Addressing the Elephant in the Room: An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Principals’ Perceptions of Opportunity Gaps, Their Leadership Practices and Access To Advanced Placement Courses for Marginalized Students

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ABSTRACT

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, achievement gaps have guided education reform work. The focus on these gaps in student outcomes has been standardized and has lacked consideration of the inputs that create the academic achievement disparities between demographic groups of students. These gaps are often tied to the segregation of learning opportunities, both across and within schools, and perpetuate racist and classist stereotypes of students. A critical need to shift attention from gaps in achievement to a more appropriate measure, opportunity gaps between racially minoritized students and their White peers, is needed. In this study, I specifically focused on the widely documented gap in opportunity to access Advanced Placement (AP) courses that racially minoritized students face. Furthermore, given the significant and increasing influence of school principals on student outcomes, I examined three high school principals’ understandings of opportunity gaps in their schools, their leadership actions, and the role that these factors play in racially minoritized students’ access to AP courses. To acknowledge the complex and nuanced realities of opportunity gaps in the U.S. education system, true equity work will require more localized, context-specific approaches to closing racialized opportunity gaps and subsequent achievement gaps. I employed tenets of the Opportunity Gap Framework (Milner, 2012), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa, 2016) and Place-Conscious Leadership (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003) to create a conceptual framework that I used to drive all aspects of the design of this multiple case study. In this framework, I included three primary drivers of opportunity gaps as identified throughout the literature: people,
policies, and practices. I examined within-case findings pertaining to the people, policies, and practices that influenced access to AP courses at each site and followed this examination with a cross-case analysis that resulted in findings that illustrated the perceptions that each principal held of opportunity gaps and the influence of those perceptions on their leadership practices. Furthermore, the findings highlight direct and indirect ways that the leadership actions of each principal connected to changes in AP course access at their schools for racially minoritized and historically underrepresented students in their schools: through how they interpreted and enacted policy, how they perceived the AP program, and how they identified and created opportunity using data-driven approaches. These findings will aid in the development of more equitable school leaders and policy within a national culture of high-stakes accountability and increasingly colorblind legislative measures with regard to student access.
DEDICATION

To David, my most precious partner in all things.

To Ella and Nash, who remind me to never stop fighting for what I believe in.

To the countless students whose God-given talents and gifts have not been provided the platform they deserve to shine their brightest.

And

In memory of Lauren, whose light will be carried forth by the many lives that are forever changed by her love… inside and outside of the classroom.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity I have been afforded to complete this doctoral journey. This dissertation is a culmination of the contributions of many individuals that have poured into my success and well-being. I owe a tremendous amount of thanks to my esteemed committee members. Dr. Hans Klar, your mentorship throughout my doctoral experience has been valuable beyond measure. Thank you for pushing me through to the finish line, and for encouraging me to pursue and supporting me through so many opportunities as a scholar. Thank you, Dr. Daniella Hall Sutherland, for cheering me on throughout the hurdles that have come with being a mother and graduate student. Your mentorship truly helped keep me going and helped me believe in more for myself. Thank you, Dr. Natasha Croom. I’ve learned more from you in one course and throughout my dissertation experience than in I did 20+ years of schooling. You have been an inspiration to me in too many ways to count. Thank you, Dr. Jacquelynn Malloy, for always asking such meaningful questions and for the joy that you bring to every space. You have expanded my thinking in infinite ways.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

“The current American system exacerbates the problem [of unequal opportunities outside school] by giving these children less of everything that makes a difference in education.”

The Equity and Excellence Commission of the US Dept of Education, 2013

In this opening chapter, I provide background information on the research problem that I investigate in this study and share my rationale for its research design and methods. I begin by setting the context for the research problem by briefly highlighting its major components from the literature. I follow this contextualization by sharing the research questions that guided all aspects of the data collection and analyses. I then share an overview of the development of the conceptual framework that was employed for this study. Then, I briefly share the research design and methods that were applied to the data collection and analysis processes. I conclude this chapter with an explanation of its significance and an acknowledgement of its limitations.

Research Problem

The racial segregation of learning spaces in the United States is not a new issue to educational researchers or to the millions of students who have been subjected to these oppressive experiences. It is widely recognized that students of color in the United States are less likely to have access to quality instruction, rigorous curriculum, and a positive school climate (Fontana et al., 2020). The language of achievement gaps that are often tied to the segregation of learning opportunities, both across and within schools, perpetuates racist and classist stereotypes of students. For this reason, it is a mistake to try to understand achievement gaps without paying attention to the real opportunity gaps.
or curriculum gaps that persist between the educational experiences of different groups of students (Turner, 2020), namely students of color and their White peers.

In this study, I focused on the lack of access to rigorous curriculum, specifically in the form of Advanced Placement (AP) classes and with regard to the exclusion of students of color in these classes in US high schools. In a 2022 report from The Education Trust (2022) and Equal Opportunity Schools shared that Black and Latinx students, in particular, have been excluded from enrollment in AP STEM courses despite having expressed interest in enrollment (Patrick et al., 2022). This report also highlighted the role of a positive and culturally welcoming school climate in expanding enrollment and success in AP courses for Black and Latinx students. Thus, given their influence on school culture and climate, this study also emphasizes a focus on the school principal as a critical component of the access to AP courses for racially minoritized students.

School leadership has been conceptualized as the exercise of influence on organizational members and stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals (Leithwood, 2021). The literature widely acknowledges the significant influence of school principals on student outcomes. Principal leadership, in fact, has been claimed to be so crucial to student outcomes that it is the second only to teaching in its impact on their learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Drastic changes to the educational policy landscape have taken place since the discovery of the degree of principal influence. These findings were recently refreshed with newer studies (Grissom et al., 2021) that identified an increased focus on the even greater influence of principals today and the role of equity in their responsibilities to their
school communities. Additionally, principals now have greater latitude to invest funds from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in ways they believe will most likely benefit underserved students (The Aspen Institute, 2018). For this reason, and because the role of the school principal has been understudied with regard to desegregating AP classes, high school principals are the primary unit of analysis in this proposed study.

This study fills gaps in the literature and the knowledge base related to the role that high school principals play in the opportunity gaps in access to and success in Advanced Placement (AP) courses experienced by racially minoritized students. To explore this research topic, I employed a qualitative multiple case study that examined principals’ understandings of opportunity gaps in their school and the ways in which their understandings connect to leadership actions and advanced coursework gaps.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that principals perceive opportunity gaps that exist within their school, the ways that those perceptions connect to their leadership practices, and how those practices are enacted in ways that contribute to the access and successful experiences of racially minoritized students in Advanced placement (AP) courses. The research questions for this study were derived from both my scholarship and educational practice, which I elaborate on in my positionality statement in Chapter 3. These questions were also derived from the conceptual framework that guided this study. I provide more detail on the construction of the conceptual framework in Chapter 2. The following research questions are addressed:
1. What is the role of principals’ leadership practices in creating access to in Advanced Placement (AP) courses for racially minoritized students?

2. How do principals perceive opportunity gaps that exist for racially minoritized students in their school?

3. In what ways do principals’ perceptions of opportunity gaps in their school connect to their leadership practices?

Research Design and Methods

I used a qualitative multiple case study to examine the understandings of opportunity gaps, leadership actions of principals, and access to and success in AP classes in each principal’s school. I began by purposefully sampling three high school principals who lead schools in varying contexts in South Carolina. Variation in geography among the study participants and their school sites was critical to capturing the spatialization of opportunity gaps for minoritized students in this study.

Data Collection

The data that I collected at each of the three sites for this multiple case study were based on the six sources of evidence for case study development as suggested by Yin (2018). The six sources of evidence include documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. For this study, my primary source of data was in the form of semi-structured interviews with principals and additional participants within each site. During the initial interviews with principals, I employed snowball sampling to determine additional individuals with whom I also conducted semi-structured interviews.
The additional interviews were a critical component of triangulating the data collected in interviews with the principals. I also collected additional documents and archival records that were incorporated into the analysis and triangulation of data gleaned from the interviews. I elaborate on each of these types of evidence with specific examples of each in Chapter 3. I also include Table 3.3 entitled *Types and Sources of Evidence Collected and Analyzed* which provides a visual of my use of Yin’s (2018) identification of evidence and its application to my data collection process.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed and collected the data for this study concurrently in an ongoing effort to reduce blind spots and enhance the validity and robustness of the data. I recorded and transcribed all interviews and memos. I engaged in both inductive and deductive coding processes with all documents, archival records, and interview transcripts for each case. I combined the emergent codes that surfaced during the inductive coding process with a priori codes that I used for subsequent rounds of deductive coding. I utilized the theoretical aspects that were used to develop the conceptual framework as a priori codes. I outlined these aspects in Table 2.1 *Aspects of Theories Incorporated into Research Design*. I engaged in a final cross-case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) after all cases were inductively and deductively coded. I also incorporated analytic memos and peer debriefing into the data analyses processes to support validity and trustworthiness of the data since I was the primary researcher engaged in this study.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of a study has been described as the researcher’s understanding of how the research problem will be best explored and is represented as a system of concepts, assumptions, and beliefs that support and guide the research design and methodology (Marshall et al., 2022; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I employed the concepts of three primary theoretical frameworks in addition to the literature and my conceptualization of the problem as a researcher to create the conceptual framework for this study. The three theories from which I drew to develop the conceptual framework are the Opportunity Gap Framework (Milner, 2012), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa, 2016), and Place-Conscious Leadership (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003).

The Opportunity Gap Framework (Milner, 2012) is grounded in critical race theory and has five interconnected evaluative areas: (a) Reject colorblindness; (b) Understand cultural conflicts; (c) Recognize the myth of meritocracy; (d) Disrupt low expectations and deficit mindsets; and (e) Context-neutral mindsets and practices. While this framework has been frequently used for teacher support, I have not been able to identify any studies to date that apply it to principal practices and mindsets. Given the proven connection of principal influence on teacher effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2021), it is equally as important to understand how principals also exhibit these qualities.

Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) was developed in response to a lack of equitable progress for minoritized students despite widespread applications of instructional, transformational, and transactional leadership models by principals to
respond to student needs (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasized four primary behaviors of culturally responsive school leaders: (a) critically self-reflects on leadership behaviors; (b) develops culturally responsive teachers; (c) promotes a culturally responsive/inclusive school environment; and (d) engages students, parents, and indigenous contexts. I incorporated these four behaviors into the development of the conceptual framework, particularly to address the human (see Figure 2.1 for people component of conceptual framework) aspect of what contributes to the perpetuation of racialized opportunity gaps. I elaborate on this component of the conceptual framework with an accompanying visual in Chapter 2.

The understanding of place is an important part of more fully understanding contexts and the relationships that inhabit them (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003a). For this reason, I also included place-conscious in the development of the conceptual framing. Budge (2006) proposed six habits of place to serve as a tool for examining rural schools and communities specifically: (a) connectedness; (b) development of identity and culture; (c) interdependence with the land; (d) spirituality; (e) ideology and politics; and (f) activism and civic engagement. In this study, I take into consideration the lack of attention to rural communities in the discussion of place, and aims to utilize this theory to understand the challenges and strengths that are both identified and address collaboratively between schools and their local communities.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. As a multiple case study, this study has limited generalizability. For this reason, I intentionally focused on creating transferability of its
findings. I include Table 3.3 entitled *Procedures Enacted to Ensure Trustworthiness and Transferability of Research* in Chapter Three to demonstrate these efforts. As the primary researcher engaged in this study, I acknowledge that my own blind spots are another limitation. I utilized the researcher positionality framework (Milner, 2007) as one tool to help minimize blind spots. I elaborate on the analytic memo processes I incorporated this framework into in Chapter 3. Additionally, the development of the conceptual framework (and the research study in its entirety) was influenced by my own experiences and knowledge. For this reason, I revisited the conceptual framework (Figure 2.1) and its theoretical foundations (Table 2.1) frequently throughout the design of the interview questions, data collection process, and analysis of the data. I conducted within-case sampling based on recommendations from each principal at the conclusion of our interview. This sampling method can be problematic given the potential biases with which these recommendations may have been made by each principal. I also conducted snowball sampling with additional study participants. Snowball sampling posed the same limitation of bias in the suggestions that were made. Time was also a limitation of this study. Given the demanding schedules of high school principals, I was unable to access the leaders in this study as participants until the conclusion of the academic year. I conducted additional interviews after my initial interviews with principals. As the timing of these interviews rolled over into the schools’ summer break, teachers and students were difficult to access. For this same reason, I was also unable to spend an extended amount of time within each site during the academic year. The issue of timing also applied to arguably the most significant limitation of this study, and that is the absence of
student voice. Interviews that were conducted captured only a moment in time and examples shared from memory by adult leaders in each school and district. Notwithstanding these limitations, the robust findings of this study implicate the important role that principals play in creating opportunity for students.

