

Access and Opportunity: Increasing Advanced Placement Access for English Learners

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Access and opportunity within an Advanced Placement (AP) Program prepare students for higher education. However, a disproportionate number of low-income students or students of color do not enroll in advanced courses partly due to institutional barriers and policies. This research evaluated a teacher's desire to change school policy, the exam scores, and student experiences at a school site that reduced barriers for English Learners (ELs) to take advanced placement classes. The qualitative study was framed by LatCrit theory focusing on a social justice perspective and school experience for Latinx identified as ELs. Results showed that EL success in advanced coursework is based on a supportive environment, access and opportunity, and a commitment to social justice.

Keywords: access, opportunity gap, Advanced Placement, English learners, LatCrit

OPEN THE DOOR: INCREASING ADVANCED PLACEMENT ACCESS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Access and opportunity within an Advanced Placement (AP) Program prepare students for higher education. However, a disproportionate number of low-income students or students of color do not enroll in advanced courses partly due to institutional barriers (Jaschik, 2019; Starr, 2017; Umansky, 2016). The College Board, the organization that administers AP exams, acknowledged that significant numbers of Black and Latinx students who can succeed in AP never take those classes, either because their schools do not offer them or because they are not placed in them (Kolluri, 2018; Starr, 2017). If we agree that a primary responsibility of educators and school administrators is to ensure that all students are treated equally with access and opportunity to meet state educational goals, then analyzing existing AP programs and identifying opportunity gaps related to access and inclusion is an important area for analysis.

This research aimed to evaluate exam scores of a school site that reduced barriers for English Learners (ELs) to take Advanced Placement classes and relays the experiences of a teacher and her EL students who took AP Spanish Language exams. The evaluation is framed by LatCrit theory and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What barriers existed to implementing access to advanced classes for Native Speakers?
- What were the similarities and differences in the exam pass rates for English Only (EO) students and Native Speakers/English Learners (EL) students taking the AP Spanish Language Exam?
- What were Native Speakers/EL perceptions about participation in the AP Spanish Language course and exam?

Evaluating these questions requires understanding the background of the incentives and barriers for students to enroll in advanced courses and the micropolitical forces that inhibit change.

CONTEXT

Eva Markland Cruz* (*a pseudonym) was a veteran Spanish teacher at NOCHS* who taught courses spanning all levels of language proficiency. Her daily schedule consisted of working with students in the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs (AP/IB Spanish Literature) and students classified as “Native Speakers.” Native Speakers (NS) was the label given to students who school counselors identified as predominantly Spanish speakers or English Learners (ELs) based on their home language survey at the time of enrollment. If Spanish were spoken in the home, the school counselors would determine a level of placement based on the following criteria: (a) Spanish elective taken in middle school, (b) the student’s level of basic skills in grammar or reading, and (c) student scores in their primary language on proficiency exam (formerly CELDT, now ELPAC), the high school counselors would place students into either NS1, NS2, or NS3 or NS3-Honors to continue Spanish language learning. The placement was subjective, and interestingly, the Native Speaker designation only applied to Spanish-speaking students, and no other ELs were represented in the study body.

As part of an ongoing effort by NOCHS to increase the number of a-g approved courses, teachers and administrators rewrote and submitted an updated curriculum. Through this effort, NS2, NS3, and NS3-Honors were approved as a-g courses satisfying Subject Area E: Language other than English. Working on the curriculum changes, Cruz had a realization:

I attended a conference where I was challenged to analyze and reflect on how, as an educator, I’m opening the doors of opportunities for our students. I then realized that not only was there a door that was closed for native Spanish speakers, but that I had a key that could open the door. I did not doubt that my students in my class could successfully take the AP Spanish Language test and achieve passing scores, and I was ready to make this happen (Cruz, personal communication, June 2017).

Cruz appealed to school site administrators, asking to teach AP Spanish Language curriculum to students enrolled in NS3-Honors. She met resistance from her department chair and the principal. However, after presenting a solid argument to her principal, she was permitted to teach the AP Spanish curriculum, but with no AP training and no AP textbooks, the course would remain labeled as NS3-Honors. Several teacher initiated actions, and student results influenced shifting the NS3-Honors curriculum to AP Spanish Language.

