. Anna, the AP Computer Science and AP Computer Science Principles teacher elaborated further:

> The professional development, especially with computer science, I'm the only person in the school. So, you don't have a colleague that can really understand what you're teaching because very few people in this school actually have that background. So, as Charlie said, it's really important that we go to APSI and with the NMSI grant, it has been invaluable because one of my instructors is actually . . . She was involved in computer science since its onset with AP. So, she brought so much valuable information. And when you're the only person, that professional development is paramount, you have to have it.

From the administrators' perspective, the most important step after choosing the right teachers to teach AP is to have those teachers trained and prepared. The campus level administrator mentioned their AP program is specifically designed to prepare students progressively while building their confidence as AP students starting freshmen year.

> I think that's what we have tried really hard at as far as administration and, our teacher team to overcome; we have students that are traditionally not considered advanced placement ready—in the sense that our students come with a lot of gaps, either learning gaps, language gaps, cultural gaps, and we have to make sure that we compensate for those things in building our students' abilities. And you kind of see that when they come

> in as freshmen, we have students taking freshmen level AP courses, usually the AP level courses are AP Human Geography, which is kind of an intro course. We also have advanced placement computer science principles, which is a relatively new course, but it is accessible to students. And like I mentioned earlier, we offer advanced placement Spanish, which usually kind of helps our students. It builds their confidence because they're not traditionally used to taking AP courses. And that's one that our Spanish speakers do an excellent job at getting high passing rates.

At the district level, Claire elaborated on the importance of teacher training by stating that it was a requirement for AP teachers to attend the APSI prior to teaching AP courses.

### Lack of Parental Involvement

The third major theme echoed throughout the findings had to do with the lack of parental involvement, awareness, and interest in Latinx students' AP coursework. This theme was prevalent and what I would consider the driving force behind the other major themes when triangulated with the student input since it coincides with the major literature about Latinx student educational attainment. All of the student participants cited a lack of parental support and awareness of their daily struggles with the rigor of AP coursework and some mentioned that parents even discouraged them from continuing the coursework due to the hard work and long hours required. It is also important to note that of all the student participants, none of their parents had an educational attainment higher than 12th grade and none had earned their high school diploma.

All of the participants spoke about the importance of parental involvement and awareness with regards to their children's educational attainment. At the district level, Claire spoke about her awareness that many of the parents of Latinx students do not have a college degree, and stated it is important that we, as a system, allow more students access to college-level course work, "what's also really scary is if you're not letting them in the class in the first place." As a campus-level administrator, Glen, also mentioned the importance of parental involvement and

exhibited awareness of the lack of knowledge about AP courses and exams for the majority of parents. In an effort to counteract this, the campus conducts informational sessions known as AP Family Night every school year. During this event, students are encouraged to bring their families to meet the AP teachers, celebrate the previous year's AP Scholars based on exam results, and learn about the benefits of AP course and time requirements. Glen mentioned that while attendance at this event is usually large, oftentimes the parents of those most in need are not available due to work schedules. And while at the administrative level, the intent to improve parent involvement and awareness for students in advanced academics; at the teacher level the prevalent response from all participants is that it can be difficult to even get parents on the phone when necessary. As Charlie, the AP U.S. Government teacher stated about parental involvement:

> Near zero. Yeah, near zero. You get the occasional answer of a phone call. I don't have a ton of feedback. I have a handful that pop in for school, ask me the teacher things. It's not a ton, which is slightly disappointing. I don't think it's for a lack of trying by the department or even the school district for that matter.

This sentiment was elaborated on further by Elizabeth, the AP English Literature & Composition teacher:

> . . . the language barrier for our kids' parents can definitely be a struggle if we don't speak Spanish. Just getting in touch with parents in general and letting them know how they're doing. So I do often rely on email because either they can ask their kid to translate it or it might have a couple of lines, if I really need to talk to the parent in Spanish, I may have someone translate for me so I can get in contact with them or call home for me. But that's a barrier on my end. And then sometimes it's just the parents don't come to parent conference night. They don't come to meet the teacher night. They don't have as much of an interest or the time to invest in their kid's education. So, the kid has to often advocate for themselves or we have to get a mentor or even sometimes I had parent conferences with older siblings this past year, too.

These responses showcase the prevalent needs of Latinx students and the importance of educational systems recognizing the pre-existing gap in parental involvement and awareness in their child's educational attainment. The AP student group validated this response in a

resounding fashion with each participant connecting with one another through the experience of having to advocate for themselves and feeling isolated at home without any true support due to a lack of awareness from parents. All four student participants agreed that their parents "really don't know what AP means." The students disclosed feelings of isolation throughout their educational endeavors especially with the amount of time and effort required by AP classes. Vivian even felt a sense of discouragement from her parents:

> . . . when I mention how hard it is, they're like, "Well, okay. Just get out of the class then." Because I think because they don't understand the importance of the classes, I think they place their child above the hard work that you have to put in. But I refused to get out.

Vane echoed this sentiment:

> That's exactly how my parents are. How I started working at the same time, they were just like, "Oh it looks like it's a lot of work. Just get out of it." But I'm like, "I really need it. Like it's a great thing for me. Colleges love it." And they're just like, "I guess." And that's it. That's where the argument ended.

With the collective feelings of isolation and forced autonomy regarding AP coursework, Latinx students rely on teachers to serve in the role that would traditionally be served by parents in other households.

