Using critical race theory as a framework, this article examines the access and availability of Advanced Placement (AP) courses and how they impact educational outcomes for Latina/o and African American students. To begin thinking critically about enrollment patterns of AP courses we ask the following questions: How do school structures, practices, and discourses help maintain racial and ethnic discrimination in access to AP courses? How do Latina/o and African American students and parents respond to the educational structures, practices, and discourses that help maintain racial and ethnic discrimination in access to AP courses? Finally, how can school reforms help end racial and ethnic discrimination in access to AP courses?

In order to answer these questions, we examined a school district in California that serves a large population of Latina/o and African American students. Three different patterns emerged around access and availability of AP courses: Latina/o students are disproportionately underrepresented in AP enrollment district-wide; schools that serve urban, low-income Latina/o and African American communities have low student enrollment in AP courses; and even when Latina/o and African American students attend high schools with high numbers of students enrolled in AP courses, they are not equally represented in AP enrollment. We call this structure and process “Schools Within Schools.”

Key Words: Chicana/o, Latina/o, and African American education, Advanced Placement classes, critical race theory, educational inequality, access and enrollment.

Introduction
Issues of access and inequality have long overwhelmed the educational experience of Latina/o and African American students. If one examines the educational pipeline–irrespective of how educational outcomes are measured–Latina/o and African American students do not perform as well as Whites (Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Garcia, 2001; Moreno, 1999; Rumberger,

However, the Gratz case did not consider that an applicant could be given admission points in at least four other areas where underrepresented students of color might face various forms of discrimination. First, an applicant could be awarded up to 16 points for being a Michigan resident and living in a Michigan county that was underrepresented at the university. These underrepresented counties tended to be in the northern part of the state where few African America, Latina/o or Native Americans reside. Second, if an applicant's parents graduated from the university, the students were given 4 points. In comparison to White applicants, fewer underrepresented parents of color have graduated from the University of Michigan. Third, students were awarded from zero to 10 points based on the quality of their high school. The research is clear that students of color attend schools of lesser quality than White students (see Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995). Finally, students were awarded up to 8 points based on the difficulty of the high school curriculum and whether or not they took the demanding college preparatory courses like Advanced Placement (AP) and honors. In fact, if the college preparatory curriculum were available and a student didn't take the courses she/he could lose up to 4 points. Again, in previous work, we have shown a “school within a school” effect. That is, attending a school with a challenging curriculum doesn’t guarantee that students of color will be enrolled in the college preparatory curriculum (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002). In each of these four areas, students of color are put at a disadvantage in the University of Michigan’s Selection Index. These four potential forms of discrimination were not addressed in the Supreme Court’s July 23rd ruling in Gratz v. Bollinger. Indeed, as colleges and universities develop Grutter type (and Gratz proof) affirmative action admissions programs, they must be aware of the potential to discriminate against the very students they are attempting to admit to “diversify” their in-coming classes.
Critical Race Theory: A Lens for Research on Access and Enrollment in AP Courses

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a framework to address these issues and draws from a broad race and ethnic relations literature base in law, sociology, history, and the field of education (see Ladson-Billings, 1996; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Tate, 1997). CRT consists of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that seek to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom (see Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993; Tierney, 1993). CRT in education includes the following five elements that form its basic model: (1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination in education, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology around school failure, (3) the commitment to social justice in education, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective (see Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

While these themes are not new in and of themselves, together they represent a collective challenge to the existing methods of conducting and interpreting education research on race and inequality. Indeed, using critical race theory in education is different from other critical frameworks because it simultaneously: (1) foregrounds race and racism in the research, (2) challenges the traditional paradigms, methods, and texts, and separates discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact students of color, (3) helps us focus on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color, (4) offers a liberatory and transformative method when examining racial, gender, and class discrimination, and (5) utilizes the transdisciplinary knowledge and methodological base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, and the law to better understand the various forms of discrimination (Solorzano, 1997 & 1998).

In this article, we take these five themes, and where applicable, apply them to the access and availability of AP courses for Latina/o and African American students. Thus, in order to begin thinking critically about enrollment patterns of AP courses we will ask the following questions: How do school structures, practices, and discourses help maintain racial and ethnic discrimination in access to AP courses? How do Latina/o and African American students and parents respond to the educational structures, practices, and discourses that help maintain racial and ethnic discrimination in access to AP courses? And, how can school reforms help end racial and ethnic discrimination in access to AP courses?