Social Justice Perspective (LatCrit)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit provide a framework to analyze practices and structures that systematically marginalize Latinx groups in education and research. CRT offers a framework for analyzing educational inequities and racialized barriers (Solorzano et al., 2005; Subtirelu et al., 2019). LatCrit evaluates laws, policies, institutional structures, and practices that do not mention race but create racial or ethnic subordination specifically related to Latinx students (Solorzano et al., 2005; Subtirelu et al., 2019). The LatCrit framework challenges concepts of race neutrality, meritocracy, and opportunities for all students. LatCrit provides perspective on this research when evaluating which students have the privilege of enrolling in certain high school courses like Advanced Placement courses. Latinx students have different and limited opportunities to learn, including limited access to advanced courses and qualified teachers. Access to AP and other advanced courses reflect Eurocentric norms and values and perpetuate privilege and marginalization or exclusion based on Latinx identification (Cooper Stein et al., 2018; Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

English Learners (ELs) and Native Speakers (NS)

Across the United States, students who are deemed not to be proficient in English are classified as English learners (ELs). English learners are nearly 18 percent of the total enrollment in California public schools (CDE, 2020; Umansky, 2016). Schools with higher percentages of EL enrollment may label and categorize students based on their language proficiency and home language surveys (Subtirelo et al., 2019). Those labels may prohibit students from access to advanced coursework or additional classes outside their academic track (Umansky, 2016).

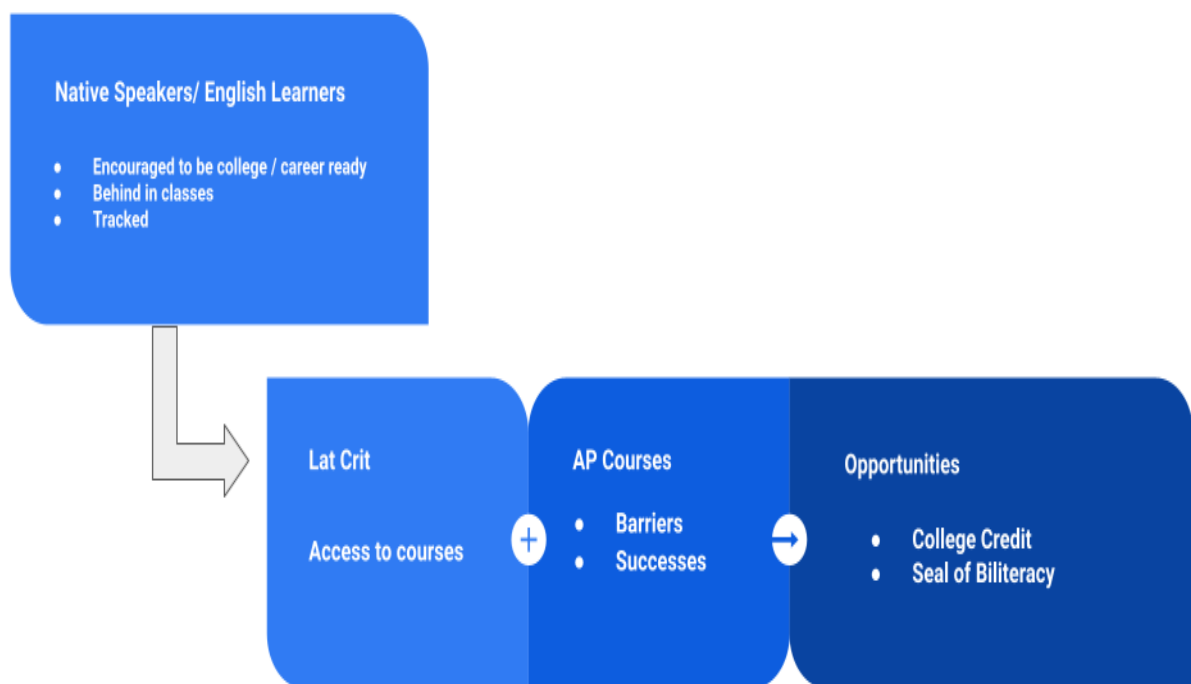
Native Speaker is another term for a person who speaks and writes in their native language, but this distinction is controversial because this classifies students by birthplace. At NOCHS, being labeled a Native Speaker typically referred to students who school counselors identified as predominantly Spanish speakers or English Learners (ELs) based on their home language survey at the time of enrollment. There is no heritage speaker classification at NOCHS.

School Experience

Barriers exist for students interested in AP courses, such as GPA requirements and standardized test scores. Even the College Board acknowledged that significant numbers of Black and Latinx students could succeed in AP, but they do not enroll due to institutional or structural barriers (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Starr, 2017). Often, students do not know the course is an option. This demonstrates inequitable patterns of school placement.