**Significance of the Study**

This study made theoretical and practical contributions to the field of educational leadership in new ways that have previously been understudied. Theoretically, this study combines three major theories that each contribute to more fully understanding and considering the intersectionality of race, place, and socioeconomics in the manifestation of opportunity gaps experienced by minoritized students in the United States. A detailed analysis of principals’ understandings of opportunity gaps and the implications of their intersectional nature contributes important information to be used for leadership development programs. A closer examination of micro-level policies pertaining to enrollment and successful completion of AP courses will reveal areas for improvement to better ensure the crafting and implementation of policies that lead to AP course enrollments that more accurately reflect each school’s student population.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

*Achievement gap*

The disparities in academic performance demonstrated between student racial and ethnic and socioeconomic groups in public schools in the United States. Academic performance metrics used to determine the status of the achievement gap are standardized tests that range from state to state.
**Advanced Placement (AP)**

A program operated by the College Board that offers courses to high school students that are considered to be of college-level rigor. Many colleges and universities offer credit to incoming students who successfully pass AP exams. The offering of AP courses varies by school as do the policies for enrollment.

**College Board**

A nonprofit organization in the United States that was originally established in 1899 with a goal to expand access to higher education. Over time, the College Board also began to create and administer standardized tests and curricula used by public and private K-12 and higher education systems to enhance postsecondary readiness. The Advanced Placement (AP) Program is the primary curricular component created and operated by College Board today.

**Equity**

This study utilizes the definition of equity put forth most recently in a metanalysis by Grissom et al. (2021). Grissom et al. (2021) defined equity as “the fair, just, and nondiscriminatory treatment of all students, the removal of barriers, the provision of resources and supports, and the creation of opportunities with the goal of promoting equitable outcomes” (p. xx).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is an act of the United States Congress enacted in 2015 that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965).
ESSA expanded district and state flexibility to use federal funds on a wider range of actions to best meet the needs of traditionally underserved students.

First Generation Segregation

A type of segregation that creates segregated learning spaces at the school level. This type of segregation is often associated with the historical timeframe of before and shortly after the *Brown v. Board* supreme court case.

Global Majority

The selected term used in my positionality statement to emphasize movement away from Whiteness as a norm against which all other races and ethnicities are measured and toward a more truthful narrative of people of color as the world’s majority.

Minoritized

Intentionally used in this study to reiterate the dominance of Whiteness in learning spaces (particularly AP classes), its historical implications and its continuation today. The use of minoritized shifts away from the normality of Whiteness, as the usual term “minority” infers that White is the majority against which the minority is measured. Minoritized is also a better representation of the uniqueness of place, as not all races and ethnicities are represented in ways that imply they are the minority in number, but may still be excluded from opportunity. This term also helps to reiterate the intersectionality that is present within identity as a minoritized individual.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The No Child Left Behind Act was an act of the United States Congress in 2001 that reinstated the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB expanded
the federal role in education, attaching school financial supports to metrics heavily based on standardized assessments of student achievement.

*Open Enrollment*

This study utilizes the term open enrollment as it is defined in recent legislation introduced in the United States Congress as part of the Advanced Coursework Equity Act in 2021. This legislation defined open enrollment as “an enrollment mechanism through which any student that chooses to enroll in an advanced course or program is allowed to do so, without regard to previous academic performance or test scores” (p. 5).

*Opportunity gap*

A way of measuring academic performance that shifts metrics away from student outcomes to educational systems inputs. Opportunity gaps refer to the conditions of students’ lives both outside of and inside of school communities that withhold necessary resources that a student needs and deserves to thrive in an academic setting and in life as a democratic citizen.

*Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)*

A set of standards considered to be a guide and evaluative tool for educational leaders (primarily principals and assistant principals). These standards were created in 2015 by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration and were formally known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. Ten standards are included that highlight the following areas as being critical for educational leaders to exhibit in their leadership: (1) Mission, Vision, and Core Values; (2) Ethics and Professional Norms; (3) Equity and Cultural Responsiveness; (4) Curriculum, Instruction,
and Assessment; (5) Community of Care and Support for Students; (6) Professional Capacity of School Personnel; (7) Professional Community for Teachers and Staff; (8) Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community; (9) Operations and Management; and (10) School Improvement (Gorton & Alston, 2019).

Second Generation Segregation

A type of segregation within a school that separates student groups at the class level. This type of segregation has frequently been referred to as tracking, as it often results from ability grouping students. This study focuses on the racialized nature of second-generation segregation.

Segregation

The racial and socioeconomic separation of students. This separation most often follows along housing lines, which overlaps often with school attendance boundaries. In this study, I focus specifically on the racialization of segregated learning spaces.

Students of Color

Refers to students who are not White. In this study, this label can include Black and/or African American, Hispanic and/or Latinx, indigenous, and multiracial students. Importantly, this term is not intended to be referenced against the term White as the standard category.

Conclusion

In this initial chapter, I summarized the literature and research design that guided this research study. A vast amount of literature speaks to the significant and growing influence of school principals as well as the large gaps in access and success in AP
courses that exist between students of color and their White peers. Notwithstanding this research, there remains a gap in a collective understanding of how principals’ understandings of opportunity gaps and their dispositions toward equity work leads to changes in AP participation for racially minoritized students. I put forth my suggested line of inquiry through this study as a way to better prepare and equip educational leaders and policymakers in ways that lead to more equitable and just policy, and more importantly, practice in increasing both enrollment and success in AP courses for racially minoritized students.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the extant literature that guided my approach to this research study. I begin with a review of the literature that establishes a well-documented call for a movement away from deficit-based achievement gap conceptualizations of educational excellence toward a better understanding of a more accurate approach to educational equity: closing opportunity gaps. I include background information on the racialized, spatialized, and socioeconomic nature of achievement gaps in this review. I then examine the background of and implications for the creation of Advanced Placement (AP) courses in the United States as one component of the multifaceted nature of opportunity gaps that exist. I also examine principals’ influence in American public schools and include background on effective leadership for equitable schools amidst the backdrop of a neoliberal policy context. Finally, I highlight the literature that contributed to the development of the conceptual framework that I used to guide this study.

From Achievement Gaps to Opportunity Gaps

The elusive state of the American dream (Ladson-Billings, 2009) for many is well documented throughout academic literature and generations of lived experiences. Foundational to its elusive nature is the inherently unequal educational system by which is it perpetuated. America’s public schools are more racially segregated now than they were nearly seven decades ago when the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court case was decided (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Orfield & Gordon, 2001;
Orfield & Lee, 2005; Orfield & Yun, 1999), a fact that has begun to gain traction in the mainstream media. While structures which formally and legally maintained racially segregated schools ended decades ago, a truly integrated educational system that provides high quality opportunities for all students never replaced that which Brown problematically intended to change (Fontana et al., 2020). De jure segregation has simply been replaced by de facto segregation (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). The acknowledgement of these historical and current realities of the state of educational inequality in American schools is critical to adequately unpacking the language of achievement gaps used to measure the academic progress of students. As Lewis and Diamond (2015) explained, race does not matter less than it used to, it just matters differently.

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a primary focus of education in the United States has been on closing the nation’s achievement gap, the persistent disparities in academic performance between student groups in public schools (Hardesty et al., 2014). Reform efforts to minimize achievement gaps have focused on test scores as one measure of student performance. Yet, a focus on disparities in standardized student learning outcomes rather than on the inputs that create them is problematic, presenting only one dimension of academic performance, while ignoring the complex and nuanced reality that students’ test scores vary on the basis of the learning opportunities they are afforded (Milner, 2012). Furthermore, a narrow focus on test scores as a sole indicator of achievement has led to policies and practices that create limited and deficit thinking about groups of students, their teachers, and their schools (Welner & Carter, 2013).
Persistent achievement gaps between racially and socioeconomically marginalized students and their White or more affluent peers do not reflect disparities in ability or intelligence, but disparate levels of access to the resources foundational to effective learning opportunities, such as health care, healthy food, technology (Gorski, 2018), affordable housing, and equitable school funding (Irvine, 2010; Milner, 2012). In the knowledge economy in which American society now operates, a greater reliance on knowledge generation and dissemination (Powell & Snellman, 2004) places an even more critical emphasis on ensuring that every child is prepared to succeed in such an environment.

Oakes et al. (2000) claimed that one reason “gaps” persist so significantly is that “American schools have been pressured to preserve the status quo” (p. xx). In this manner, achievement gap explanations have created a focus on student performance rather than the inequitable structures, systems, contexts, policies and practices that lead to perceived achievement gaps (Milner, 2012). Moreover, efforts that have placed limited focus on achievement gaps has moved educational change toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address long-term underlying issues (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). This short sightedness is particularly evident in leaders’ and teachers’ ideological commitments to race-neutrality that mask the role that racism and Whiteness play in the design and implementation of school improvement efforts as several scholars have indicated (Holme et al., 2013; Irby et al., 2018). The standardization of achievement gap measures has advanced a sameness agenda (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that assumes all students experience homogenous environments in which equality and equity of
opportunity are afforded to them (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Milner, 2012; Milner & Tate, 2008).

Though the assigned meaning of achievement gaps may vary, more and more scholars are beginning to include the implications of achievement gap measures in their attempts to define them without recognition of the opportunities afforded to students. Importantly, a solid understanding of what opportunity means in the context of educational achievement in the United States is needed. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), a major player in higher education admissions, connected opportunity to providing pathways to the development of human and social capital (Kirsch & Braun, 2016). Howard (2020) defined opportunity gaps as the inputs of unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities for students of color and from low-income backgrounds, while defining achievement gaps as the outputs of unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits. Lewis and Diamond (2015) used quantitative language to define achievement gaps, which they referred to as “the disparities in test scores, grade point averages, and/or high school and college completion rates between White students and Black and/or Latina/o students” (p. 2). Irvine (2010) provided an even more detailed articulation of achievement gaps as the results of other gaps that coerce people into believing that an achievement gap actually exists. Her definition of these gaps included a: teacher quality gap; teacher training gap; challenging curriculum gap; school funding gap; digital divide gap; wealth and income gap; employment gap; affordable housing gap; health care gap; nutrition gap; school integration gap; and quality childcare gap (Irvine, 2010, p. xii). As a more just
understanding of opportunity emerges, it is critical to include an examination of the foundations of its racialized nature in the United States.

**Racialized Opportunity Gaps**

Throughout the literature, various forms of racism within schools that contribute to the racialized nature of achievement and opportunity gaps in the United States are highlighted. Delpit (1995) emphasized the hidden curricula that advantages White, middle-class cultures and dismisses others. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) both identified significant evidence of racist instructional pedagogy and emphasized the systemic nature of the racist structures that created and continue to maintain oppressive educational systems. Darling-Hammond (1995) wrote in great depth of achievement and opportunity gaps as being a product of culturally insensitive assessment and exclusion from access to critical resources. Exclusion of certain groups of individuals from educational opportunity in the United States has been a part of how America has operated since its inception. However, as it pertains to educational progress, closing the racialized achievement (opportunity) gap has been a more recent central issue in American educational debates over the last fifty years (Khalifa, 2016).

While achievement gaps became a metric for educational evaluation following the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2000, the history of opportunity gaps (though not acknowledged in policy and practice) dates back to the origination of public schools as a lever for expanding educational opportunities to all. Even after the creation of public schools in the early 1900s, gaps in academic access existed among White students and Students of Color and were upheld by systemic legal structures. These inequitable
structures continued to exist in the post-\textit{Brown} era and distinctly highlight the disparities in access to educational opportunity. Lewis and Diamond (2015, p. 1) elaborated on these disparities. They noted that such a variation in student achievement “would not be noteworthy if not for the racial caste that is obvious in the data that supports it.”

Ladson-Billings (2006) first highlighted the importance of attentiveness to socio-historical factors in order to approach disparities in educational outcomes adequately and properly. She concluded that there is not as much of an achievement gap in the United States as there is, what she considered, an education debt that the educational system owes to the many students it has poorly served (2006). Ladson-Billings explained that here exists a historical debt, economic debt, sociopolitical debt, and moral debt that are both a cause and an effect of the education debt that continues to exist. Thus, the achievement gap is explained by Ladson-Billings as a logical outcome of the educational debt, or opportunity gaps, that continue to plague the nation. To ensure a better future for all students, particularly the students of color to whom the United States owes this education debt, it is critical to understand the historical inequities that have attached opportunity and academic assets to Whiteness as a societal norm (Foster, 1999; Milner, 2012).

\textit{The Normality of Whiteness in Standardized Achievement}

White students have become constructed as intellectually and academically superior to other student groups (Milner, 2012). This harmful and inaccurate rhetoric that attaches Whiteness to intelligence has prevailed throughout most of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Boykin & Noguera, 2011) and has been incorporated into achievement gap
explanations by researchers, policymakers, and educators. Other damaging and false narratives of intelligence as property of White people have articulated people of color as being a part of a “culture of anti-intellectualism” (McWhorter, 2000) that is oppositional to schooling (Ogbu, 1987). Such claims have been particularly harmful to Black citizens, who were furthermore portrayed as carrying a status of victimology in which they blame the White man for their problems (Steele, 1996). These detrimental ideas have been deeply embedded in United States history and continue to be propagated in media and popular culture (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). These harmful narratives can also vary by place in the United States, and understanding the spatialization of racism and opportunity is an important part of its intersectional nature.