## Summary

Research Question 1

> *How do organizational structures, implemented at the district and campus level close the access and equity gap to advanced placement courses for Latinx students?*

This question was most thoroughly explored in the conversations with the district-level advanced academics coordinator and the campus-level administrator, however, the teachers and students provided relevant information to further triangulate the data and answer the question. Claire, the district-level advanced academics coordinator, who has served the district for 11 years in that capacity, stated the vision for the advanced academics department was a flexible one

where “we need to provide opportunity and we need to provide access to opportunity.” She spoke at length about the need to tailor educational systems and policies to suit individual student needs and allow campuses the flexibility to adapt these systems to their specific student populations. She further elaborated on removing “the roadblocks” to access for all students and that school districts should not act as gatekeepers. This conversation was echoed in my conversation with Glen, the campus-level administrator, who spoke about all AP courses on campus being open-access and how there are AP courses offered to all grade levels, ninth through 12th. They both also spoke about how important it was to offer AP exams for free to all students who took an AP course, especially considering the socioeconomic status of many of their students.

In our conversation, Claire, who has a PhD in education, even enlightened me to some of the research and literature about best practices for equity in advanced academic programs. She mentioned the “80% rule” by Donna Ford, this rule defines an equitable advanced academics program for a district as having 80% representation matching the district’s demographics (Wright, Ford, & Young, 2017). This is the measure that Claire has used to determine the level of equity in her practices for the district during her tenure. The AP teachers spoke about their duty to make students feel welcomed and to provide a sense of continuity in their classes, there was a lot of conversation around “building” student skills and writing ability from freshmen year to senior year. The AP teacher focus group was very aware of the need to fill the student learning gaps and building their academic abilities as they grow in their AP classes throughout their high school career. The campus-level administrator provided further insight by speaking about the tutoring calendar created to avoid having any single AP class monopolize student time for tutoring. The calendar was created to help facilitate the equal distribution of after school and

Saturday tutoring time for students who take multiple AP courses.

Research Question 2

> *What types of leadership best practices, as specific policies and practices provide access to and participation in advanced placement courses by Latinx students?*

This question was more related to the concepts associated with Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital theory. As mentioned in my literature review, Latinx students face many unique barriers to educational attainment. Many of these barriers are associated with a lack of social capital due to cultural, familial, and language barriers as well as systemic barriers such as poverty and inequitable policy (Ballon, 2008; Gibson et al., 2004; Perna, 2005; Espinoza-Herold & Gonzalez-Carriedo, 2017). To overcome the many barriers, Latinx students must rely on the *institutional agents* in a school setting as the major influence and allies in closing the opportunity gap (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). These practices begin at the district-level, with policies intended to remove gatekeeping for student access to AP courses and exams (Ford, 1995). A major policy that Stripes HS had at the district level was that all AP exams were free to students who took the courses; the removal of this economic barrier was cited as a major reason for Latinx students to continue to take AP exams and register for AP courses. All four students stated they would not have taken many AP courses if they would have had to pay for the AP exams. Having administrators who are knowledgeable and aware of the students they serve and their backgrounds, demographics, and economic statuses also play a major role, since these powerful institutional agents can further affect positive changes in their role and be seen as empowerment agents for Latinx students and their increases in access and equity to AP coursework (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). These district and campus leaders in the case study were very aware of the important responsibility they had to their students—the majority Latinx—and they used this to become champions of change for their students. They hired like-minded teachers, increased

course offerings, allowed open access to all AP courses, and implemented mandatory, rigorous AP-related teacher trainings for all of their AP and pre-AP teachers. These practices in turn, motivated and empowered AP teachers to hold themselves accountable for all of their students' learning and feeling a sense of belonging in AP courses instead of the traditional elitist and exclusionary mentality espoused by many traditional AP programs in comprehensive high schools. The Latinx students in AP classes reported having a sense of belonging in their AP courses, having a level of confidence in their teachers' knowledge and competence to prepare them for the AP exams, and being knowledgeable about AP courses and requirements to be successful in their AP coursework. In a systemic sense, a successful AP program in closing the opportunity gap towards AP courses will

- Provide open access
- Cover or reduce the AP exam fees for all students
- Have an active awareness of the systemic barriers faced by Latinx students towards advanced academics, and serve to eliminate those barriers in their district
- Hire like-minded teachers who are accountable for their students; success in AP courses
- Provide rigorous trainings for all AP teachers on a yearly basis
- Give students a sense of community in their AP classes

These factors are the practices and policies that can increase access and participation in AP courses by Latinx students.

Research Question 3

> *What evidence is there that Latinx students are building social capital accessing and participating in advanced placement courses?*

This question's response relied more on the artifacts and data from the College Board. The College Board (2020) provides campuses with a report called the *Equity and Excellence*

*Report*, this report displays the percentages of a school's entire 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade classes who scored a three or higher on at least one AP Exam and the percentage of the senior class that scored a 3 or higher on at least one AP Exam during high school. For Stripes HS, this data was very telling of the increases in equity to AP exams as seen in Table 5. The campus focus began focusing on advanced academics access after the 2013 school year, the data for this year was added to display the comparison and starting point.