Cooper Stein et al. (2018) note that inequitable patterns of academic placement, distant relationships with non-Latinx teachers, and institutional cultures de-value Latinx customs and norms. They advocate for teachers to challenge the racist structures, beliefs, and practices in schools (Cooper Stein et al., 2018). However, English learners may have limited ability to self-advocate, and many teachers lack preparation to work with ELs (Russell, 2017; Russell & Kuriscak, 2015). This means that ELs may not have the same experiences at school as EO students, regardless of advocacy. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework linking the perspective to the intent of this research.

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative framework to describe the relationship between the students tracked in Native Speakers courses and access to courses designated as college and career ready. In addition, the teacher's experiences were derived from email exchanges and informal interviews regarding her desire to create opportunities for her students, the transformation teaching she accomplished, and the success she experienced with her students.

Data Sources

I received permission from NOCHS (a pseudonym) to review data and AP exam results. In addition, I reviewed information collected by the teacher from her students sharing their experiences taking an AP exam. Students were not identified other than enrolling in the class and taking the exam. Data represent two consecutive years of AP Spanish Language instruction by one teacher serving 158 students (2018 - 76 students; 2019 - 72 students) who took the AP Spanish Language Exam.

Student data was collected confidentially through a Google Form the teacher made available to her students after the exam administered in 2018 and 2019. Ninety-seven students responded to the teacher survey. 2020 data were excluded due to inaccurate testing scenarios brought on by COVID-19. There were no identifying markers except for the targeted sample of students enrolled in the teacher's class. I reported descriptive findings using this archival descriptive data, including de-identified school-wide AP Scores and qualitative data previously collected by the AP Spanish Language teacher.

Descriptive Results

There were barriers that limited access and opportunity to advanced coursework at NOCHS. The existing system labeled English learners based partially on assessments and, at times, on arbitrary judgments of enrollment counselors. Innovation by teachers was discouraged as school leaders generally supported the status quo. The lack of willingness and funding to train teachers and purchase additional instructional materials reflected the administration's reluctance to make changes. There was limited information aimed at EL parents about advanced coursework and college opportunities. Despite these barriers, Cruz worked to bring the opportunity of Advanced Placement to her students.

Cruz observed the other AP Spanish Language courses in the school and collaborated with AP teachers to ensure her students received instruction to prepare them for the College Board AP Spanish Language exam. She presented to parents the process during an English Learner Advisory Council Meeting to inform and engage them about advanced coursework and academic opportunities.

The NS3-Honors students signed up for the AP Spanish Language exam in 2018, all of them with fee waivers. This was the first time they had taken a high-stakes exam, let alone an exam that demonstrated college-level academic readiness for most of these students. Of the seventy-six Native Speaker 3 (NS3)-Honors students who took the AP Spanish Language Exam in the spring of 2018, 72 of them passed—a 94 percent pass rate. Motivated by their success, 35 students from NS3-Honors chose to enroll in advanced level AP Spanish Literature the following academic year in fall 2019, effectively creating an additional section of that course.

Cruz started the new academic year preparing the next group of NS3-Honors students to take the AP Spanish Language exam. The success rate continued into 2018-2019, when 69 out of 72 students passed the AP Exam in spring 2019 for a pass rate of 96 percent.

By the 2018-2019 school year, the success of Cruz's efforts was undeniable. Students in the NS3-Honors course were officially considered AP students by the school but were still segregated from other AP Spanish Language classes, although they did have access to AP textbooks. The ELs designated as "native speakers" by the school enrolled in AP Spanish were learning the same AP curriculum, having the same exam success as their English Only (EO) peers but were not integrated into the designated AP Spanish classrooms. Cruz continued to advocate for her students by requesting that the course NS3-Honors be eliminated. She used her pass rate data and student success stories to lobby the school administration to make this change. She continued to speak about access, opportunity, and equity for English Learners and

encouraged students to challenge themselves and enroll in advanced courses. Finally, in the 2019-2020 school year, students who would have been placed in NS3-Honors were directly enrolled into Spanish 4 (AP) as advanced students heterogeneously grouped with all AP students.

Student Survey Results

After completing the AP exams in the spring, Cruz surveyed her students about their experience in the NS3-Honors course and their thoughts about taking the exam. Students provided feedback to the teacher through a Google Form Survey Cruz administered. Below is a summary of the student survey results for academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019.

- 78 of the 97 students who responded to the survey had never taken an AP course
- When asked if they were encouraged to take another AP course after this experience, two students said they were not encouraged, 36 somewhat, and 59 very encouraged.
- 36 did not enroll in another AP course in the next term; 60 did enroll in another AP course the following term
- Twenty-one did not know about AP tests before enrolling in NS-3 Honors.
- 22 students reported that their parents knew about Advanced Placement courses
- After high school, 11 students were unsure about the future; 27 students reported intentions to enroll at a community college; 59 students planned to attend a four-year university.