**Spatialized Opportunity Gaps**

The complexity of opportunity gaps commands a deeper interrogation of causal factors than race alone. To research racialized gaps in opportunity and achievement in such an isolated manner yields inaccurate results that portray groups of individuals already oppressed in a monolithic way. Tieken (2017) defined *place* as a specific setting and *space* as its more abstracted counterpart. Tieken also referred to educational inequities as *spatialized*, as they are rooted in geography and exist across particular places. The role of space and place in academic opportunities is gaining increasing attention in research and policy, with more than two dozen different systems to classify space and place currently used by the United States government (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Tieken, 2017). Even so, reform has failed to solve gaps in opportunity that are tied to geography and remain focused on an urban/rural racial binary (Tieken, 2017). While
most students attend suburban schools (Diamond et al., 2021), 20% attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019), much of the research on opportunity gaps continues to center on low-income children of color in urban settings only and generally concludes that achievement gaps are larger in metropolitan areas with higher levels of racial and socioeconomic inequality and segregation (Drescher et al., 2022; Owens & Candipan, 2019; Reardon et al., 2019b). Furthermore, core issues of educational research like issues of race and class inequities and social mobility are believed to be urban challenges and constitute 80% of the articles published in the top five American Educational Research Association (AERA) Journals (Diamond et al., 2021). This gap in attention to nonurban educational spaces in the literature omits the lives of millions of vulnerable students, attaches dangerous stereotypes to race, place, and space, and overlooks the inequities that have existed across contexts throughout the history of schooling in the United States.

The Stanford Education Data Archive is a resource created by the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University that includes nearly 430 million standardized test scores from all public school students in the United States in grades three through eight. These scores are used to construct measures of educational opportunity and academic achievement for every community in America (Drescher et al., 2022). Test score measures are placed on a common scale to compare student achievement and learning rates nationwide, despite the fact that tests vary across states, grades, and years (Reardon et al., 2019a). In an explanation of how their data captures opportunity gaps in rural contexts, researchers at Stanford refer to these gaps as reflections of “local
inequalities in educational opportunity undergirded by differential access and exposure to resources and stressors” (Drescher et al., 2022).

In an effort to capture the wide variety of heterogeneous communities of rural America (Clark et al., 2022), patterns of variation in measures among rural school differences that include differences in student outcomes by region, relative geographic location, and characteristics of the local economy are examined (Drescher et al., 2022). The level of granularity encapsulated by this data opens the door for further research on the ways in which space and place influence educational opportunities for rural students. One major finding of Drescher et al.’s (2022) analyses to date highlights the challenges that rural districts face in providing challenging, differentiated instruction to support high-achieving students and thus continue to focus their resources on prioritizing efforts to ensure students meet a minimum level of proficiency. However, this preliminary finding requires further study with an even narrower focus on school level factors.

Diamond et al. (2021) argued that the changing nature of suburban schools and communities and the history of their creation as education spaces makes them important spaces to be studied and to expand the ways in which intersections of race, place, and inequality are understood. Just as the boundaries of rural spaces are incredibly complex, there is also no singular definition of suburbs, thus there continue to be debates about how they are defined. One definition that has been used to define suburbs as the physical space beyond a city’s boundaries, yet still within a metropolitan area (Diamond et al., 2021). This demonstrates that the way that a suburban space is defined can also follow unique characteristics of the city to which it is attached.
Suburban areas also lay claim to a historical attachment to Whiteness. Educational research has shown throughout history that White supremacy and the governmental structures of the United States created suburbs (Diamond et al., 2021; Freund, 2007). Just as certain issues of educational inequity have been attached to urban spaces, the Whiteness connected to the arrival of suburban communities throughout history should not overlook the important fact that suburbs have also been home to minoritized communities of individuals who often were removed from suburban spaces by White populations and excluded from the opportunities that were created in them. Thus, racial inequality is also built into the “bedrock of suburbia” (Diamond et al., 2021) and well-represented in the literature that describes the barriers often faced by minoritized individuals as many White families perceived their presence in suburban spaces to be threatening to White status and dominance (Dhingra, 2020; Diamond et al., 2021; Lung-Amam, 2017).

Socioeconomic Opportunity Gaps

Some scholars have argued that socioeconomic status explains, perhaps more than any other factor, the academic performance disparities between groups of students in the United States (Howard, 2020; Rothstein, 2004). Certainly, poverty has deeply rooted influences over the experiences of students in schools (Howard, 2020), but to further avoid stereotyping students, their families and their communities, one must be mindful of the additional social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that have been and continue to be at play. Schools in the United States are highly segregated by both race and income level, and measures of racial segregation and socioeconomic segregation are
highly correlated (Startz, 2020). Moreover, a significant number of educators hold deficit-based perspectives that children from low-income homes, children of color, and children who are English language learners are not succeeding in schools because of cultural deficiencies (Lindsey et al., 2013). In reality, the intersectionality of racialized, spatialized, and socioeconomic opportunity gaps is both complex and ever-changing and is evident in these deficit perspectives. Acknowledging this intersectionality is a critical part of understanding how racism, classism, sexism, and other individual and structural systems have an impact on how students of color experience school through multiple systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Howard, 2020).

Critical race theory is one approach to studying educational inequities in ways that are tied to educational inequities through geography that is well-documented in the literature and encourages an understanding of these different types of opportunity gaps as “allies in a shared struggle for educational justice” (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In other words, it is critical to avoid assigning students and their experiences to one type of oppression in a highly nuanced and unjust system. The American public school system has been highly reliant on property taxes and, therefore, property rights throughout history. In this system, those with property (especially high-value property, also often tied to Whiteness) have the “right” to a high-quality education while those who inhabit less valuable property do not have this same right. Historically, the relationship between property ownership and educational opportunity has been a racialized system of oppression that ensures people of color remain property poor and educationally underserved (Tieken, 2017). This oppressive system remains alive and well today, with
daily headlines about the unjust practices faced by people of color in the banking and real estate sectors.

While socioeconomic status varies across all racial groups in the United States, Black and Latinx families face a disproportionate number of social challenges with more individuals living in extreme poverty and with limited access to quality healthcare and other important services (Theoharis, 2009). Often, race and socioeconomic status are either used interchangeably in ways that perpetuate unfair and inaccurate stereotypes of students or race is dismissed entirely in leaders’ perceptions of opportunity. Individuals who subscribe to a colorblind approach to discussing educational opportunity (Milner, 2012) become fixated on deficit narratives of students living in poverty. Gorski (2018) advised against this approach laced in complacency and ignorance of reality. He suggested there is “no path to equity that does not include a direct confrontation with inequity” (p. 102). Embracing the harsh and unjust realities faced by low-income and students of color is necessary to making appropriate and adequate changes.

In a similar fashion to the manner in which Irvine (2010) articulated the different dimensions of educational opportunity gaps, Gorski (2018) outlined additional disparities in access that children from low-income backgrounds experience. These disparities include: preschool; well-funded schools; adequately resourced schools; shadow education; school support services; affirming school environments; high academic expectations; well-paid, certified, and experienced teachers; student-centered, higher-order curricula and pedagogies; opportunities for family involvement; and instructional technologies. While many of these disparities are macrolevel policy issues, Howard
(2020) pointed out that focusing on macrolevel structure must happen alongside microlevel interactions in order to more accurately understand the complexity of why gaps in educational outcomes exist as they do.

**Advanced Coursework in American Public Schools**

It is well-documented that the strongest predictor of whether a student will be successful in college is the degree to which they experienced a rigorous course of study in high school (Adelman, 2006; Theokas & Saaris, 2013). It is also evident that students of color are shut out on varying levels and in multiple ways from accessing rigorous opportunities as compared to their White peers, particularly those from middle-income socioeconomic backgrounds. These gaps in opportunity to experience both access to and success in advanced classes have been assigned multiple labels throughout the literature, including high-end opportunity gaps (Theokas & Saaris, 2013) and excellence gaps (Plucker et al., 2010). They span across and through different contexts, though they tend to follow along the lines of racial and socioeconomic status throughout the spaces and places they inhabit. This is arguably due to the meritocratic nature of the systems and structures that maintain the gaps. In this section, I highlight literature that illustrates why advanced courses are coveted opportunities often hoarded by middle- and upper-class White communities in the United Status and why closing these gaps is significant to both minoritized students and the society in which the critical human capital they possess has been excluded.

**Benefits of Advanced Coursework in a Meritocratic Society**
In schools, the harmful stereotypes experienced by students of color are reinforced when students are racially tracked. This tracking occurs as a result of the racist structures built into the policies and practices that are understood and implemented by individuals who hold great control over the opportunities offered or withheld from minoritized students. In these instances, students often believe that advanced classes are reserved for the smartest and hardest working among their peer group (Milner, 2012; Tyson, 2011; Tyson, 2013).

Given the aforementioned attachment of Whiteness to these traits, advanced courses often become operationalized as White spaces. Often coveted as the gold standard of curricular offerings, the Advanced Placement (AP) program is the oldest and largest program in the United States offering college-like experiences to high school students. It is larger than the International Baccalaureate program and serves more students than dual enrollment programs (Theokas & Saaris, 2013), which vary based on local school contexts. Aside from being touted as a meritocratic symbol of excellence, AP courses help build important student skills, develop student self-image (Lee et al., 2010), increase college retention and completion and career compensation (Santoli, 2002). AP classes also offer significant opportunities for students who complete the course and exam to earn college credit. This element of a potential financial leg up could serve many low-income and/or first-generation college attendees, but as widely reported, has not done so for many of the students that could benefit.

AP has become a symbol of excellence for many school systems. Just as many parents equate high-quality schools with high scores on standardized tests (LaCour et al.,
schools that offer more AP courses tend to be viewed as institutions that better prepare students for college (Starr, 2017). Schools with greater numbers of non-White and Asian students who take AP classes and pass AP tests are viewed as institutions which promote equity (Starr, 2017). While enrollment and test-passing numbers are important indicators of opportunity in a school, Starr (2017) argued that these are first level indicators of equity and closing actual gaps in opportunity and outcomes requires a much deeper understanding of how AP classes are administered and to whom they are offered. AP course offerings vary both across and within districts and individual schools. The microlevel policies that influence these offerings are resource dependent and, furthermore, depend on changing the mindset and biases of those in positions to interpret and create policy. Because it is mostly tied to standardized achievement measures, funding often becomes the focus of school and district level leadership. When a standardized metric focused on a baseline of achievement becomes the focus of schools and district, identifying ways to expand AP opportunities to minoritized students often becomes less of a priority, if a priority at all.

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC) Schools of Opportunity project (2019) implemented an audit system that identifies public high schools that have resisted this isolated focus on test scores and have prioritized creating strong and equitable opportunities for all students to learn. The schools identified by these measures were found across geographic variances and each school ensured that students were not only held to high academic standards, but were supported in meeting those standards (LaCour et al., 2017). In the rubric for measuring this progress, NEPC included the following
guiding questions for schools to reflect on: 

(1) *Do students at this school have access to broad and meaningful learning experiences?*  
(2) *Do all students have access to honors, IB, and AP courses? Has the school abolished low track classes with low expectations?* 

(NEPC, 2019). These questions place the impetus for reflecting on what enriching opportunities mean and look like for school leaders. This project provides a starting point for identifying factors to consider as a guide to closing gaps in access to AP courses, but still requires acceptance and implementation in policy and practice.

**Advanced Coursework Opportunity Gaps**

A long history of inequity follows the origination of AP in the United States. The AP program was originally designed for high-achieving students at high-status schools in the United States as part of an effort to create an academic elite following the launch of Sputnik and a heightened need for the “best and brightest” in leadership (Schneider, 2009, p. 813). It was also clearly expressed by Dudley (1958) that, in 1951, “the basic philosophy of the Advanced Placement Program is simply that all students are not created equal” (Schneider, 2009, p. 817). In an attempt to change this racist and classist narrative, the College Board attempted to highlight gaps in enrollment in AP classes despite student ability, explaining a “right to rigor” on behalf of any student who is “academically ready for the rigor of AP” (College Board, 2014, p. 28). However, the original sentiment expressed by Dudley (1958) continues to play out accordingly with too many low-income and students of color continuing to miss out on opportunities to participate (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).
The biases of leaders and the communities they serve are often evident in their definitions of what is meant in their local contexts by the College Board’s terminology of being “ready for the rigor” of AP coursework. Studies find that the process through which students are assigned to courses is complex and can include localized policy factors such as teacher recommendations, course scheduling, and parental requests and demands as well as student socioeconomic status and race (Tyson, 2013). Every year, millions of high school students from low-income and minoritized backgrounds are denied access to AP opportunities, often because their schools either lack the resources to offer AP courses, their talents have not been recognized by their teachers in the form of recommendations for AP courses, their test scores fall below a created benchmark, or for some other reason (Oakes et al., 2000; Solórzano & Ornealas, 2004; Tyson, 2013). Additional reasons for the exclusion of students of color are often a result of school or classroom level policies and prerequisites.