Table 5

*Stripes HS Equity and Excellence Based on College Board Data*

| Year | Graduating Class Summary % | 12th grade % | 11th grade % | 10th grade % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2013-14 | 17.1 | 7.1 | 6.7 | 6.8 |
| 2014-15 | 23.3 | 6.8 | 7.3 | 5.7 |
| 2015-16 | 23 | 7.4 | 9.8 | 9 |
| 2016-17 | 25.1 | 12 | 10 | 9 |
| 2017-18 | 28 | 10.4 | 12.9 | 16.2 |
| 2018-19 | 37.6 | 11.4 | 11.3 | 17.7 |

The overall student participation data based on College Board reports also showed an increase in the number of students taking AP exams, the number of exams taken and a rise in Latinx students taking AP exams over the six years of available data as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

*Stripes HS Access to AP Exams College Board Data*

| Year | AP Exams Taken | AP Students | Latinx AP Students |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2013-14 | 747 | 442 | 283 |
| 2014-15 | 1159 | 614 | 433 |
| 2015-16 | 1357 | 660 | 495 |

*(table continues)*

| Year | AP Exams Taken | AP Students | Latinx AP Students |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2016-17 | 1644 | 778 | 622 |
| 2017-18 | 1491 | 742 | 592 |
| 2018-19 | 1517 | 767 | 621 |

Based on these figures, there was an increase of 119% in the number of Latinx students taking AP exams over the 6 school years of data I collected. These numbers provide tangible evidence of the impact that the leadership actions at both district and campus level, and teacher actions served to increase Latinx student access to AP coursework. As is shown in these findings, Stripes HS, through a conscious effort by district and campus level administrators, and with the service of highly trained and socially aware AP teachers, has succeeded in creating an AP program that is robust in access and equity. These increases in AP coursework participation have led our student participants to higher educational aspirations and access; both of the graduating senior student participants were enrolled in college, and one of them, Luis, was going to a private university on a full-tuition academic scholarship. All of the students expressed an increase in confidence and feeling or preparedness for higher education, countering the lack of parental educational attainment for the group, evidence of increased social capital.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the necessary organizational structures, from a district and campus level, and best practices that high schools can utilize to implement an advanced academics program that focuses on increasing Latinx student access and performance in advanced academic courses. The results of this study showed Latinx students, already lacking social capital, also face many barriers of different forms: systemic, structural and cultural in their educational opportunities for AP courses and exams. According to Schneider (2009), AP, like other reform movements with the objective of focusing on inequities in schools, has failed to increase equity. Hallett and Venegas (2011) found racial inequities are more pronounced when looking at AP programs across the country. Schools who have overcome these barriers have helped increase equity by allowing Latinx students more access to AP courses and exams through district- and campus-level administrators working to remove barriers and hire and support the most capable and socially aware AP teachers who aim to grow and nurture the students who they serve. In turn, these practices have served to increase Latinx students' college prospects due to the reliance of advanced academics in the college admission process. According to Hallett and Venegas (2011), taking some form of advanced academic coursework in high school is imperative to gaining entry into prestigious universities.

The barriers faced by Latinx students vary widely, as presented in the literature review, and can be attributed to cultural, language, socioeconomic, and systemic factors. My research questions aim to highlight the areas in which the case study campus has successfully mitigated these factors to increase Latinx student access and equity to AP coursework.

## Connections to the Literature

### Leadership Practices: Access and Equity

While AP programs are promoted widely as a means towards college readiness, there are significant gaps in participation for Latinx students. This challenge is amplified by the growth of Latinx student enrollment in schools (Eschbach, 2009). Of the one million Latinx students eligible to enroll in high school AP courses, only 19% were enrolled in advanced or dual enrollment/college credit courses. Considering the AP program was developed with the intention of preparing students for college before graduating from high school (College Board, 2014) and Latinx enrollment in AP courses is low, Latinx students are less likely to gain college access or successfully complete college coursework.

The data I collected from this study suggest enrollment and access to high school AP courses is critical to furthering Latinx students' higher educational attainment, with all student participants having educational goals at a minimum of an undergraduate degree. To support college readiness and access for Latinx students there is an intentional push to promote "more Advanced Placement courses in our high schools" (Wagner, 2008, p. 6). Moreover, AP courses are designed to promote college readiness, and must be made available for all students and not just for those students identified as college bound (Wagner, 2008). AP programs provide students with learning experiences that are specialized and academically challenging for students (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2004). The Latinx student participants indicated high school AP courses are more challenging and time consuming than other classes and require a full commitment to meet the expectations and demands of the college level coursework. Through the simple act of having access to AP courses, Latinx students recognize that they will be better prepared for college, and as a result succeed in college (Goldrick-Rab & Mazzeo, 2005). As a result, Latinx

students enrolled in high school AP courses are at a greater advantage than their counterparts not enrolled in high school AP courses and are more likely to earn an undergraduate college degree and also pursue graduate studies (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2004).

## Leadership Practices: The Teacher Factor

Since research has shown that teachers are the number one predictor in student success, a major focus of this study was AP teachers (Darling- Hammond, 1999; Hattie, 2003). This study uncovered that teachers play an important role in Latinx student educational attainment and motivation; all participants, at the district, campus and student level spoke on the importance of teachers in developing an equitable AP program. These findings can be further examined and defined through the relevant literature. Through the lens of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework, district and campus level administrators who value the need for equity and access to AP coursework for Latinx students can be considered *empowerment agents*, positively affecting policy and challenging the flawed status quo to champion reforms that, in turn, influence teachers to become the *institutional agents* that Latinx students need to increase their social capital. In the case of high school Latinx AP students, this increase in social capital translates to significant educational attainment beyond high school when compared to their parental and historic educational attainment. In essence, teachers become the replacement parental figures as the *institutional agents* with the knowledge, training, and willingness to transfer their social capital to Latinx students. In non-Latinx students, this role is often filled by college-educated parents who automatically transfer their social capital in the sense of motivation and advocacy towards advanced academics.