The most notable measurement of Cruz’s success came after the first year of test scores. 76 NS3-Honors students took the AP Spanish Language Exam in 2018, and 72 students passed (94% pass rate). In addition, 35 students from NS3-Honors chose to enroll in the next level AP Spanish Literature class the following year. The success rate continued into the second year of NS3- Honors taught with AP Spanish curriculum, and 69/72 students passed the AP Exam in 2019 for a pass rate of 96%. Pass rates for EL students aligned with the historical and current school pass rates for the same exam. Table 1 provides an overview of the test results for two testing cycles, 2018 and 2019.

**TABLE 1
NATIVE SPEAKERS: AP ENROLLMENT AND PASS RATE**

Year	# of students in NS3 - Honors taking AP exam	# students who passed AP Exam	% pass rate / School pass rate	# of students from sample enrolled in AP Lit (Span 5)	# of students who passed the exam
2017/2018	76	72	94% / 96%	35	X
2018/2019	72	69	96% / 96%	36	26

EMERGENT THEMES

Students provided feedback to the teacher through a Google Form Survey administered after students completed the AP Spanish Language exam. Through their experience, comments, and reported results, three themes emerged from their comments: 1) the teacher provided a supportive environment for their learning; 2) students recognized that the class provided opportunities they did not have previously, and 3) students felt empowered by their experience. Below are representative examples of student comments and a description of the results.

Supportive Environment

Students recognized that Cruz supported their work in a challenging advanced course and reflected that the support was a key lever to their confidence to succeed in class and on the exam. Students referenced pedagogy and positive reinforcement as factors that made taking an advanced course a good experience.

Representative student comments of supportive environment theme:

- I would like to share that since it was all a brand new thing since the test was given in an early period and my teacher Mrs. Cruz was able to teach the material in a way where the memories of the material were easily retained.
- I think a lot of the reason that we were successful in taking the test was because of the absolutely supportive and awesome teacher. Mrs. Cruz was always encouraging and challenging her students to be the best. It was a truly amazing experience due to her way of teaching.
- This AP class made me challenge myself to work hard, and my teacher pushed me to do my best and conquer this AP test.
- The overall experience of the class was amazing. Everyone came out of that class having learned something new. I appreciate all of the hard work and effort put into the course from our teacher Mrs. Cruz.

Opportunities

Students commented on the increased opportunities available after taking an advanced course. Comments reflect the recognition that they were given a chance to use their existing skill to succeed on the exam and help them with future academic goals.

Representative student comments on opportunities theme:

- This class prepares you beyond the educational aspect and brings aspects of the real world into the lesson. It also helps open new doors for us because, as Hispanic students, we face many barriers, and this class helps us face those difficulties head-on and overcome them.
- It was a great opportunity for Native speakers because most are more advanced in Spanish abilities, so our skills are shown on the test.
- Most, if not all, of the people in my class passed the exam meaning that we were prepared to take the exam even if we were not in Spanish 4 AP.
- This AP test is a very good step forward towards many of the students' plans after high school and benefits our knowledge of AP tests.
- I would like to take more of these classes to be successful in my life.

Social Justice and Empowerment

A sense of social justice and empowerment from this experience emanated from student comments about access, intelligence, and pride for completing the course and passing the AP Exam. Students noted that their experience and opportunity should extend into additional courses and programs. Students expressed that they wanted to be seen beyond the label as English learners.

Representative student comments of social justice and empowerment theme:

- I would just like to say that students do have the ability to go from Native Speakers 2 to AP 4. We may need a little support from our teachers and families, but anything is possible. We, as Latino students, are capable of so much more than people believe; I believe it's time to show what we can do. *Sí se puede!*
- I would like to say that I feel it is very necessary for other schools to have the same opportunities as us to be able to see our own growth and intelligence. My experience was great, and I feel our teacher prepared us well for it. I do not regret taking the test as a native speaker three. It would be beneficial if it was given the title of AP to the Native Speakers.
- The course was interesting, and this challenge really did make me feel proud of being bilingual.

SIGNIFICANCE

Cultivating equitable education systems for the 21st century requires disrupting and transforming opportunities for students, reducing barriers to access courses that lead to additional opportunities for students beyond high school. This research provided perspective from a teacher who advocated for change, disrupted the current system, and experienced success. In addition, student perspective demonstrated the value of the increased opportunity, quality instruction, and challenging curriculum.