In order to answer these questions and to elaborate on how critical race studies can help examine the access and availability of AP courses and enrollment for Latina/o and African American students, we examine both California high schools in general and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) specifically.

Methodology

Using 2000-01 data from the California Department of Education, we were able to examine all of California’s high schools. We looked at schools with a minimum of 500 students enrolled and this totaled 780 high schools. Since AP course availability and school size varied dramatically from school to school, we developed an AP Student Access Indicator (APSAI), which controls for both the size of the school and the number of AP courses available at the school. This indicator divided the overall high school student enrollment by the number of AP courses available at the high school. For instance, we calculated the APSAI score at Whitney High School in Cerritos California by dividing the 1,025 students by 34 AP courses for a score of 30. The lower the ratio of students to AP courses, the higher the ranking of the school. Indeed, Whitney High had the lowest ratio of students to AP courses and was ranked first. From there we calculated an APSAI score and ranked each high school in the state. We then combined the top 50 public high schools in the state and examined the racial make-up.
It is in this demographic context that we begin to address the question of access and student enrollment in AP courses for Latina/o and African American students. One place to begin addressing educational inequalities is to examine the negative consequences of the inequalities in access and enrollment of AP courses in high school. We begin this discussion by reaffirming that colleges and universities continue to focus on traditional indicators to determine the eligibility of admitted students. Hence, high school grade point averages (GPAs), standardized tests, and AP courses weigh heavily in determining eligibility for college admission. Therefore, to be equitable, one could argue that all California comprehensive high schools should offer a full array or at least an adequate number of AP courses and ensure proportionate student enrollment as one factor in preparing competitive applicants for university admission. Unfortunately, this is not the case. For example when examining California's top 50 AP high schools (as measured by the AP Student Access Indicator), Figure 1 reveals that in 2000-01, while Latina/o students made up 38% of California's high school student enrollment, they only made-up 16% of the student population in the top AP high schools.

Our second layer of analysis used LAUSD data for the 2001-02 academic year. With these data we examined overall student enrollment in AP courses, student racial/ethnic enrollment in AP courses, and AP course availability for each high school in the district.

**Results**

**Access and Enrollment of AP Courses: The Case for California**

Latinas/os are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the state of California. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Latinas/os make up 32% of the state’s population. Furthermore, Latinas/os constitute 43% of the state of California’s K-12 public school enrollment (California Department of Education, 2000-2001)—the largest and fastest growing ethnic group of California’s K-12 public schools. Indeed, by the 2009-10 academic year, Latina/o students are expected to reach 51% or the majority of the state’s K-12 student enrollment (California Department of Finance, Demographics Unit, 2000). Also, using the 2000 U.S. Census, African Americans are 6% of the state’s population, while they constitute 8% of the state of California’s K-12 public school enrollment (California Department of Education, 2000-2001). However, the African American presence in California schools is gradually declining. By the 2009-10 academic year, African American students are expected to be 7% of the state’s K-12 student enrollment (California Department of Finance, Demographics Unit, 2000).

![Figure 1](image-url)

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Source: CA Department of Education, 2000-01
Clearly, at the California state level, Latina/o and African American students are less likely to be in the top 50 AP high schools. Therefore, students who do not have access to these courses are not afforded the extra GPA points and other college admissions benefits for taking AP courses and thus reduce their chances of becoming competitively eligible for university admissions. Furthermore, while this inequality exists in California's 50 most competitive high schools, the problem of under enrollment of Latina/o and African American students continues to increase across the remainder of California public high schools (California Department of Education, 2000-2001). In this context, we must pose the question: Do Latina/o and African American students have equal access to AP courses at their high schools? To best answer this question we examine a specific school district in California—the Los Angeles Unified School District.

**Access and Enrollment of AP Courses: The Case of the Los Angeles Unified School District**

In this section we analyze the AP enrollment in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), California’s largest school district. It is a district where two-thirds (66%) of its high school students are Latina/o and 14% are African American. The district serves predominantly urban, low-income communities of color. Like many districts across the country, the LAUSD has an underrepresentation of Latina/o and African American students enrolled in AP courses. For example, in the 2001-02 academic year (Figure 2), Latina/o students were 66% of the LAUSD’s high school student enrollment, while they comprised only 49% of district wide AP enrollment (LAUSD, 2001). Similarly, African Americans were 14% of the overall high school population and 8% of the AP student enrollment. This is clearly disproportionate to their district wide enrollment. In contrast, Asian and White students show the opposite trend. As Figure 2 indicates, Whites comprised 12% of student enrollment and 22% of AP enrollment and Asians comprised 9% of the district’s student enrollment and 21% of AP enrollment (LAUSD, 2001).