## Leadership Practices: The Parent Factor

The literature states that a distinguishing factor for Latinx students is that they are more

likely to seek information about college primarily from family and friends (Gonzalez, 2011; Perna, 2000). Because of this, family and friends become a critical influence in Latinx students' college aspirations. Because of this limited access to viable college information and the contingency of a student's family background, Latinx students' social capital can be limited (Perna, 2000).

The most prevalent of all findings in my study, was the lack of parental advocacy, knowledge and importance placed on AP coursework attainment. The administrators and teachers all cited a lack of parental involvement in AP students' educational careers often attributing it to the language barrier. However, the student participants in the study provided further understanding through their critical insights of their parents' lack of support in their lives as related to AP coursework. All of the student participants expressed a frustration with their parents' apathy and indifference about their educational goals; and this led to a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty in some about continuing to pursue AP coursework. This sense of inadequacy was only countered by having AP teachers who are understanding, empathetic and available for students. Schools with high Latinx student populations hoping to increase their participation in AP coursework should use this knowledge to develop AP teacher advocacy, understanding and cultural competence in the form of a campus-wide initiative similar to the case study campus.

It is important to note that the lack of parental advocacy for Latinx students may be a result of cultural and systemic barriers, and the onus should be on the schools and districts to improve the connection that Latinx parents have through educational resources and community outreach.

## Recommendations

Based on the results from my study there are two major recommendations for school leaders to consider in their effort to close the opportunity gap for Latinx students in AP coursework. These recommendations include offering open access to all students and hiring and training teachers who understand and value equity. While my study uncovered many factors at Stripes HS that collectively served to provide an equitable AP program for Latinx students, these recommendations were the highest leverage ones. These recommendations are further elaborated.

### Open Access to AP Courses

A major factor in systemic inequity can be linked to gatekeeping as discussed in my literature review. Data from this study showed implementing district and campus wide policies that serve to remove gatekeeping can serve to increase access and provide a more equitable AP program for Latinx students. A simple means to do so is to offer open access for all students to AP courses. This means that the only prerequisite for enrolling in grade-level appropriate AP courses is for students to express interest in taking the course. In order for this to be successful as a practice, administrators, counselors, and teachers must understand that an AP student is merely a student who is interested in the subject and willing to do the work and avoid the mentality that only certain students are “qualified” for AP courses. Open access can be further amplified through offering historically easier courses freshmen year to students and motivating Latinx students to take courses they are likely to be successful in such as AP Spanish. At my case study campus, they also had mandatory parent signature and meetings required for students to unenroll from AP courses once they were enrolled. This is particularly helpful in that many students opt for the “easy way out” once the courses become challenging without giving themselves the opportunity to experience success. Another major factor implemented at the district level was

offering all AP exams free of charge. If financially possible, districts who wish to increase Latinx student enrollment in AP courses should do this as it is a major factor for students and their families in choosing to take AP coursework.

### Hiring and Training Teachers Who Value and Understand Equity

Perhaps the most prevalent finding from my study was the positive effect that teachers have on Latinx student educational attainment and motivation in AP courses. As I discussed in my findings, teachers serve in place of parents with regards to social capital for Latinx students mainly because of parents' low educational attainment. Having the right teachers can increase student access and close the opportunity gap. This can be magnified further by offering mandatory, high quality trainings for all AP teachers on a yearly basis. In my study, the APSI sessions offered AP teachers the exam and content knowledge necessary to help prepare their students for success in the AP exams.

The AP teacher role must be one of advocacy for Latinx students to gain the confidence and empowerment necessary for success in AP coursework. In this case study, the campus administrator openly stated AP teachers should not be hired based on tenure at the campus, but on their ability to reach all students and show a desire to help all of them be successful despite their learning, language, or cultural gaps.

Based on the data collected and emergent themes from my study, there are recommendations that should be considered by school leaders to close the opportunity gap in AP courses. These recommendations are discussed under each of the emergent themes from this study.

### Open Access

- District leaders may seek to remove gatekeeping policies that can discourage Latinx

students from pursuing AP coursework.

- Whenever possible, districts may provide financial assistance for paying for AP exams or cover the costs in full.

- Campus leaders can provide a wide range of AP course offering and distribute them throughout the grade levels.

- Campus leaders can promote their AP courses for all students and make them easily accessible for all interested, with policies that make it difficult for students to unenroll.

- Latinx students may be offered AP "gateway" courses that can build their confidence and self-esteem with regards to AP coursework, some examples include AP Spanish, AP Art Drawing.

- School leaders may engage in an inclusive process for promoting AP courses for all students and establish informational meetings with students and parents to communicate information about AP courses.

- School leaders can monitor participation data on a yearly basis and develop a plan for improving and growing their AP participation data.

Teachers Make the Program

- School leaders may mandate and provide training opportunities (APSI) in AP curriculum and strategies for all AP teachers on a yearly basis. School leaders should also make these trainings available for pre-AP teachers in order to ensure vertical alignment.

- Campus administrators may also receive professional development on identifying student potential for college and success through a profiling and monitoring system that includes promotion of AP courses and advocacy for connecting students to counselors and administrators for AP enrollment.

- Strengthen collaboration amongst AP teachers with a focus on "teaching the students in front of them" through a sharing best practices that close student learning and language gaps.

- Campus administrators may develop a means to ensure that teachers do not monopolize students' tutoring time with one course to ensure students can successfully take multiple AP courses.

Lack of Parental Involvement

- AP teachers can continuously provide students with updated information about AP

exams and communicate weekly with their parents about student progress.