This research revealed descriptive findings that support the following actions by school leaders and teachers who want to provide their students with additional, equitable opportunities to take advanced courses. Based on the findings and Cruz's experience, I present several recommendations for school leaders to increase access and opportunity.

Teacher Leaders Can Reduce Barriers to Innovation and Transformation by Teacher Leaders by Evaluating the Micropolitical Forces That Inhibit Change.

Create forums for gathering non-traditional data and listening to stakeholders who have innovative ideas about addressing inequities. Listen to teachers and students! Often decisions are made by site or district administrators about who gets what, when, and how to exclude the voices of people on the margins.

Provide Resources and Train Teachers to Teach the Advanced Curriculum.

Evaluate expenditures to ensure equitable distribution of resources to meet student needs. As schools continue to do more with fewer resources, leaders can consider new ways to optimize resources. Seeks ways to support teacher training with online courses and in-house collaboration.

Support Students With Tutors and Fee Waivers in Preparation for College Exams.

Communicate information about financial assistance for students. Some students receive waivers based on socioeconomic standards. Some may be close to qualifying but miss the cut-offs. Connect students with on-campus tutors and consider creating scholarship funds for testing fees.

Evaluate Student Classification Related to Language Fluency and Track Courses to Avoid Arbitrary Course Enrollment.

Review policy and practice about student classification at the site and district level. How do you determine if a student is misclassified? Are there policies that result in the segregation of ELs based on an early assessment? Which opportunities for students are removed or reduced due to classification?

Intentionally Develop the Master schedule to Reflect Opportunities for All Students.

Evaluate how master schedules are created, including the priorities and values reflected in planning, course selection, and schedule building. Beyond putting the puzzle pieces together, incorporate analysis and reflection on the equity gaps evident in the master schedule. Varying the design of the schedule can have a positive effect on student access and opportunity if more classes are offered throughout the day and classes are integrated instead of tracked and homogenous.

Remove Prerequisites for Enrolling in Honors or Advanced Level Courses.

Prerequisites based on previous coursework or grades restrict students' ability to choose courses that interest them or challenge them. Allow students to select classes with their counselors, teachers, and families to ensure better access to advanced courses without artificial barriers. Students who have access to advanced coursework improve their college and career readiness and may also positively impact overall underrepresented student outcomes.

Engage Families in Student Education to Develop Understanding and Knowledge About the Value of the Opportunity, Specifically About College and Career Readiness.

Knowledge is power. Community outreach to English learners' families and access to information allows families to be partners in students' education. Hold information sessions about course offerings and opportunities in multiple languages to engage families.

CONCLUSION

By the 2018-2019 school year, the success of Cruz's efforts was undeniable. Students in Natives Speakers 3 Honors course were officially considered AP students by the school but were still segregated from other AP Spanish Language classes, although they did have access to AP textbooks. The ELs designated as "native speakers" by the school enrolled in AP Spanish were learning the same AP curriculum, having the same exam success as their English Only (EO) peers but were not integrated into the designated AP Spanish classrooms. The change occurred in the 2019-2020 school year when students who would have been placed in NS3-Honors were directly enrolled into Spanish 4 (AP) as advanced students heterogeneously grouped with all AP students. Cruz continued to advocate for her students by requesting that the course NS3-Honors be eliminated. She used her pass rate data and student success stories to lobby the school administration to make this change. She continued to speak about access, opportunity, and equity for English Learners and encouraged students to challenge themselves and enroll in advanced courses.

Access and opportunity within an Advanced Placement (AP) Program prepare students for higher education. However, a disproportionate number of low-income students or students of color do not enroll in advanced courses partly due to institutional barriers. Advocacy to expand opportunities to learn, with access to advanced courses and qualified teachers, reduced the marginalization and exclusion of English learners at NOCHS, but only with Cruz's students. Moving past the norms and values that perpetuate privilege and marginalization based on perceived language and academic capabilities is a challenge for many institutions, but a challenge that could be addressed with commitment from school leaders, teachers, and students willing to expand opportunities.

If we agree that a primary responsibility of educators and school administrators is to ensure that all students are treated equally with access and opportunity to meet state educational goals, then analyzing existing AP programs and identifying opportunity gaps is an appropriate area for analysis. Reducing barriers to accessing courses that lead to additional opportunities for students beyond high school requires innovation and change. As this study showed, opening that door and providing a supportive environment created opportunities that empowered students. This is a pathway to improved academic experiences for all students.

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