This finding invites us to ask: How do these data get played out in specific schools within LAUSD? To answer this question, we chose four high schools within the district. Using the AP Student Access Indicator, the four schools are among the top 10 AP high schools in the district. Van Nuys High School is one of these top ranked schools. Van Nuys High School serves a

![Figure 2](image-url)

**LAUSD % Enrollment by Ethnicity in AP Courses, 2001-02**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>% of High School Enrollment</th>
<th>% of AP Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina/o</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: LAUSD, 2001-02
predominantly low-income, Latina/o student body in the San Fernando Valley section of Southern California. Close to 64% of the students are on free and reduced price meals (California Department of Education, 2001-2002). Using the AP Student Access Indicator, Van Nuys High School is ranked 103rd (out of 780 schools) in the state of California and 28th (out of 52 schools) in the entire LAUSD. According to Figure 3, during the 2001-02 academic year, Latina/o students comprised 78% of the student population at Van Nuys High School. However, Latina/o students only made-up 13% of students enrolled in AP courses. African Americans made-up 5% of the student population, but only 1% of AP enrollment. In contrast, Asians were 8% of the student population and 53% of AP student enrollment while Whites were 10% of the student population, but 32% of AP enrollment.

![Figure 3](image-url)

Van Nuys High School, AP Enrollment, 2001-02

Source: LAUSD, 2001-02

The second school we looked at was Hamilton High School. Hamilton’s student body is predominantly Latina/o and African American and many of the students are bused into this middle to upper middle class community in West Los Angeles. Approximately 23% of students at Hamilton High School are receiving free and reduced price meals. Using the AP Student Access Indicator, Hamilton High School is ranked 99th (out of 780 schools) in the state of California and 14th (out of 52 schools) in the entire LAUSD. According to Figure 4, in the 2001-02 academic year, Latina/o students comprised 52% of the student population at Hamilton High School but only 31% of students enrolled in AP courses. African Americans made up 38% of the student population, in contrast to only 18% of AP enrollment. Conversely, Asians were 4% of the student population and 6% of AP student enrollment. Whites were 6% of the student population, yet 45% of AP enrollment.
The third school we examined was Palisades Charter High School. Although Palisades Charter High School is located in an affluent beach community in the most western portion of Los Angeles, it serves a racially diverse student body. Furthermore, many of the Latina/o and African American students are bused into this upper middle class community in West Los Angeles. Unlike many of the schools in the LAUSD, Palisades has only 9% of its students enrolled in free and reduced price meals (California Department of Education, 2001-2002). Using the AP Student Access Indicator, Palisades Charter High School is ranked 40th (out of 780 schools) in the state of California and 3rd (out of 52 schools) in the entire LAUSD. According to Figure 5, in the 2001-02 academic year, Latina/o students comprised 24% of the student population at Palisades Charter High School. However, Latina/o students only made-up 13% of students enrolled in AP courses. African Americans made-up 27% of the student population, but only 8% of AP enrollment. In contrast, Asians were 9% of the student population and 17% of AP student enrollment. Whites were 40% of the student population, yet 62% of AP enrollment.

Source: LAUSD, 2001-02
Finally, the last school we examined was Bravo Medical Magnet High School. This is one of the few high schools in the LAUSD in which the entire campus is considered to be a magnet school. Using the AP Student Population Indicator, Bravo Medical Magnet is ranked 29th (out of 780 schools) in the state of California and the highest in the entire LAUSD. This high school is located in the predominantly low-income, Latina/o community of East Los Angeles. However, its student population is much more diverse than the community it serves. Furthermore, 81% of its students receive free and reduced price meals. According to Figure 6, during the 2001-02 academic year, Latina/o students comprised 51% of the student population at Bravo Medical Magnet High School. However, Latina/o students only made-up 34% of students enrolled in AP courses. African Americans made-up 4% of the student population, and a proportionate 4% of AP enrollment. In contrast, Asians were 24% of the student population and 43% of AP student enrollment, while Whites were 21% of the student population, and 19% of AP enrollment.