- School leaders may develop educational workshops or informational sessions for parents to communicate how AP courses support college readiness and access and how they can motivate and support their students enrolled in AP courses.
- School leaders may create a student advocate and mentorship program that supports the enrollment of Latinx students in AP courses. This advocacy and mentoring program can help Latinx students navigate the pressures of AP coursework.
- School leaders may develop a partnership with parents to best communicate and articulate AP course goals, expectations, and implications.

## Further Research

The findings in this study were based on interviews with district and campus level administrators who oversee the AP program and AP teachers and were triangulated based on the perspectives and experiences of Latinx students in one urban high school. In this study, participants cited that open enrollment, teacher competence, and teacher support were important determinants in their success as AP students, while parental influence varied and was often cited as a negative factor in educational attainment. Further research could look at factors aimed at improving Latinx student parental advocacy and knowledge of advanced academics.

### *Policy*

Further research could focus on the systemic factors that cause the inequity with regards to access to AP courses in entire school systems. A more system or district focused approach could serve to develop the necessary policy changes for improving equity and access at a systemic level. In this study, student participants cited that teacher support and encouragement were vital determinants in their decision to enroll and continue in AP coursework. This finding could be looked at further through a middle school lens in Latinx student pre-AP coursework attainment. Another area that could be looked at further could be policies and practices for Latinx student identification in GT programs, since this is the usual pathway towards AP courses

in high school. It would also be relevant for researchers to take a deeper look at earlier grade levels and ways to educate Latinx parents about the importance of college readiness in an effort to ensure advocacy and build parental social capital. Another topic worth a deeper look is the factors that build resiliency in Latinx students and their educational attainment. I was very impressed by the student participants in my study and their grit and determination to succeed despite the factors against them.

## Conclusion

The quest for equity in education is an ever-shifting journey that changes as student population demographics change. It is imperative that educators adjust and adapt quickly to create systemic and policy changes necessary for improving equity. In the last 50 years, many urban districts in Texas have had significant shifts in demographics with many shifting towards majority Latinx student demographics. To ensure success, these school system leaders should focus on improving their Latinx student educational attainment. As stated in the literature, a major factor in educational attainment and college readiness is AP coursework; district leaders need to make systemic changes that ensure equity and access for Latinx students in AP coursework in order to close the opportunity gap.

The study results offered insight from all perspectives involved in access and equity to AP coursework for Latinx students. The student perspective allowed for an active triangulation of the practical results of policies, practices, and systems implemented to increase student access to AP coursework. As I reflect on this study, my aim was to provide understanding into leadership practices that can close the opportunity gap for Latinx students in AP courses and have the students' voice provide insight into the effects of these practices. This study was aimed at informing the practice of district and school leaders who should be more focused toward

closing the opportunity gap. As a result of new understandings from this study, district leaders and campus administrators may be able to establish systemic reforms and new efforts that may increase access and equity for Latinx students to AP courses.

# APPENDIX A

## CAMPUS-LEVEL AP ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you worked with advanced academics or the AP program?
2. What is your vision for the AP program at your school?
3. In what ways is the AP program here different from other schools?
4. How are teachers hired or selected to teach AP courses?
5. How are students selected for AP courses?
6. Describe the demographic diversity of your campus?
7. How does your school's diversity affect advanced academics and the AP program?
8. Why are AP courses important for students?
9. Describe the college-going culture of your campus?
10. How do you personally help students with their college application process?
11. How do you personally help students with their college selection process?
12. Do you feel this campus does a good job with getting students into the college of their choice? Why or why not.
13. How would you describe the environment in an AP course on your campus?

# APPENDIX B

# DISTRICT-LEVEL ADVANCED ACADEMICS COORDINATOR

# INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been an educator?
2. How long have you worked with advanced academics or the AP program?
3. What is your vision for the advanced academics program in your district?
4. Describe the demographic diversity of your district.
5. In what ways is the AP program here different from other districts?
6. Why are AP courses important for students?
7. How are teachers hired or selected to teach AP courses?
8. How are students selected for AP courses?
9. What systems or processes would you say contribute most to increasing access and equity to AP courses and exams?

# APPENDIX C

# AP TEACHER FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Welcome: I am Jesus Martinez; I am conducting research on effective leadership practices that lead to closing the opportunity gap for Latinx students in high school. The purpose of this focus group is to gather information about your experiences as an AP teacher on your campus. The results of this focus group will be used to draw conclusions about best practices that can help schools improve Latinx student access to AP courses. You were selected for this focus group because you meet the criteria and have agreed to participate.

Guidelines for Focus Group:

1. There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
2. We will be audio recording, one person speaking at a time
3. Use your pseudonym only please
4. You do not need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
5. My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
6. You must talk to each other when answering the questions in part 2.

Directions for Focus Group:

The focus group will have 2 parts, the first part is intended to obtain specific information about you and your background, everyone will take turns sharing this information. The second part will consist of open-ended questions that are intended to explore your experiences and personal views about our topic. This portion will be open-ended and, while you must take turns speaking for recording purposes, everyone can contribute as much to each question. The questions are pre- arranged, I will ask the question and then you will spend as much time answering and discussing the question as needed for everyone who want to contribute before we move to the next. There is a total of 13 questions; after we finish, I may ask additional or follow-up questions to better grasp your individual and collective experiences on our topic.