Policies created at both district and school levels with regard to AP admission and implementation far too often serve as barriers to minoritized students’ access and success in AP classes. Large resistance is often faced by schools (particularly in racially diverse communities) which attempt to remove such barriers. Claims of affecting program fidelity and watering down curricular challenge plague the narratives faced by schools and students of color who attempt to gain entry into the opportunities these courses provide, despite these allegations being widely disputed throughout performance on student exams and research.
The Education Trust (EdTrust) examined trends of Black and Latinx student participation in advanced courses. In a recent analysis of “fair representation”\(^1\) (Theokas & Saaris, 2013) of Black and Latinx students in advanced coursework opportunities\(^2\), three major findings were reported that demonstrate how schools and districts continue to exclude Black and Latinx students from opportunities to enroll in AP classes despite their proven ability to succeed: (1) Black and Latinx students are successful in advanced courses when given the opportunity; (2) Despite these proven successes, Black and Latinx students are still not fairly represented in advanced courses; and (3) These inequities are largely due to (a) schools that serve mostly Black and Latinx students not enrolling as many students in advanced courses as schools that serve fewer of these students and b) schools – particularly racially diverse schools – deny Black and Latinx students access to advanced courses (Patrick et al., 2020). Based on these findings, EdTrust (2013) provided practical and immediate suggestions for state leaders and policymakers which incorporate suggested resources and supports for students to both access AP courses and succeed in them after they enroll. It is up to individual districts and school level leaders and educators, however, to ensure that these suggestions are put into place.

Kolluri (2018) conducted an extensive literature review that sought to investigate whether the AP program has achieved its dual goals of equal access and effectiveness.

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1 EdTrust refers to the term *fair representation* as a similar share of enrollment by Black and Latinx students in advanced courses as their total enrollment in a school.

2 Data for this analysis were obtained from the U.S. Department of Education’s 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).
Kolluri indicated three possible perspectives of why and how the opportunity gaps within advanced coursework continue to exist despite research that supports minoritized students’ success: (1) use of advanced courses to reinforce current social hierarchies, (2) lack of effectiveness of advanced coursework curriculum, and (3) lack of preparation of Black and Hispanic students for advanced courses (i.e., exclusion from preparatory classes in middle school). Kolluri (2018) also highlighted the fact that the existing literature on AP directly correlates with historical debates on educational inequality, primarily regarding the role of student families, schools and social structures. These debates launched primarily following the release of the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) which focused on a correlation between academic disparities and family characteristics and those of in-school experiences.

Often, Black and Hispanic students are denied access to advanced courses simply by the school they attend (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Cisneros et al., 2014; Iatarola et al., 2012; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). The Education Trust (2013) examined the equitability of AP access both nationally and school by school. The study accounted for school-level differences in demographics, participation rates, and program size. The expectation for the enrollment trends studied was that enrollment would be proportional to total school enrollments demographically speaking. The nationwide study identified over 600,000 students who would participate in AP courses if they were enrolled at the same rate as their White peers within their school. Of the approximately 600,000 students missing from AP enrollments, 467,496 were low income, 89,025 identified as Black, 3,301 identified as American Indian, and 54,623 identified as
Hispanic. This data reveals that the real advanced course opportunity gap lies not between schools, but within them (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

**Second Generation Segregation**

The idea of separate being inherently unequal that stemmed from the *Brown v. Board* case ruling in 1954 has proven to be especially true when it comes to equity of access to advanced coursework enrollment. The inequities tied to segregated learning spaces is an important factor in understanding how resources have historically been allocated for advanced learning opportunities both across schools and within them. Two forms of segregation exist among and within American schools: first- and second-generation segregation. First generation segregation is generally associated with a historical timeframe before *Brown v. Board* and occurs at the school level (Brooks et al., 2013; Kluger, 2004). Second generation segregation occurs within schools (most often those that are racially diverse) and has been referred to as “forms of racial segregation that are a result of school practices such as tracking, ability grouping and the misplacement of students in special education classes” (Spring, 2006, p. 83). In other words, second generation segregation operates as a form of institutional racism in American education (Brooks et al., 2013).

Racialized tracking is another way in which the attribute of intelligence is channeled to White students as Whiteness becomes projected as the standard for success in AP in diverse schools where they dominate the advanced classes that are offered (Tyson, 2013). It is well documented across the literature that these racial boundaries within racially diverse schools are especially difficult to cross when students are highly
tracked. As we are reminded by Tyson (2013), advanced classes not only become seen as the domain of whites in these instances, but non-White students often feel uncomfortable crossing these institutionally imposed racial boundaries. AP programs, specifically, have been considered “overt manifestations of second-generation segregation” (Singleton & Linton, 2006). In these programs, White students learn of their privilege and superiority while students of color learn that they are inferior academically and, in some cases, socially (Brooks et al., 2013).

One study of student placement in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools district in Charlotte, North Carolina revealed that, even when Black and White students are similarly high achieving, Black students are not placed in advanced classes at the same rate as White students (Mickelson, 2005). Most of the research on second-generation segregation has focused on teachers and classrooms, with little focus on the perceptions and actions of school leaders in regard to such matters (Brooks et al., 2013). Fully desegregating schools in ways that incorporate a full elimination of these ideas is one intervention that has never received full and sustained hypothesis testing in educational research (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Principals often have the positional authority to assert influence on both the formal and informal microlevel structures that allow second-generation segregation to persist in their schools (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Theoharis, 2009).

**The Influence of School Principals in Neoliberal Contexts**

Tackling the breadth of issues that creates opportunity gaps involves broad, sweeping, and systemic changes in policy and practice. However, enacting the systemic
changes needed requires a close analysis of the role of the individual within the micro contexts that maintain oppressive systems. It is widely acknowledged that school principals have a profound impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Grissom et al., 2021) and are best positioned to promote school-level reforms (Louis et al., 2010). Principals are often the most knowledgeable about resources and are best positioned to promote and support school reform efforts (Khalifa, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

The principal is the most recognizable leadership position in a school and is also a position that is most empowered by district policy while also being held the most accountable for progress or lack thereof (Khalifa, 2016). Given the sizeable influence of the principal’s position in school communities, it is critical to better understand the beliefs and assumptions regarding race and opportunity that underlie principals’ practices. However, it is not leadership practices themselves but the manner in which leaders apply them within their unique environments that actually determine the degree to which they influence student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Until recently, the most notable research study that demonstrated the significance of school leaders on student learning outcomes was produced by Leithwood et al. (2004). This study launched additional studies that examined the influence of school principals during a nearly two-decade timeframe and amidst a rapidly shifting educational policy landscape (Grissom et al., 2021). Changes in educational policy have had important implications for public school principals. An era of standards and high-stakes accountability has been ushered in since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. Market-based reforms and efforts to privatize public education have shifted
professionalism in the field from a public service focus to a focus on competition and entrepreneurialism (Horsford et al., 2020; McGhee & Anderson, 2019). As such, the principalship studied by Leithwood and colleagues in 2004 had significantly different expectations of principals than what is expected of principals today. In fact, a recent metanalysis conducted by Grissom et al. (2021) included a foreword on the increasing influence of principals: “based on research since 2000, the impact of an effective principal has likely been understated, with impacts being both greater and broader than previously believed: greater in the impact on student achievement and broader in affecting other important outcomes” (p. XIV).

The idea that principal influence has been understated is supported in this metanalysis across six studies of data that included more than 22,000 principals in four states (Grissom et al., 2021). Major policy changes taken into consideration in the analysis of these studies included widespread adoption of high-stakes accountability systems focused on student achievement (emphasis on achievement gaps), spread of public and private school choice options, and a heightened attention to equity as a stand-alone policy and professional goal (Grissom et al., 2021). These changes have shifted how principals understand their role as leaders in their school communities and the outcomes by which their leadership performance is judged. Despite changes to the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL), principals often also find

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3 In 2015, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards changed and Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) were put forth by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. Changes to these standards include a heightened focus on equity for evaluating principal performance.
themselves competing for student enrollment and funding in the school choice arena (Grisom et al. 2021; Jabbar, 2015), which may shift a leader’s priorities away from necessary actions for equity and toward maintaining the status quo as referenced by Oakes et al. (2000). Of course, the nature of principal competition is nuanced and highly dependent on localized contexts.

**Effective School Leadership for Equity**

For nearly fifty years, educational researchers have placed greater emphasis on the role that schools leaders play in creating effective schools for diverse populations of students. Notably, Edmonds (1979) and Brookover and Lezotte (1979) began the inquiry into the notion of effective schools for changing student populations. They emphasized the importance of instructional leaders. However, following the enactment of No Child Left Behind, educational scholars sharpened their focus on the central role that school principals play in closing achievement gaps (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Reyes et al., 1999; Skrla et al., 2000).

The profound impact of school leadership highlighted in studies during this timeframe includes specific aspects of schooling over which educational leaders have the agency to influence. These aspects include organizational structures, communication strategies, school culture, instructional assignments, professional development opportunities and planning, finance issues, and resource allocation (Brooks et al., 2013; Brown, 2005). Principals have agency (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) to positively affect educational change and increase equity (Theoharis, 2009), as they structure schools, classes, teacher and student assignments, and impact school culture. Recent scholarship
has started to make a clearer connection to the role of a principal on student learning experiences and outcomes. School leaders’ effectiveness has been found to be crucial to improving student learning, with the greatest impact of leadership effectiveness being found in schools with the greatest need (Bryk, 2010; Louis et al., 2010).

The Grissom et al. (2021) study included seven major findings on the effectiveness and influence of school principals. Of the seven major findings of these analyses, four findings directly correlate to the design and rationale for this study:

1. Principals have substantively important effects that extend beyond student achievement.

2. Principals must develop an equity lens, particularly as they are called on to meet the needs of growing numbers of marginalized students.

3. Principals are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, but representation gaps with students are growing.

4. Research on school principals is highly variable, and the field requires new investment in a rigorous, cohesive body of research.

Grissom et al. (2021) explained principal contributions to student learning by identifying what they consider to be three overlapping realms of skills and knowledge that principals need in order to be successful in meeting the new demands placed on them as professionals: instruction, people, and the organization. Additional research on school leader effectiveness has drawn attention to the importance of leaders’ ability to adapt these skills and other leadership practices to suit their immediate contexts (Hallinger, 2011; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2019).
The ability to adapt critical leadership skills in varying contexts and in ways that result in equitable outcomes lies within a school leader’s skills, orientations, behaviors (Grissom et al., 2021), and dispositions (Johnson & Uline, 2005). Furthermore, principals’ behaviors must also be driven by understandings of the complexity of practices, policies, and the needs of community members in order to lead in ways that close opportunity gaps (LaCour et al., 2017). Leithwood et al. (2005) articulated the adaption of leadership practices as a need for developing leaders with “large repertoires of practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as needed” (p. xx). Evidence from recent studies also argues for a continued reorientation of the work of school principals toward educational equity and for school districts to prioritize the needs of increasingly diverse student backgrounds (Grissom et al., 2021). Each of these critical attributes of school principals requires changes in daily practice to transform the oppressive structures that stand as barriers to outcomes that are both equitable and focus on excellence for all students.

Decades of good leadership in a high-stakes accountability era have also created unjust and inequitable schools (Theoharis, 2007). According to Irby et al. (2018), school tracking, opportunity hoarding, and the threat and reality of White middle class flight from schools and their districts pose barriers to sustained improvement efforts (especially those tied to equitable change) (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Wells & Crain, 1997). To address gaps in opportunity to access AP courses specifically, educators must be willing to change the way they think about intelligence and students from low-
income and minoritized backgrounds (Tyson, 2013) before they are able to effectively begin this type of change.

Given that schools may lose funding if students do not meet certain accountability measures, the idea of prioritizing advanced challenges becomes “lost in the fray” (Schneider, 2009). This is one of many reasons that changes to principals’ daily practices (especially White principals’ practices) require a critical examination of “biases, privileges, assumptions, worldviews, inconsistencies, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression” (Milner, 2020, p. 2). Hinnant-Crawford (2020) highlighted the fact that, just because leadership is not the origin of the (opportunity) gaps, does not absolve leaders from their responsibility to eliminate them, and a good starting point for this important work lies in the important influence leaders have on growing the consciousness of teachers.