The low enrollment of students in AP courses in predominantly low-income, urban, Latina/o and African American communities like the communities around Van Nuys and Bravo High Schools is only part of the problem. Another obstacle emerges regarding the access and enrollment in AP courses for Latina/o and African American students who attend multiracial high schools with a relatively high student enrollment of AP courses such as Hamilton and Palisades High Schools. Despite attending high schools with an overall high student enrollment in AP courses, Latina/o and African American students remain underrepresented in AP courses. We call this phenomenon “Schools within Schools” and found the same pattern at other multiracial schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. It is important to look at “Schools within Schools” since it is often the case that although Latina/o and African American students attend high achieving high schools, they are often underrepresented in AP courses.

**Discussion: Responses to Unequal Access and Enrollment of AP Courses**

We have discussed three different patterns that emerged at the district level: (1) Latina/o and African American students are disproportionately underrepresented in AP enrollment in the top AP high schools in the state and the LAUSD (See Figures 1 and 2); (2) schools that serve urban, low-income Latina/o and African American students are disproportionately underrepresented in AP enrollment; and (3) schools that serve Latina/o and African American students are disproportionately underrepresented in AP enrollment. It is important to look at “Schools within Schools” since it is often the case that although Latina/o and African American students attend high achieving high schools, they are often underrepresented in AP courses.
American communities have low student enrollment in AP courses (See Figures 3 and 6); and (3) even when Latina/o and African American students attend high schools with high numbers of students enrolled in AP courses, they are not proportionately represented in AP enrollment. We call this structure and practice “Schools Within Schools” (See Figures 4 and 5).

In response to unequal access and enrollment in AP courses in California high schools, two court cases have emerged. The first is a California Superior Court Case titled, Daniel et al. v. State of California (1999). This civil rights class action suit was filed on behalf of California public high school students who were being denied equal and adequate access to Advanced Placement courses by the State’s local school districts. In this case, the four student of color plaintiffs (along with their parents) argued that there was a lack of availability of AP courses at their high school and there was little encouragement and support from the high school for them to enroll in AP courses and take AP exams (Daniel et al. v. State of California, 1999). The student plaintiffs argued that this lack of access to AP courses and exams places them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other California high school students when competing for admission to universities. Before the Daniel case went to trial, the parties agreed to a consent decree that in part culminated in state legislation that gave financial support for California public high schools to build otherwise weak AP programs–AP Challenge Grant Program.

The second court case is Castaneda et al. v. University of California Regents (1999). This is a United States Federal civil rights class action lawsuit that claims that the UC Regents and UC Berkeley have violated and continue to violate the civil rights of the students of color who in part were denied equal access to AP courses at their high schools. Specifically, this occurs when the University of California adopts and implements admissions policies and procedures that disproportionately deny to otherwise qualified minority applicants an equal opportunity to compete for admission to undergraduate studies. The case argued that the University of California at Berkeley used admissions criteria that have a disparate impact on African American, Latina/o and Pilipino applicants because it uses and gives added weight to AP course enrollment, AP grades, and AP exams in its admissions process. Indeed, AP programs serve at least three benefits in the admissions process to those who have access: (1) AP courses are an indication of a school’s high quality curriculum; (2) students who take AP courses receive an extra grade point in their GPA; and (3) AP courses usually lead to students taking AP exams. In many cases, if they score a “3 or better” on the exam, they receive college course credit. As a result, students who do not have access to such AP programs are at a distinct disadvantage when applying for university admissions. Many colleges and universities throughout the state and indeed the nation provide similar benefits to students who have access to and take AP courses.