Part 1:

Demographic Interview Questions:

- 

1. How long have you been a teacher?
2. How long have you been an AP teacher?
3. What AP subject do you teach?
4. What is your view on the connection between college readiness and AP coursework?
5. Does the school have a clear vision, which you can articulate clearly?
6. Are you given the necessary resources to teach all your students?
7. When students initially enter your AP course, do they have the required skills and knowledge to be successful?
8. When students finish your AP course, do they have the required skills and knowledge to be successful?
9. Do you feel that your students come to school ready to learn?

Part 2: Focus Group Questions:

1. Describe the qualities necessary for a student to be successful in your AP classes.
2. Talk about your experiences with professional development specific to AP.
3. Describe your understanding of culturally responsive teaching.
4. On a weekly basis: How much time is spent discussing student achievement? How much time is spent discussing student culture?
5. Describe how administration supports and recognizes your contributions as an AP teacher.
6. Describe the culture of collaboration at your school.
7. Describe the typical AP student in your class.

# APPENDIX D

# LATINX STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Interview Protocol-AP Student Focus Group

Welcome: I am Jesus Martinez; I am conducting research on effective leadership practices that lead to closing the opportunity gap for Latinx students in high school. The purpose of this focus group is to gather information about your experiences at your school with AP coursework and how the school environment and your home environment have influenced your decision to take the courses. The results of this focus group will be used to draw conclusions about best practices that can help schools improve Latinx student access to AP courses. You were selected for this focus group because you meet the criteria and have agreed to participate.

Guidelines for Focus Group:

1. There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
2. We will be audio recording, one person speaking at a time
3. Use your pseudonym only please
4. You do not need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
5. My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
6. You must talk to each other when answering questions

Directions for Focus Group:

The focus group will have 2 parts, the first part is intended to obtain specific information about you and your background, everyone will take turns sharing this information. The second part will consist of open-ended questions that are intended to explore your experiences and personal views about our topic. This portion will be open-ended and, while you must take turns speaking for recording purposes, everyone can contribute as much to each question. The questions are arranged in the set of flashcards, each flashcard contains 1 question, we will randomly draw a question and then you will spend as much time answering and discussing the question as needed for everyone to contribute before we move to the next. There is a total of 5 questions; after we finish, I may ask additional or follow-up questions to better grasp your individual and collective experiences on our topic.

Part 1:

State your pseudonym and the following:

Demographic Questions:

University/College aspirations?

Do you qualify for free or reduced lunch?

What is the highest educational level attained by your parents?

Elementary (K-5)
Middle School (6-8)
High School (9-12)
GED
Trade or Technical Certificate
Associates
Bachelor's
Masters
Doctorate

How many AP courses do you plan to take while in high school?

What extracurricular activities/ clubs are you involved in?

Do you work a part-time job?

Part 2:

Focus Group Questions:

1. What do you know about AP courses and exams (research questions 1,3)?
2. Why did you decide to take AP courses? Who influenced you the most in this process (research question 2)?
3. Do your parents (or guardian(s)) know that you are taking AP courses? Did they help with you when making this decision (background question)?
4. Are your AP teachers supportive and helpful (research questions 1,2)?
5. Do you feel like you belong in your AP classes (research question 1)?

# APPENDIX E

# PARTICIPANT EMAIL REGARDING INTERVIEWS

Greetings,

My name is Jesus F Martinez and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas. I am currently conducting my dissertation research and would be pleased if you would consider participating in a 60 to 90-minute, one-on-one semi-structured interview. I am interested in your experiences as a district or campus level administrator or counselor and your involvement with regard to AP courses.

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to develop an understanding of the effective leadership practices used for closing the opportunity gap that successfully increase access to and participation in AP courses for Latinx students.

You are not obligated to participate in the study, but if you are willing to participate, please respond to this email so that we can make arrangements that are convenient for you to interview. An informed consent letter is attached to this email. Please read it prior to the interview. I will go over it with you prior to the interview and answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Jesus F Martinez

# REFERENCES


Access to High Standards Act of 2004, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 1702 (2004).

Arbona, C., & Nora, A. (2007). Predicting college attainment of Hispanic students: Individual, institutional, and environmental factors. *The Review of Higher Education, 30*(3), 247–270.

Ballon, E. G. (2008). Racial differences in high school math track assignment. *Journal of Latinos & Education, 7*(4), 272–287. doi:10.1080/15348430802143428

Basch, C. E. (2011). Teen pregnancy and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. *Journal of School Health, 81*(10), 614–618. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00635.x

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). Introduction. In B. M. Bass & B. J. Avolio (Eds.), *Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership* (pp. 1–9). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bleske-Rechek, A., Lubinski, D., & Benbow, C. P. (2004). Meeting the educational needs of special populations: Advanced placement's role in developing exceptional human capital. *Psychological Science, 15*(4), 217–224. doi:10.1111/j.0956-7976.2004.00655.x

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research in the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.

Bragg, D. D. (2013). Pathways to college for underserved and nontraditional students: Lessons from research, policy, and practice. In L.W. Perna & A. P. Jones (Eds.), *The state of college access and completion: Improving college success for students from underrepresented groups* (pp. 34-56). New York, NY: Routledge.