In this fashion, a principal’s willingness to explicitly challenge and reject deficit models of explaining differences in student achievement has been argued to be the single biggest factor in the academic success of minoritized students (Beard, 2018; Shields et al., 2004, p. 4). Administrators sometimes unwittingly reproduce conditions of hierarchy and oppression, especially by fostering compliant thinking instead of critical reflection (Riehl, 2000). When willing to do so, principals are in a prime position to orchestrate a context with a culture and climate focused on equity and justice (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Furthermore, evidence has suggested that the implementation of cultural responsiveness may be short-lived unless promoted by the principal (Khalifa, 2016) and that, order to restructure for a truly integrated, equitable learning environment in which
both equity and excellence are the goal for all students, “strong, focused, insightful skilled leadership” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. XX) is required of the principal.

**Principals’ Understandings of their Influence in Leading for Equitable Outcomes**

Assessing a principal’s influence based on behaviors alone results in a partial conclusion of what makes a leader effective for leading equitable student outcomes. These behaviors are driven by principal understandings of their role and influence as well as mindsets toward their leadership approaches, particularly their leadership of equity work. Principals’ dispositions, or the attributes that enable principals to develop positive relationships with stakeholders, positive school culture, and affect student achievement (Wasonga, 2009), are a helpful concept to consider in identifying how principals perceive the work that they do.

Research has demonstrated the influence (often positive) that principal dispositions have on engagement in equitable leadership practices (Brooks et al., 2007; Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2021). When specifically examining a principal’s approach to closing opportunity gaps within their school, their equity consciousness (Lindsey et al., 2005; McKenzie et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2004) must be accounted for to examine their disposition. Flores and Gunzenhauser (2021) drew from a sample of 22 interviews with principals and school district leaders to inquire how school leaders define opportunity and achievement gaps and how they use data to craft questions, problem solve, and position themselves to achieve equity-oriented goals. Their findings suggest that educational leaders’ dispositions toward equity work and their school context most strongly
influenced their interpretation of how to approach closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

Other research has highlighted principal educational equity mindsets, which have been found to provide insight into the philosophy they use to guide their work, their priorities, and their anticipated actions (Nadelson et al., 2020). Nadelson et al. (2020) defined an equity mindset as “the embrace of a philosophy that motivates engagement in actions that increase opportunities for all students to achieve their highest capacity” (p. xx). Included in the ideas that influenced this definition of equity mindset is the notion that an individual’s mindset is reflective of individual identities, how they perceive themselves, their environments, and responsibilities, and how that perception influences interactions with others (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995).

This definition of an equity mindset was applied to an analysis of 128 principals and their commitment to equity work. Personal, professional, and school variables were considered in this analysis that sought to identify the attributes of a school leader with an education equity mindset, how those attributes are related, and how the mindset manifests in principals’ work. Nadelson et al. (2020) argued that school principals’ expression of education equity mindsets manifests in their engagement in instructional leadership, transformative leadership, collaborative leadership, influence on organizational culture and climate, advocacy for educational equity, and participation in evidence-based decision-making. These manifestations were incorporated into the data analysis, and findings from this study and led to identifying a correlation between the ways principals actually spend their time and their educational equity mindset. School leaders who
understood the importance of advocating for educational equity were more likely to intentionally drive their prioritization of time by analyzing student data with the lens of addressing and eliminating marginalization within their school.

Principals’ positions have been proven to influence organizational culture and climate. When encouraging the critical consciousness of teachers (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020), principals must also put forth their own reflection and critical examination of the policies and practices they put forth for equitable outcomes for all students (Furman, 2012). Given that individual actions are grounded in unique and personal experiences, interpretations, and understandings but also exist in a more collective history with others (Dillard, 1995), a principal’s understanding of the individual and collective structures that show up as racism in their school context is paramount to closing opportunity gaps for racially minoritized students. In other words, in order to reduce the barriers faced by these students in ways that are within a principal’s sphere of influence, principals must have some working knowledge of why disadvantageous conditions exist for certain students (DeMatthews, 2018). The way that this working knowledge becomes actualized as culturally responsive school leadership, on the other hand, is highly contextualized. For this reason, viewing a principal’s effectiveness at closing opportunity gaps must also take into consideration the historical, social, and political contexts in which principals operate.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of a study has been described as the researcher’s understanding of how the research problem will be best explored and is represented as a
system of concepts, assumptions, and beliefs that support and guide the research design and methodology (Marshall et al., 2022; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As can be seen in Figure 2.1, my synthesis of the literature resulted in my conceptualizing of the existence and perpetuation of opportunity gaps as resulting from three primary drivers that are intricately connected: people, policies, and practices. The development of conceptual frameworks is also largely based on experiences and literature. I employed the concepts of three primary theoretical frameworks in addition to the literature and my conceptualization of the problem as a researcher to create the conceptual framework for this study.

The first of these theories, the Opportunity Gap Framework, has primarily been used to help teachers make sense of their work in ways that take into account the mechanisms, practices, policies, and experiences that influence students’ learning opportunities. The framework focuses, specifically, on how teachers think about and conceptualize their work to center opportunity over achievement outcomes (Milner, 2012). The framework is grounded in critical race theory and it acts as an invitation for teachers to engage in mindset shifts in how they view students as learners. Five interconnected evaluative areas are included in Milner’s Opportunity Gap Framework: (1) Reject colorblindness; (2) Understand cultural conflicts; (3) Recognize the myth of meritocracy; (4) Disrupt low expectations and deficit mindsets; and (5) Context-neutral mindsets and practices. While this framework has been frequently used to support teachers in developing more equitable practices, I have not been able to identify any studies to date that apply it to principal practices and mindsets. Investigating these areas
with regard to principals is critical given that principals’ effects on students come largely through their effects on teachers and how they create appropriate conditions for teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021).

Similarly, Gay (2010) pointed out that culturally responsive teaching is an important part of solving the challenges faced by minoritized students but that it alone would not eliminate opportunity gaps. As Gay pointed out, all aspects of education systems must be culturally responsive in order to completely close opportunity gaps, including but not limited to funding, policymaking, and administration. For this reason, culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) was developed as a working theory in the field in response to a lack of progress in closing opportunity gaps for minoritized students despite widespread applications of instructional, transformational, and transactional leadership models by principals to respond to student needs (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasized four primary behaviors of culturally responsive school leaders: (1) critically self-reflects on leadership behaviors; (2) develops culturally responsive teachers; (3) promotes a culturally responsive/inclusive school environment; and (4) engages students, parents, and indigenous contexts. These four behaviors were incorporated into the development of the conceptual framework, particularly to address the human aspect of what contributes to the perpetuation of racialized opportunity gaps. I refer to the human aspect as “people” in Figure 2.1.
Finally, to capture the spatialization of opportunity gaps, I incorporated place-conscious leadership into the construction of the conceptual framework. The understanding of place is an important part of more fully understanding contexts and the relationships that inhabit them (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003a). Budge (2006) proposed six habits of place to serve as a tool for examining rural schools and communities specifically: (1) connectedness; (2) development of identity and culture; (3) interdependence with the land; (4) spirituality; (5) ideology and politics; and (6) activism and civic engagement. While these habits of place can be applied to all settings, including suburban and urban, I took heed of the fact that rural communities have historically been
underrepresented in the literature and considered this gap in the research as an additional factor in my research design.

In Table 2.1, entitled *Aspects of Theories Incorporated into Research Design*, I list the major aspects of each of these three theoretical framings that were utilized in the design of the conceptual framework and subsequent research design. Each theory contributes to the interconnectedness of opportunity gaps in education that are racialized, spatialized, and socioeconomic in nature.

**Table 2.1**

*Aspects of Theories Incorporated into Research Design*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Major Aspects Included in Research Design</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Gap Framework</td>
<td>Reject color blindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Milner, 2012)</td>
<td>Understand cultural conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Grounded in Critical Race Theory)</td>
<td>Recognize the myth of meritocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disrupt low expectations and deficit mindsets</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counter context-neutral mindsets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culturally Responsive School Leadership</td>
<td>Exhibits critical self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Khalifa, 2016)</td>
<td>Promotes culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotes culturally responsive and inclusive school environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engages students and parents in community contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-Conscious Leadership</td>
<td>Situate learning within encompasses community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Budge, 2006)</td>
<td>Identify challenges in local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Gruenewald, 2003)</td>
<td>Address challenges in local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration with local stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem-Solving with local stakeholders</td>
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</table>
Conclusion

In this chapter, I shared the extant literature that guided my approach to this research study. Importantly, I highlighted the people, policies, and practices that perpetuate opportunity gaps faced by racially minoritized students in the American public schools. Moreover, I included background on the racialized, spatialized, and socioeconomic nature of achievement gaps in this review. Each of these components were applied in tandem with aspects of the Opportunity Gap Framework (Milner, 2012), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa, 2016), and Place-Conscious Leadership to develop and share the conceptual framework guiding this study. As I developed this study, the conceptual framework played a continuous and critical role in research design and methodology.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this chapter, I discuss the research design and methods that were used in this study. Foundational to the design of this research is an acknowledgement of my positionality as a researcher. For this reason, I begin this chapter by sharing my researcher positionality and epistemological approaches. I then provide an explanation of my research problem and discuss my rationale for the decision to conduct a qualitative multiple case study to answer my research questions. I follow this rationale by sharing my site and processes for sample selection, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, I highlight the limitations of the study design.

Research Design

Positionality Statement and Epistemological Approaches

It is not possible to fully capture my identity as a researcher in this singular positionality statement. The manner in which I move through the world is both the same and ever changing from moment to moment. I find myself in cognitive tension when I reflect on my own experiences and compare them to others.’ As a White, cisgender, able-bodied female in the United States, I experience systems every single day designed for people just like me, despite a truth that I am like no one else. My embodiment of attributes that seem surface level to some (e.g., mother, sister, friend, daughter, wife, graduate student, first generation doctoral student, educational practitioner and scholar, teacher, leader, Christian who doesn’t believe in the current prescription of religion) implicates a much deeper sense of oppression for others.
The personal investment I have in this research topic is rooted in my experiences as an educational practitioner and my own schooling experiences before I began my doctoral journey. As a teacher in a global majority and low-income urban high school in Charlotte, North Carolina, I worked both for and against a system that was not designed to maximize the highest potential of each of my students. It took some time for me to realize this uncomfortable truth. I invested deeply in building relational capacity with my students and worked tirelessly to make their talents known all while celebrating benchmark metrics in a standardized system that did just the opposite.

I grew up in a small, rural town in North Carolina, where one public high school was attended by all and no private schools existed for White and/or affluent parents to opt into seeking “better” than their local public school. My schooling experience was nearly a 50/50 racialized split between students of color (specifically Black and/or African American students in this case) and White students. I witnessed the oppressive experiences of my peers of color without the language to call out what felt wrong in how schooling functioned at the time. It wasn’t until junior high school that I started to wonder why I was being separated from my peers of color as we were tracked and what I did to end up on the track that I did. The impact of the truth that, for the most part, I was born White, became known to me much later in life.

My practitioner experiences took place within a much different educational setting in a large, urban district in the American south. I spent hundreds of hours deeply engrossed in analyzing middle and high school master schedules as a district leader, or as I call them “blueprints of school culture.” The data I analyzed on a daily basis was
riddled with inequities. I needed to know if this was a universal truth for students of color and economically disadvantaged students across our nation and, if so, what was taking place to alleviate it. I am fortunate enough to say that this desire to know more and do better is rooted in the privileged ability to begin and complete a PhD program.

Because I exist in this position of privilege in nearly all situations and yet face barriers to progress in others, and because I am a human being with complicated emotions, feelings, and belief systems engrained in my own subconscious, I need outside assistance in expanding my thinking about what each of these aspects of my existence means and how they show up in my research. For this reason, I used Richard Milner’s (2007) Researcher Positionality Framework throughout the design of this qualitative study. The Researcher Positionality Framework is grounded in research on the color and culture line and critical race theory and includes four major domains for ongoing inquiry throughout my research: (1) researching the self, (2) researching the self in relation to others, (3) engaging in reflection and representation, and (4) shifting from the self to the system. These domains enable my research to better prioritize the well-being of the communities and people involved in this study and acknowledge the multiple roles, identities, positions that I, as a researcher, and the participants bring to the research process (Alridge, 2003; Chapman, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Milner, 2007; Tillman, 2002). The domains also emphasize the importance of contextualizing and expanding my individual consciousness to take into consideration historical, political, social, economic, racial, and cultural realities on a broader scale (Milner, 2007).
Epistemology and Research Paradigm. Merriam (2009) emphasized the importance of researchers identifying and monitoring subjectivities in relation to their own interests and the theoretical framework of a study. Ladson-Billings (2000) argued that epistemologies include both ways of knowing and systems of knowing the world. Milner’s (2007) Researcher Positionality Framework provided a tool to look more deeply and broadly at how I consistently consider how I exist within racialized systems of knowing and how I experience the world. Milner captured his framework’s purpose by explaining that it helps minimize the dangers of the seen (dangers that can explicitly emerge as a result of the decisions a researcher makes), unseen (dangers that are implicit, covert, or invisible in the research process), and unforeseen (dangers that are unanticipated in the research process based on decisions made by a researcher. (p. XX). As a researcher, I applied a constructivist epistemological approach to my investigations in this study. The definition of constructivism under which I classify my ways of engaging with knowledge is “meaning is made individually and in a social collective with no single, observable reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9).