Both of these legal cases are important because they illuminate the unequal educational conditions and opportunities across California high schools. We would predict this unequal pattern of access to AP would hold in most school districts across the country (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2000). This is why we argue that as colleges and universities develop admissions programs in a post Grutter and Gratz legal environment, they must take into consideration the lack of AP and other educational opportunities that exist in the high schools. Equally important is the fact that these legal cases demonstrate how students and parents are resistant to educational structures and practices that maintain unequal conditions and outcomes in these schools. Students and their parents are not only critical of these educational inequalities, but by using the legal system, they are proactive in challenging these inequalities (Castaneda et al., v. The Regents of the University of California et al., 1999 & Daniel et al., v. The State of California et al., 1999). A critical race framework suggests and these cases illustrate that marginalized groups can be agents of their own transformation. In these and other cases, students and parents are demanding equal access and enrollment in AP courses through the state and federal courts and state and local legislation.
Recommendations
Although many steps must be taken in order to remedy the unequal access and enrollment of AP courses, we recommend the following as a starting point:

K-12 Recommendations

• K-12 institutions must develop a College-Going Culture that includes at minimum the following six conditions (see Oakes, Rogers, McDonough, Solorzano, Mehan, and Noguera, 2000):

1. A School Culture Supportive of Advanced Study and College Going.
2. Student Participation in Rigorous Academic Courses (i.e. college preparatory courses and AP programs); schools must ensure that all students have equal access to and are proportionately enrolled in AP courses and other college preparatory programs. Indeed, states and/or districts might consider that the default curriculum in all high schools be the college preparatory curriculum.
3. Student Access to Qualified Teachers.
5. The School Developing a multicultural College-Going Identity, and
6. The School Connects with Parents and the Community Around Advanced Study.

University Admissions Recommendations

• Colleges and universities must apply pressure on states and their local school districts to offer a rigorous academic curriculum for all students regardless of race or ethnicity, gender, or social class.
• Eliminate the extra point allocated to AP courses.
• Develop more accurate measures for student academic success such as the student’s GPA in college preparatory courses (see UC Latino Eligibility Task Force, 1997).
• Develop and implement the AP Student Admissions Index. This Index is calculated as the ratio between the number of AP courses the student takes divided by the number of AP courses her/his school offers. For example, using the index score, students are given a higher weight if a school offers 5 AP courses and the students take all 5 compared to a school that offers 20 AP courses and the student takes 5.

• Develop and implement an AP School Equity Index. This School Equity Index would equal the number of specific students of color enrolled in AP courses divided by the number of those specific students of color enrolled in the school. For example, at a particular school you would calculate the number of Latino/a or African American students enrolled in AP courses divided by the number of Latin/o or African American students enrolled in the school. The School Equity Index could identify schools with high underrepresented students of color participation in AP courses; equal participation, and low participation. Implementation of this policy could also begin to address the “School within School” phenomena.

Conclusion
This study began by allowing for an overall explanation of the role of race in the college admission process. A student’s participation in AP courses and programs is one of many indicators that determine college admission. Therefore, this study took a closer look at the representation of Latina/o and African American students in AP courses and found that in California they continue to be underrepresented in AP courses (see Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002). As indicated earlier, while there may be many other indicators, this study focused on the access and enrollment of AP courses to begin to explain educational outcomes for Latina/o and African American students. As researchers and policy makers we must address the educational inequalities that exist for underrepresented students of color. We must ensure that all students are afforded an equal educational opportunity to learn. We argue that critical race theory provides a framework to study those institutions which students of color attend and discuss educational inequalities that might otherwise go unnoticed.
A Critical Race Analysis of Latina/o and African American Enrollment

Although this study has looked at the unequal access and enrollment in AP courses for Latina/o and African American students, we must keep in mind that access to AP courses is one example of many educational inequalities that occur before their high school experience and continue into their postsecondary experience and therefore impact their educational outcomes. Disparities in AP course enrollment should be used as a window that offers a glimpse into other educational inequalities that exist in schools. Furthermore, using a critical race framework allows us to specifically place race and racism at the center of the analysis and focus on those educational inequalities that impact Latina/o and African American students inside and outside the schools.

Notes
1 The College Board administers the Advanced Placement Program (AP). AP was established in 1955 to provide high school students with the opportunity to take college-level classes and exams. Currently there are 35 courses in 19 subject areas (Commission on the Future of Advanced Placement Program, 2001).
2 In this article, Latinas/os are defined as persons of Mexican and Latin American ancestry living in the United States, irrespective of immigration or generation status.
3 In this article, the term underrepresented Students of Color is defined as persons of African American, Latina/o, and Native American ancestry. It should be noted that certain Asian American students continue to be underrepresented in some educational outcomes. However, the data reported are not disaggregated by Asian subgroups.
4 Magnet schools are comprehensive schools offering enriched curriculum in one or more subject areas. Enrolling in magnet schools are strong predictors for future college enrollment and can significantly benefit students when applying for college admission.

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