Burchinal, M., McCartney, K., Steinberg, L., Crosnoe, R., Friedman, S. L., McLoyd, V., & Pianta, R. (2011). Examining the Black-White achievement gap among low income children using the NICHD study of early child care and youth development. *Child Development, 82*(5), 1404–1420. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01620.x

Carpenter, D. M., & Ramirez, A. (2012). Exploring the underachievement gap. *Christian Higher Education, 11*(2), 115–130. doi:10.1080/15363759.2012.624458

Center for Global Education. (2019). *Equity and quality in education*. Retrieved from https://asiasociety.org/education/equity-and-quality-education

Chajewski, M., Mattern, K. D., & Shaw, E. J. (2011). Examining the role of advanced placement exam participation in 4-year college enrollment. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice, 30*(4), 16–27. doi:10.1111/j.1745-3992.2011. 00219.x

College Board. (2014). *The 10th annual AP report to the nation*. Retrieved from http://www.collegeboard.com/html/aprtn/pdf/ap-report_to_the_nation.pdf

College Board. (2019). *AP program.* Retrieved from https://ap.collegeboard.org/?navId=gf-ap&navId=gf-ap

College Board. (2020). *Report descriptions. Summary reports: Equity and excellence report.* https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/scores/available-reports/report-descriptions

Cowan-Pitre, C. (2014). Improving African American student outcomes: Understanding educational achievement and strategies to close opportunity gaps. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *38*(4), 209–217. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52cf1070e4b048ae22d972b2/t/58b82d46a5790a60fdfce8eb/1488465244758/Improving+African+American+Student+Outcomes+%282014%29.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Sykes, G. (1999). *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice. Jossey-bass education series.* ERIC.

Daugherty, M., & White, C. (2008). Relationships among private speech and creativity in Head Start and low-socioeconomic status preschool children. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 52*, 30–39. doi:10.1177/0016986207311059

Davis, C. A., Slate, J. R., Moore, G. W., & Barnes, W. (2015). Advanced placement exams, incentive programs, and cost effectiveness: A lack of equity and excellence for Black students in Texas, New York, and Florida. *The Journal of Negro Education, 84*(2), 139–153. doi:10.7709/jnegroeducation.84.2.0139

Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1994). Socializing young children in Mexican-American families: An intergenerational perspective. In P. Greenfield & R. Cocking (Eds), *Cross-cultural roots of minority development* (pp. 55−86). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dougherty, C., Mellor, L., & Jian, S. (2006, February). *The relationship between advanced placement and college graduation: 2005 AP study series, Report 1*. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519365.pdf

Edgerton, J. D., & Roberts, L. W. (2014). Cultural capital or habitus? Bourdieu and beyond in the explanation of enduring educational inequality. *Theory and Research in Education, 12*, 192–220. doi:10.1177/1477878514530231

Eschbach, K. (2009). *The changing demography of Texas children: Current trends and future challenges.* Retrieved from http://txsdc.utsa.edu/presentations/superintendents_conf_2009.php

Espinoza-Herold, M., & González-Carriedo, R. (2017). *Issues in Latino education: Race, school culture and the politics of academic success* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-95 § 114 Stat. 1177 (2015).

Ferguson, R. F. (2001). A diagnostic analysis of Black-White GPA disparities in Shaker Heights, Ohio. *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 2001(1), 347–414. doi:10.1353/pep.2001.0003

Fernandez, M. A. (2018). *What is a first-generation college student?* Retrieved from https://www.collegeraptor.com/getting-in/articles/questions-answers/first-generation-college-student/

Ford, D. Y. (1995). Desegregating gifted education: A need unmet. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *64*(1), 52-62. doi:10.2307/2967284

Geisler, J. L., Hessler, T., Gardner, I. R., & Lovelace, T. S. (2009). Differentiated writing interventions for high-achieving urban African American elementary students. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, *20*(2), 214–247. doi:10.1177/1932202X0902000202

Gibson, M. A., Gándara, P. C., & Koyama, J. P. (2004). The role of peers in the schooling of U.S. Mexican youth. In M. A. Gibson, P. Gándara, & J. P. Koyama (Eds.), *School connections: U.S. Mexican youth, peers, and school achievement* (pp. 1–17). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Goldrick-Rab, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2005). Chapter 5: What 'No Child Left Behind' means for college access. *Review of Research in Education*, *29*(1), 107-130. doi:10.3102/0091732x029001107

Gonzalez, L. M. (2011). College-level choice of Latino high school students: A social-cognitive approach. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 40, 144–155. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2012.00014.x

Good, M. E., Masewicz, S., & Vogel, L. (2010). Latino English language learners: Bridging achievement and cultural gaps between schools and families. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, *9*(4), 321–339. doi:10.1080/15348431.2010.491048

GovTrack.us. (2019). *H.R. 1532—112th Congress: Race to the Top Act of 2011*. Retrieved from https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr1532

Hallett, R. E., & Venegas, K. M. (2011). Is increased access enough? Advanced placement courses, quality, and success in low-income urban schools. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *34*(3), 468–487. doi:10.1177/016235321103400305

Harvey, D., Slate, J., Moore, G., Barnes, W., & Martinez-Garcia, C. (2013). College readiness gaps: A review of the literature. *Journal of Education Research, 7*(3), 181–204.

Hattie, J. (2003). Teachers make a difference, what is the research evidence?