My personal research paradigm falls within a critical interpretivism consideration. My research centers on educational inequities that result from the historical construction and implications of schooling as a societal reproducer. I approach my research with the belief that the purpose of educational research is to critique and change power relations in the structures and practices of education systems. In examining opportunity gaps, specifically those in access to and success in AP classes, the purpose of my research is to identify barriers and disrupt potential systems that are structured for the interests of some
members and classes of society and perpetually exclude others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) from these opportunities.

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodological Approach**

The purpose of this research study is to better understand how high school principals’ leadership practices contribute to access to and success in Advanced Placement (AP) courses for racially minoritized students by examining how principals perceive opportunity gaps in their school and how this perception connects to their leadership actions. The research questions that guided the design of this study are:

1) *What is the role of principals’ leadership practices in creating access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses for racially minoritized students?*

2) *How do principals perceive opportunity gaps that exist for racially minoritized students in their school?*

3) *In what ways do principals’ perceptions of opportunity gaps in their school connect to their leadership practices?*

To answer these questions, I adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methodology was most appropriate for this study, as I sought to understand the meaning that principals (and other school community members) constructed of a particular phenomenon in their school setting and how they make sense of their own experiences and those of others (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2006).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified four characteristics that are key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: (1) The focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; (2) The researcher is the primary instrument of data
collection and analysis; (3) The process is inductive; and (4) The product is richly
descriptive (p. 15). In Table 3.1, I demonstrate the application of these characteristics to
the design of this qualitative study. In the left column, I list each of Merriam and
Tisdell’s (2016) key characteristics of qualitative research. In the right column, I list the
ways in which each corresponding characteristic was applied throughout the design of
this study.

**Table 3.1.**

*Qualitative Research Characteristics and their Support in the Research Design*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Research Characteristic</th>
<th>Research Design for this Study</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| The focus is on process, understanding, and meaning. | The focus of this study is on:
  * High school *principals’ understandings* of opportunity gaps in their school.
  * High school principals’ leadership *actions and behaviors* for equity.
  * The role that principals play in creating access to advanced coursework opportunities. |
| Ongoing reflection tools were used to broaden the lenses through which I engaged as the primary researcher in this study: | I conducted all data collection and analysis for this study. |
| The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. | I utilized tools to support and strengthen my skills as a critical White researcher. |
The process is inductive. No hypothesis was tested in this study. I gathered data through semi-structured interviews, documents and archival records analysis.

The product is richly descriptive. This is a multiple case study by design to add to the validity and transferability of its findings.

Within-case sampling was employed to make for a robust data set. Snowball sampling was also used to deeply investigate each case.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also identified what they considered to be basic researcher competencies needed to ensure that each of the aforementioned research characteristics can be adequately demonstrated in research design. These competencies are: (1) a questioning stance with regard to work and life context; (2) a high tolerance for ambiguity; (3) being a careful researcher; (4) asking good questions; (5) thinking inductively; and (6) comfort with writing. I included these competencies in my ongoing reflective practice as the primary researcher for this study. Importantly, it will also be necessary to discuss these reflective exercises with a peer debriefer to uncover additional biases and assumptions.

**Rationale for Multiple Case Study**

Over time, case studies have been described using a range of understandings and terminology, including but not limited to a solid qualitative “approach” (Creswell, 2013), “design” (Tesch, 1990), and “strategy of inquiry” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Scholars have also assigned a range of definitions in an attempt to articulate the purpose and nature of case studies as they see best. Merriam (2009) defined
the case study as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system, an idea which evolved from seeing the case itself as “a single entity or unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Merriam’s view is influenced by that of Miles and Huberman (1994), who originally emphasized the importance of the “bounded context” in which the phenomenon being studied occurred (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Creswell (2013) also asserted the importance of the bounded system (the case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) and added the mechanisms by which these systems are explored over time: “through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case-based themes” (p. 97). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) added the phrase “richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon (or multiple phenomena)” to their definition of the case study (p. 51). This word choice on behalf of Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) implies the importance of building a strong description of a case or cases in order to achieve the purpose of case studies as they view to be to generate deep understandings that can inform practice, policy development, and social action.

Yin (2018) put forth criteria for exemplary case studies. These criteria include a case study’s: (1) significance; (2) completeness; (3) consideration of alternative perspectives; and (4) illustration of sufficient evidence. Importantly, cases are not monolithic. Therefore, inclusion of multiple cases is a common strategy that is applied to strengthen case study findings (Yin, 2006). According to Miles et al. (2014), more cases allow for a greater variation across cases and a more compelling interpretation (Merriam, 2009). This exploratory (Berg, 2007) multi-case study examines three cases of principals
bound by place (their schools and districts) and time (second semester of the academic year). This study design allowed for within and cross-case analyses, which provided greater attention to the highly contextualized manner of how opportunity gaps manifest for students of color in different geographic settings.

**Sample selection**

When considering how many cases to include for the design of a multiple case study, Miles et al. (2014) suggested thinking about the number of cases that will give confidence to findings. In addition to the consideration of confidence in the findings, it is also important to note that the goal of case study research is not generalizability, but transferability. Transferability, as defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), is “how (if at all) and in what ways understanding and knowledge gained from the case study can be applied to similar contexts and settings” (p. 51). I kept this in mind when I utilized purposive sampling to identify principals who were recommended based on their reputation for being change agents in their schools.

I began the sampling process by creating a list of principals for potential outreach. I strategically developed this list using three primary reference points: (1) The principal (or supervising district leader) was recommended by faculty in the Clemson University Department of Educational and Organizational Leadership Development who taught in or led the Ed.D. program; (2) The principal led a school where the College Board Honor Roll recognition was awarded to its district; or (3) The principal led a school that partners with Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS), a nonprofit organization that provides data and support for schools and districts to increase equitable enrollment in advanced
courses. Being a partner school or district with EOS indicates that some level of funding has been prioritized for increasing equitable enrollment in advanced courses. Additionally, schools that receive the College Board Honor Roll recognition have demonstrated increases in exam results while also broadening access to course enrollment. In other words, traditionally underrepresented students are both taking AP courses and passing the corresponding exams at schools with this designation. For these reasons, I utilized a school’s partnership with one of these two entities as a reference point for my outreach efforts. I obtained the list of these partnerships from each nonprofit’s website. I obtained contact information for the principal of every high school included in the list which resulted in a final list that included 72 schools, their principals and district contacts across the state of South Carolina. I prioritized outreach to principals who were recommended by Clemson University faculty first, as a realistic case study site is one where entry is possible (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

I also added the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale designation of each school to my outreach list to ensure diversity in geography among the sites of study. Locale designations were identified using the NCES locale indicator, which describes the type of area that a school is located in based on population and proximity to resources. I emailed 15 of the principals and district contacts included in this list. I include my email template for participant recruitment in the appendices (Appendix A). Ultimately, my outreach efforts yielded a total of five principals who expressed a willingness to participate in the study. As can be seen in Table 3.2, I organized my sampling identification and outreach list using a template I developed that incorporated
this information. The excerpts of the final template that I’ve chosen to include in Table 3.2 are those of the cases that I selected for the study. Principal email addresses are not included to protect anonymity of participants in this study.

Table 3.2

*Purposive Sampling Outreach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>NCES Locale</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Principal Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Suburb, Midsize/Rural, Fringe</td>
<td>Milltown High School</td>
<td>Principal Martin</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Suburb, Midsize/Rural, Fringe</td>
<td>River Birch High School</td>
<td>Principal Foster</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Suburb, Large/City, Small</td>
<td>Samuel Roberts High School</td>
<td>Dr. Johnson</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importantly, each site that was selected for this study was located near the boundaries of geographic locales as indicated by the National Center for Education Statistics locale codes and maps. I elaborate on the significance of the situatedness of each site and its impact on opportunity in Chapter 4. It is also important to note that each of the three final sites were chosen based on the amount of time that the principal participant had been leading the school (at least three years to be considered). This was critical to answer my primary research question, *What is the role of principals’ leadership practices in creating access to and success in Advanced Placement (AP) courses for racially minoritized students?* Thus, this three-year time period of principal leadership matched the quantitative data that I incorporated into the data analysis. This factor eliminated one of the five principals who demonstrated interest as a study participant, as he had only completed one year as the principal of his school.
Miles et al. (2014) emphasized that qualitative studies call for a continuous refocusing and redrawing of study parameters during fieldwork. The identification of the three principal participants and their corresponding high schools set the initial boundaries for the cases that were studied under these identification parameters. Yin (2018) further suggested selecting the case(s) that will most likely illuminate the research questions. Therefore, throughout sample selection process, I used the conceptual framework and research questions to help establish and refresh the focus as needed for decision-making.

This resulted in additional considerations for my sampling processes such as NCES locale codes and time spent as the principal at each site.

Once the three principals were identified, I conducted interviews with each principal. I employed snowball sampling during each interview. This resulted in additional interviews with individuals from a range of roles to create a more richly descriptive case for each site (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The follow-up interviews that I conducted with the suggested interviewees provided additional perspectives that afforded me the opportunity to triangulate the data. These individuals were primarily in leadership roles at each school and, in some cases, the district offices, given the time of year that I was permitted to conduct the interviews. This was an ongoing, constructive process that also included continuously adding documents and archival records to the data collection and analysis processes for additional and more robust data triangulation.
Research Methodology

Data Collection

“data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment. They can be concrete and measurable, as in class attendance, or invisible and difficult to measure, as in feelings...” (Merriam, 2009, p. 105)

For this study, I collected three forms of evidence highlighted by Yin (2018) as being sources for case study development: documents, archival records, and interviews. The goal for document and archival record collection was to facilitate the discovery of cultural nuances, and provide important contextual information into the school culture (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) with a specific focus on the culture of AP in each school and the facilitation of this culture by the school’s principal. Documents collected include but are not limited to email communication, relevant meeting agendas and minutes, Board of Education policies and meeting minutes, course catalogs, master schedules, news articles, and course syllabi. In Table 3.3, I denote these types of evidence and the specific sources of each type of evidence collected.

Table 3.3

Types and Sources of Data Collected and Analyzed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Evidence</th>
<th>Source of Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Emails, School calendars of relevant events (i.e., AP support events, teacher PD), Meeting agendas, Meeting minutes, News articles, Administrative documents, School mission and vision statements, Board of Education meeting notes, faculty and department meeting agendas, AP teacher meeting agendas, Schools’ master schedules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival Records</td>
<td>School level policy regarding AP course admission, District level policy regarding AP course admission, State level policy regarding AP course admission, State level policy regarding student AP exam fee support, National policy regarding AP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
course admission, NCES locale codes, Office of Civil Rights Data, US Census data, Enrollment data, Longitudinal achievement data

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed with each Principal, as well as a range of other suggested school and district personnel: Assistant principals, AP/IB Coordinator, District administrators

I began the interview process by conducting semi-structured interviews with each principal. I met with each principal in their office to engage in these interviews. After the first interview with each principal, I then interviewed the principals’ recommended individuals who responded to my email request with interest in participating in the study. These interviews consisted of face-to-face interviews with two assistant principals, one Zoom interview with a district administrator, one phone interview with another district administrator, and two completed interview questionnaires via email with school level coordinators. My goal as a researcher was to foster interactivity with participants as best I could to elicit in-depth, context-rich perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) to the topics addressed in this study. Once I requested and received initial suggestions for subsequent interviews from the principal of each school, I contacted each participant via email, utilizing the email template included as Appendix A while adding the principal’s reference to the narrative. I utilized a preplanned semi-structured interview protocol to guide each interview session, leaving space for new information to be provided. I included interview protocols in the Appendices (Appendix B for Principal Interview Protocol and Appendix C for Non-Principal Interview Protocol).
Prior to the start of each interview, I notified participants that our conversation would be recorded and received their verbal permission to do so. In Table 3.3, I summarized the interviews that were conducted for this study. Given that two of the cases, Principal Smith of River Birch High School and Dr. Johnson of Samuel Roberts High School, were located within the Rolling Falls School District, the district administrators that I interviewed spoke with regard to each case.

**Table 3.4**

*Interview Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School or District</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Roberts High School</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Dr. Robert Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Roberts High School</td>
<td>School Counseling Director</td>
<td>Dr. Mariam Williams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling Falls School District</td>
<td>District Administrator</td>
<td>Dr. Ella Nash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling Falls School District</td>
<td>District Administrator</td>
<td>Dr. Eleanor Browning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River Birch High School</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>John Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River Birch High School</td>
<td>AP/IB Coordinator</td>
<td>Avery Meyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milltown High School</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Brandon Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milltown High School</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Dr. Terrence McDonald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milltown High School</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Mary Robinson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yin (2018) also denoted and reemphasized the use of four principles of data collection: (1) using multiple, not just single, sources of evidence; (2) creating a case study database; (3) maintaining a chain of evidence; and (4) exercising care in using data from electronic sources of evidence (such as social media) (p. 112). I incorporated these principles of data collection to reflect on the process as the data collection process was iterative in nature. I began data collection as soon as my sites were sampled and approved. I spent two months collecting data prior to conducting interviews. Doing so enabled me to more effectively probe for more detail during the interview process. It is
important to consider the alignment of research questions with the type of data needed to address them, as each data source is one piece of a “puzzle” that contributes to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 50). I kept this in mind as I employed snowball sampling and as I interviewed participants in an effort to expand my data collection in ways that completed the “puzzle” and captured contextual nuances for each case.

**Data analysis**

In this section, I describe the manner in which I analyzed the data that I collected. Miles et al. (2014) strongly advised analyzing data concurrently with data collection. Doing so, they argued, can be a healthy corrective for built-in blind spots. Merriam and Tisdell (2016), furthermore, noted the 10 suggestions of Bogdan and Boykin (2011) for analyzing data as they are being collected (pp. 197-198):

1. Force yourself to make decisions that narrow the study.
2. Force yourself to make decisions concerning the type of study you want to accomplish.
3. Develop analytic questions.
4. Plan data collection sessions according to what you find in previous observations.
5. Write many “observer’s comments” as you go.
6. Write memos to yourself about what you are learning.
7. Try out ideas and themes on participants.
8. Begin exploring the literature while you are in the field.
9. Play with metaphors, analogies, and concepts.
10. Use visual devices.

I referenced these suggestions in an ongoing fashion throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of my study. In this section, I also highlight the ways I engaged in these suggested activities as a researcher.

In total, I interviewed nine individuals. I audio recorded and transcribed each semi-structured interview in its entirety, with the exception of one interview that was conducted over the phone with Dr. Ella Nash of Rolling Falls School District, and two interview protocols that were completed through email by Dr. Mariam Williams of Samuel Roberts High School and Avery Meyers or River Birch High School. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, with the average length being one hour. I submitted the audio files to Rev.com for initial transcription. Upon receiving the transcriptions from Rev.com, I reviewed and cleaned each transcript. I completed this task while I listened to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Doing so allowed me to become more acquainted with each case, while also generating insights and “hunches” about the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I kept a running record of additional questions as I cleaned the transcription data to guide the continuation of my data collection. I also kept memos to continuously reflect on my biases as a researcher.

Once I completed the data scrubbing process for all transcripts, I stored each deidentified transcript in a folder in NVivo 14. I labeled each folder according to the pseudonym I created for each principal as the case. I also typed and added my written memos as well as the documents that I collected to these same folders to keep an organized approach to case development. I also created subfolders for each case folder in
NVivo 14 for the purpose of organizing documents for each case by type. I labeled each subfolder according to the type of data that I housed in the folder. I applied the labels “transcripts,” “school documents,” “district documents,” and “other” to subfolders for each case. I classified documents that were shared with me by a school faculty member as “school documents.” These documents included school calendars, department meeting minutes, faculty meeting minutes and agendas, informative parent and student session presentations, course catalogs, course syllabi, and school portfolios. I classified documents that were either shared with me by a district administrator or that I obtained from the district’s website as “district documents.” These documents included district level forms, board policies, and district-created school profiles. I classified any document that I procured on my own from a source other than each district and school as “other.” These documents included news articles and data from sources such as the US Civil Rights Data Collection, NCES, and the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE). As a measure of precaution, I backed up all files on an external hard drive.

When conducting a multiple case study, the typical analytic strategy is to provide detailed descriptions of themes within each case and follow a thematic cross-case analysis as a coding approach (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). After I reviewed and scrubbed all transcripts, field notes, and interview notes, I engaged in an inductive coding process that propelled deep reflection, analysis, and interpretation of the data’s meanings (Miles et al., 2014). As I coded, I included the question stem as often as possible to ensure that I made appropriate connections in my data analysis. I completed the first round of inductive coding using NVivo 14, as suggested for studies that prioritize and
honor participants’ voices (Miles et al., 2014). While inductively coding, I thematically developed codes from patterns that I began to recognize in the data. I also included memoing in my research strategy. I took note of the experiences, thoughts, and ideas that were shared with me by each participant and considered the ways they spoke of Advanced Placement courses and other opportunities in their school community. I also revisited my conceptual framework frequently as I memoed. Doing so allowed me to also recognize a need for additional rounds of deductive coding.

I deductively coded using a conceptual matrix that I created using each theory that I incorporated into the development of my conceptual framework. The matrices included the theory, aspects of each theory, and descriptors from the literature. Using aspects of each theory as a priori codes, I engaged in three rounds of deductive coding, with each round dedicated to a to a singular theory. In Table 3.5, I demonstrate the structure of the deductive coding approach that I took.

Table 3.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Round</th>
<th>Applied Theory</th>
<th>A Priori Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Round Two</td>
<td>Opportunity Gap Framework</td>
<td>Reject colorblindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understand cultural conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognize the myth of meritocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disrupt low expectations and deficit mindsets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counter context neutral mindsets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round Three</td>
<td>Culturally Responsive School Leadership</td>
<td>Exhibit critical self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Promote culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I combined and collapsed thematic codes that I generated during the initial inductive round of coding as I coded deductively and as I engaged in the cross-case analysis of my findings.

**Trustworthiness**

Researchers can best acquire evidential truth when they value and listen to the self, to others (Nieto, 1994), and to the self in relation to others (Milner, 2007). To this end, analytic memoing was a critical component of my engagement with the research throughout the data collection and analytical processes. An analytic memo is “a brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s summaries of data but attempts to synthesize them into higher level analytic meanings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 95). I utilized analytic memoing to capture thoughts that occurred frequently throughout the data collection and analysis processes. To guide my analytic memoing, I employed Milner’s (2007) Researcher Positionality Framework and elements of Tillman’s (2002) culturally responsive and inclusive school environments

Promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments
Engage students and parents in community contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round Four</th>
<th>Place-Conscious Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Situate learning within the encompassing community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify opportunities for growth in the local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Address opportunities for growth in the local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration with local stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem-solving with local stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Habits of place</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sensitive research approaches. Marshall et al. (2022) considered these types of engagement with reflective thought processes across data sets as crystallization rather than the conventional reference of triangulation and put forth a combination of their own research with Maxwell’s (2012) and Creswell and Miller’s (2000) lists of procedures that help ensure the rigor, significance, and trustworthiness of a research study. In Table 3.4, I synthesize these ideas and highlight my engagement in the procedures that were possible to ensure trustworthiness and transferability in this study.

Table 3.6

Procedures to Ensure Trustworthiness and Transferability of the Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Engagement in this Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crystallization(^4) (triangulation)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for disconfirming evidence or</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alternative explanations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in reflexivity</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged engagement in the field</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration with participants</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing an audit trail</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer debriefing</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checks</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich data</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study Limitations

Perhaps the most obvious and widely debated aspect of any case study, including this multiple case study, is its lack of generalizability. For this reason, I focused significant effort on the transferability of the design of this study. Given that opportunity

\(^4\) Crystallization is included as a suggested term in lieu of triangulation by Marshall et al. (2022).
gaps, and especially those that are evident in access to Advanced Placement courses, are highly contextualized, a deep understanding of the ways principals perceive and approach this type of equity work is critical. These understandings have important implications for policy development and change, and particularly for leadership preparation programs.

Another limitation of this study is that I am the primary instrument of research. Tillman (2002) highlights that culture can be conceptualized differently depending on one’s worldview and particular needs as a researcher and scholar. Given that I applied a limited and biased singular viewpoint to the development of this study, and given that this viewpoint was my own as a White, cisgender, able-bodied, middle class, college educated female, I deemed additional supports necessary to bolster trustworthiness of the data analysis. Thus, I sought out tools and resources in the literature to ensure that the major attributes and experiences I brought to my engagement with the research did not suppress the biases I carried, but rather brought them to where they were consciously recognized and present in my awareness. Furthermore, it is possible that these attributes may have influenced participants’ comfortability with me as a trusted source for sharing detailed information, as I also conducted the interviews for this study. I employed culturally sensitive research approaches (Tillman, 2002) to minimize discomfort and to engage as appropriately as possible given my positionality.

Finally, it is important to note that in this study I only examined, at length, one form of advanced academic curriculum: the Advanced Placement program. Other programs, including dual credit opportunities, Cambridge, and International Baccalaureate programs compete for advanced course enrollments within many high
schools in the United States. I also considered this factor in the development of the interview questions for this study, and the data collection and analysis processes.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described my research approach to this study. To the best of my current knowledge and understanding of my research topic, I have taken into consideration the most appropriate qualitative approaches in this multiple case study that, according to the methodological literature, most effectively provide in-depth contextual details for each case in ways that answer my research questions. I employed major components of the Opportunity Gap Framework (Milner, 2012), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (Khalifa, 2016), and Place-Conscious Leadership (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003) to develop questions to ask of myself as the primary researcher and participants in the contexts that were examined. The findings from this study provide details that illuminate the roles that principals play in expanding access to successful AP experiences for racially minoritized students.
CHAPTER FOUR
CASE CONTEXTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The ways each principal understood and interpreted policy played a critical role in how their leadership actions influenced racially marginalized students’ access to AP courses. In this chapter, I highlight relevant federal, state, and local (district and school level) policy contexts in which each school is situated. I then present the cases of Principal Martin of Milltown High School, Principal Smith of River Birch High School, and Dr. Johnson of Samuel Roberts High School. I provide personal and professional background information on each leader. I then describe each school community that the principals lead. In doing so, I focus on detailing the people, practices, and policies that drove each school’s culture and access to AP courses. I also share findings for each case that demonstrate each principal’s influence on access to AP classes through policy interpretation and enactment, their perceptions of AP, and the data-driven approaches they took to identify and create opportunity in their schools.

National Context

Under the provision of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have greater autonomy than before to take advantage of several funding sources that districts can use to both expand access to advanced courses and ensure greater student success within them. ESSA also ensures attention is paid to traditionally underrepresented students, including students of color and students living in poverty. To take advantage of these funding opportunities, districts are required to provide a significant amount of
demographic data to track student access and progress. However, the requested demographic data does not extend to enrollment in AP or other advanced classes, and is limited to exam participation. While AP exam participation by demographic group may be a helpful data point to understand student achievement in terms of college readiness, it limits opportunities to systemically analyze equity in access to the courses themselves. Some courses carry designations as entry AP courses (e.g., in this study, AP Human Geography is denoted as a course that is technically open for ninth graders to take as evident in the findings of this chapter) while others require substantial prerequisites (e.g., AP Physics) and systems changes (e.g., teaching assignments, scheduling, financial resources) to enact as an offering to students. Fortunately, districts are given greater autonomy over funding allocation decisions under ESSA, allowing districts greater flexibility to reallocate funds toward these endeavors.

Additional educational legislation at the federal level of relevance to this study includes the introduction of the Advanced Coursework Equity Act (ACEA) to Congress in 2021. While this legislation has not yet become law, it is important to note, as it acknowledges traditionally underserved students and explicitly references race (in its current form). ACEA also highlights data that expresses the urgency of the need to increase access to advanced courses for traditionally underrepresented students. For example, ACEA draws attention to the fact that, while one in ten students across all schools in the US are enrolled in AP programs, just over one in 20 Black and Native American students participate in AP courses. It also illustrates the systemic nature of the issue of unequal access to advanced coursework by taking into account the importance of
taking Algebra I in 8th grade to be on track for enrolling in advanced courses in high school, as well as the inequities that exist in access to gifted identification and services between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. ACEA also puts forth a clear definition of open enrollment, defining it as “an enrollment mechanism through which any student that chooses to enroll in an advanced course or program is allowed to do so without regard to previous academic performance or test scores.” (p. 5) I denote the importance of this definition, as I had to provide clarity around the term for each principal I interviewed. In the case of Principal Smith of River Birch High School, when I asked about his school’s enrollment policy, he replied that he was glad I asked so that he could make sure I was “on the same page” with how he defines open enrollment and how it is operationalized in his school:

Open enrollment sometimes implies like a window for anyone to sign up, but we don’t have window to sign up. Students meet with counselors and in those sessions have conversations around what our school offers… We will totally support them on a decision to enroll in honors, AP, IB or dual credit… but we’re also advocates for them not getting in over their head. We do have parent overrides, but technically some students’ current grades don’t allow them to jump right into AP.

In this case, previous grades acted as a barrier to some students who may want to take an AP course, as defined by ACEA and as an indicator of barriers to access in this study. ACEA encourages districts to prioritize opening access to advanced courses, but does not legislate the mechanisms by which districts and schools are to make it happen. Ultimately, the definition of open enrollment remains locally controlled, and principals
can determine what open enrollment looks like in their school to the degree that their
district allows.