Hernandez, F., & Murakami-Ramalho, E. (2016). *Brown-eyed leaders of the sun: A portrait of Latina/o educational leaders*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Hertzog, N. B. (2005). Equity and access: Creating general education classrooms responsive to potential giftedness. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 29*, 212–257. doi:10.1177/016235320502900205

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2017). *The practice of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hispanic Network. (2017). *Latinx—What does it really mean?* Retrieved from https://www.hnmagazine.com/2017/11/latinx-really-mean/

Hoy, W., & Miskel, C. (2008). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice.* New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

King, H. (2017). *Responding to marginalization of students of color in K-12 education.* Retrieved from https://www.advanc-ed.org/source/responding-marginalization-students-color-k-12-education

Kingore, B. (2004). *Differentiation: Simplified, realistic, and effective.* Austin, TX: Professional Associates Publishing.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). Lack of achievement or loss of opportunity? In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds)., *Closing the opportunity gap: What American must do to give every child an even chance* (pp. 11-24). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lauen, D., & Gaddis, S. (2012). Shining a light or fumbling in the dark? The Effects of NCLB's subgroup-specific accountability on student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 34*(2), 185–208. doi:10.3102/0162373711429989

Leithwood, K. (1992). The move toward transformational leadership. *Educational Leadership, 49*(5), 8–12. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx

Lewis, J., & Ritchie, J. (2003). Generalizing from qualitative research. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers (pp. 263–286). London, England: Sage.

Lidz, C. S., & Macrine, S. L. (2001). An alternative approach to the identification of gifted culturally and linguistically diverse learners: The contribution of dynamic assessment. *School Psychology International*, *22*(1), 74–96. doi:10.1177/01430343010221006

Lin, N. (2001). *Social capital: A theory of social structure and action.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Lohman, D. F. (2005). An aptitude perspective on talent: Implications for identification of academically gifted minority students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *28*, 333–360. doi:10.4219/jeg-2005-341

Luna, N., & Revilla, A. T. (2013). Understanding Latina/o school pushout: Experiences of students who left school before graduating. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, *12*(1), 22–37. doi:10.1080/15348431.2012.734247

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Milner, H. R. (2010). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

National Association for College Admission Counseling. (2011). *State of college admission*, 2011. Washington, DC: Author.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *The condition of education 2014.* Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014083.pdf

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, *84*(2), 112–130. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1001303

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002).

Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale Press.

Oakes, J., & Guiton, G. (1995). Matchmaking: The dynamics of high school tracking decisions. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(1), 3–33. doi:10.3102/00028312032001003

Oakland, T., & Rossen, E. (2005). A 21st century model for identifying students for gifted and talented programs in light of national conditions: An emphasis on race and ethnicity. *Gifted Child Today*, *28*(4), 56–64. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ720377.pdf

Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Clarenbach, J. (2012). *Unlocking emergent talent: Supporting high achievement of low-income, high ability students*. Washington, DC: National Association for Gifted Children.

Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Clarenbach, J. (2014). Closing the opportunity gap: Program factors contributing to academic success in culturally different youth. *Gifted Child Today, 37*(2), 103–110. doi:10.1177/1076217514520630

Passow, A. H., & Frasier, M. (1996). Toward improving identification of talent potential among minority and disadvantaged students. *Roeper Review*, *18*, 198–202. doi:10.1080/02783199609553734

Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education, 71*(2), 117–141. doi:10.2307/2649245

Perna, L. W. (2005). The benefits of higher education: Sex, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic group differences. *Review of Higher Education, 29*(1), 23–52. doi:10.1353/the.2005.0073

Perna, L. W., & Kurban, E. R. (2013). Improving college access and choice. In L. W. Perna & A. Jones (Eds.), *The state of college access and completion: Improving college success for students from underrepresented groups* (pp. 10–33). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ream, R. K., & Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2006). The mobility/social capital dynamic: Understanding Mexican American families and students. In S. Paik & H. Walberg (Eds.), *Narrowing the achievement gap* (pp. 67-90). New York, NY: Springer Science and Business Media.

Schneider, J. (2009). Privilege, equity, and the advanced placement program: Tug of war. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 41*(6), 813–831. doi:10.1080/00220270802713613

Solórzano, D. G. (1992). Chicano mobility aspirations: A theoretical and empirical note. *Latino Studies Journal*, 3, 48–66.

Solórzano, D. G., & Ornelas, A. (2002). A critical race analysis of advanced placement classes: A case of educational inequality. *Journal of Latinos & Education, 1*(4), 215−229. doi:10.1207/S1532771XJLE0104_2

Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review, 67*(1), 1–41. doi:10.17763/haer.67.1.140676g74018u73k

Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2011). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth & Society, 43*(3), 1066–1109. doi:10.1177/0044118X10382877

Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1995). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 116–135. doi:10.2307/2112778

Texas Education Agency. (2010). *Overview of the academic excellence indicator system.* Retrieved from http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/about.aeis.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *No child left behind act of 2001, Section 1702: Access to high standards act.* Retrieved from http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg14.html#sec1702

USCRossierOnline. (2013). *More schools offering open enrollment for AP courses*. Retrieved from https://rossieronline.usc.edu/more-schools-offering-open-enrollment-for-ap-courses/

Voelkel, R. H., & Chrispeels, J. H. (2017). Understanding the link between professional learning communities and teacher collective efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 28*(4), 505–526. doi:10.1080/09243453.2017.1299015

Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need and what we can do about it.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Welner, K. C., & Carter, P. L. (2013). Achievement gaps arise from opportunity gaps. In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds)., *Closing the opportunity gap: What American must do to give every child an even chance* (pp. 1-10). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Wright, B. L., Ford, D. Y., & Young, J. L. (2017). Ignorance or indifference? Seeking excellence and equity for under-represented students of color in gifted education. *Global Education Review*, *4*(1), 45-60. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a1d4/b9b59d5bc6a0e94b88265ba0e4c5c5012353.pdf?_ga=2.12120759.283199915.1596638525-518485069.1596391439

Wyner, J. S., Bridgeland, J. M., & Dilulio, J. J., Jr. (2007). *Achievement trap: How America is failing millions of high achieving students from low-income families.* Lansdowne, VA: Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Civic Enterprises.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.