**South Carolina State Context**

**South Carolina State ESSA Plan**

**Profile of the South Carolina Graduate.** Each case included in this study is
located in the state of South Carolina, specifically within the upstate region. A guiding
principle of evaluating student achievement and a major component of its state ESSA
plan is the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*. The profile is marketed as a
personalized approach to overcoming the “one size fits all” approach to educating
students and outlines major skills that school leaders are expected to embed in their
programming and instruction, from course offerings to the student experience and
outcomes within each course. I analyzed language from the competencies of the *Profile
of the South Carolina Graduate* and their descriptors to better understand the skills that
are prioritized for student learners in the state. The competencies outlined include the
abilities to: read critically, express ideas, investigate through inquiry, reason
quantitatively, use sources, design solutions, learn independently, navigate conflict, lead
teams, build networks, sustain wellness, and engage as a citizen. I compared this
language to the language used by each principal as they described student expectations.

**College and Career Ready School Report Card Indicator.** As an additional
component of its ESSA Plan, the South Carolina Department of Education issues each
public school a report card annually. The indicators included on this report card include
measures that are calculated to create an overall rating for each school. Ratings range
from “excellent” to “unsatisfactory.” The College and Career Ready Indicator is the measure included in school ratings that is most relevant to this study. In particular, the definition embedded within this indicator of what it means to be “college” ready versus “career” ready is critical to understanding how each school (and each school’s principal) structures student opportunities. Table 4.1 highlights the considerations for each of these measures. It is important to note that, while an AP exam score of 3 or higher is considered to be a measure of college readiness, the participation and passage rates for AP courses and exams are not included as a factor in school report card ratings.

Table 4.1

South Carolina College and Career Ready (CCR) Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCR Indicator</th>
<th>Measure (Student must meet at least one)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Ready</td>
<td>ACT composite score of 20 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAT composite score of 1020 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AP exam score of 3 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IB HL exam score of 4 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completion of 6 hours of dual credit with a grade of C or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Ready</td>
<td>CTE completer + National or state industry credential as determined by the business community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silver, Gold or Platinum National Career Readiness Certificate on the state-approved career readiness assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ASVAB score of 31 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Successfully complete state-approved work-based learning program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: South Carolina Department of Education
**Graduation Rates.** Another indicator of the effectiveness of high schools in South Carolina is the “on time” graduation rate, or the number of students that graduate from each high school within four years of entering as a ninth grader. While all school report card measures should be considered by principals in their planning, results from this study indicated the greatest focus on these two indicators.

Importantly, this study includes the data released by the state for AP exam participation and passage rates only. AP course enrollments by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status are not tracked by the state department. The Rolling Falls School District was able to provide honors and AP course enrollment numbers by racial demographic groups, but the data was only for 2021-22 and it excluded socioeconomic status (an indicator no longer tracked by the district). Foothills School District was unable to provide this same AP course enrollment information. The report card data is released annually in November. Therefore, the report card data used in this study spans over the course of the 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years. In addition to increasing graduation rates, the South Carolina Department of Education also aims to reduce the percentage of students needing remedial college courses by 5% per year. This speaks to efforts to ensure that graduation rate increases match a sustained or increased level of rigor. Dr. Johnson of Samuel Roberts High School and Principal Martin of Milltown High School each referenced this idea as they shared their implementation of AVID as one approach to improving the outcomes of students while also increasing access to advanced academic options.
South Carolina Gifted and Talented and Advanced Placement Policy

Throughout most of the interviews I conducted for this study, interviewees referred to gifted and talented programs when discussing students who were considered to be academically fit for an AP course. For this reason, and because of the historical nature in which AP has been attached to giftedness (and in which giftedness has been attached to Whiteness), I included South Carolina policy pertaining to gifted and talented, honors and AP identification, enrollment and programming into my document analyses. This policy analysis provided deeper insight to the structures, expectations, and levels of support from the South Carolina Department of Education as it pertains to the opportunities that students in each school may have been offered or excluded from before beginning high school at each site.

The South Carolina State Board of Education Regulation 43-220 details best practices for the identification of gifted and talented students. The state defines giftedness as “students who are identified in grades one through twelve as demonstrating high performance ability or potential in academic and/or artistic areas and therefore require educational programming beyond that normally provided by the general school programming in order to achieve their potential” (SC BOE Regulation 43-220, p. 1). The official legislative mandate dates back to 1987 and requires that these students’ unique talents be served during the general school year and that funds be provided to serve these needs. The SC Education Improvement Act of 1984 is also referenced in the mandate and requires that districts allocate funding according to the number of students identified as gifted. For districts that do not identify at least 40 students, $15,000 is to be allocated.
Each student in second grade completes the CogAt aptitude test and the Iowa achievement test. Services offered to students who are identified as gifted include a pull-out model of instruction in elementary school, honors courses capped at 25 students in middle school, and honors and AP classes in high school. Therefore, the state requires that all districts provide AP courses in any school that includes grades 11 or 12.

**District Contexts**

The district context in which each case was embedded played a critical role as a determinant of certain resources and levels of support for each principal’s work. Likewise, micro level politics added to the complexity and nuance of some cases. For these important reasons, I describe each district context with specific reference to their AP programming.

**Rolling Falls School District**

The Rolling Falls School District is a county-wide consolidated district with nearly 20 high schools and a total student population of over 77,000 students. Rolling Falls County is a rapidly growing area of South Carolina, and the growth is evident in the growing student population. Rolling Falls School District has a history of resistance to efforts to desegregate its schools. Today, students in Rolling Falls School District attend schools based primarily on the geographic location of their residence, except for students who opt into magnet programs through school choice. However, Rolling Falls was slow to embrace shared learning spaces and still shows significant discrepancies in advanced learning opportunities for racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged students as compared to their White and/or affluent peers.
Despite the size of its student population, the Rolling Falls School District does not include any written policy pertaining to gifted and talented identification or AP course offerings, enrollment, or support in its board policies. Dr. Ella Nash explained that the district ensures differentiation for these students but that it has no specific policy outlining expectations for meeting any identified needs of gifted learners. She further highlighted that South Carolina state policy is “referenced by the district but not duplicated.”

While the Rolling Falls District Board of Education does not currently outline specific expectations or support AP enrollment, the district does serve as somewhat of a liaison between the College Board and each school. The district communicates primarily with AP coordinators, who ensure that courses are organized, audited, and implemented, and exam registrations are handled appropriately. For example, when piloting a new course like AP African American Studies, or a program like AP Capstone, the district shares information with schools. Schools then have the opportunity to gauge interest from teachers and students and to consider the scale of resources needed to implement a new offering. After demonstrating that the interest and ability to offer a course or program at scale is present, schools may then pilot these opportunities. This is a local decision that is “based on multiple factors” that were not explicitly shared or elaborated on by Dr. Nash, but that can be deduced partially based on requirements for new courses as outlined by the College Board (e.g., course start-up costs which range from $1,900 to $10,000, and teacher professional development and certification).
Currently, there is no policy in the Rolling Falls School District that specifically examines equity in advanced academic opportunities. However, the Board of Education does have an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policy, which was adopted in 2021. I incorporated this policy into my analysis. This policy states the following district commitment:

The provision of an equitable education system reflected in the educational opportunities offered to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, English learner status, disability, and/or other characteristics, is critical to the success of every student. The Board prioritizes educational equity through the allocation of resources based upon individual student needs. As such, the District will identify and address barriers to achievement for students, work to eliminate opportunity gaps, utilize culturally responsive teaching techniques and approaches, and leverage community partnerships.

The district further states that it will engage in data-driven approaches to systematically address these gaps. While this policy is very new, evidence that this approach has been taken remains limited or nonexistent in the case of equitable AP course enrollment and outcomes. As can be seen in Tables 4.2 and 4.3, gaps have existed between student demographic groups since the 2019-20 academic year in terms of AP exam participation and pass rates.
Table 4.2

Rolling Falls School District AP Exam Participation by Student Demographic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Students Who Took an AP Exam</th>
<th>Total Number of AP Exams Taken</th>
<th>AP Exam Pass Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021-22</td>
<td>4,064</td>
<td>7,019</td>
<td>62.1% (4,359 exams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-21</td>
<td>4,409</td>
<td>7,485</td>
<td>58.7% (4,394 exams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>4,510</td>
<td>7,655</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: South Carolina Department of Education
*Data not available

Table 4.3

Rolling Falls School District 2021-22 AP Exam Pass Rates by Student Demographic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Demographic Group</th>
<th>Pass Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Alaskan Native</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: South Carolina Department of Education
*Data not available

Foothills School District

Milltown High School is located in the Foothills School District. Foothills is one of seven public school districts in a county with a population of approximately 320,000 people. The total population for the Foothills School District, however, is only approximately 16,000 people. There is a higher concentration of economic disadvantage within the Foothills School District, with 18% of families living below the poverty level as compared to the 12% of families living below the same level county wide. Milltown High School is the only high school within the Foothills School District. Students that
begin as ninth graders at Milltown High School feed into the school from one middle school that was recently built to consolidate two older and smaller middle schools in the two primary towns of the local community. Before Foothills School District was established in 1950, schools were racially segregated and each White school in the present-day district’s geographic territory was considered its own district before merging with others and desegregating to become the district that it is today. The mantra of Foothills School District emphasizes a commitment to focus on every child. The Milltown High School community also adopted this as its own mantra. Principal Martin included it in each of the agenda documents that were analyzed for this study, and it was displayed throughout the school website content.

Unlike the Rolling Falls School District, the Foothills School District serves a much smaller population of under 3,000 students. The Foothills School District Board of Education also includes an Advanced College Placement policy that outlines guidelines connected to the South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984 for implementing AP courses at Milltown High School. This policy establishes a minimum baseline for offering AP, articulating that “Milltown High School will offer at least one AP course in the school, through independent study, or through an agreement with other district(s).” Student eligibility is also addressed in this policy. It provides that, in order to qualify for enrollment, students must demonstrate academic excellence in prerequisite courses. Students who complete an AP course are also required to sit for the College Board administered exam.
Principal Martin and the two assistant principals that I interviewed, Mrs. Robinson and Dr. McDonald, each referenced the gifted and talented program of Foothills School District as they discussed AP course admissions and as they discussed students who had historically been automatically enrolled in AP courses at Milltown High School. To better understand the implications of the label of giftedness within the Foothills context, I included an analytical review of the language used by the district in its policy pertaining to gifted identification, characteristics of gifted learners, and the services provided to students who are identified as gifted.

Foothills School District’s Gifted and Talented Education policy highlights its recognition of a need for gifted students to receive differentiated approaches to teaching and learning. The district defines giftedness as demonstrating abilities or potential abilities for high performance in academic or artistic areas. As required by the state, the district universally screens all second graders and prioritizes implementing services in grades three through nine for students identified through this process. For any student not identified through the district screening process, nomination forms may be submitted by a teacher, parent, or student themselves. I also included the forms in my analyses as they were easily accessible on the website for the Foothills School District. The teacher nomination form, in particular, includes a list of several characteristics of gifted learners. According to this list, a student who is deemed eligible for further gifted screening may exhibit one or more of the following qualities as a learner:

1. Asks many questions, is curious, likes to experiment
2. Has many ideas, clever responses, solutions to problems
3. Has an active imagination
4. Is willing to take a risk, challenge ideas, be individualistic
5. Has a keen sense of humor
6. Has unusually advanced vocabulary for age
7. Reads a great deal on his or her own
8. Sets high expectations for self and others
9. Is persistent, sticks to a task
10. Becomes deeply involved with topics of study

Many of the traits listed are subject to the interpretation and biases of teachers, highlighting one reason that it is critical to ensure that teachers are both trained in and consistently supported in culturally responsive pedagogy. At the high school level, enrollment in AP courses is considered a form of differentiation for gifted students. For this reason, as I was told in my interviews, the administration at Milltown is working to dismantle the stigma attached to AP as the “right” option for a specific type of student.

**Principal Martin of Milltown High School**

Mr. Martin, a man of tall stature and positive energy, has been the principal of Milltown High School for eight years. He has been in the field of education for 36 years, and has served in roles ranging from teacher, coach, athletic director, assistant principal, principal, and district assistant superintendent across multiple districts in two states. Mr. Martin excitedly welcomed me to his office for our interview. His office included a table with six chairs, where he explained that he meets with his team every Friday morning. Mr. Martin directed my attention to the wall beside where I was seated. On that wall, a
list of years and words were painted. He explained that, each year, his team and other teachers and students decide on a “word of the year.” This word is a grounding and focus mechanism for the goals that they set as a school community. Mr. Martin also proudly displayed pictures of his personal and professional families, as Mr. Martin repeatedly referred to the staff and students of Milltown as family, too. He shared with me that he grew up on a farm in South Carolina. He referenced his upbringing several times as a connection point with the students of Milltown High School, many of whom are considered economically disadvantaged. Mr. Martin, the first in his family to attend college, explained that he didn’t know he was “poor” until he went to college and was exposed to socioeconomic diversity. While he saw others traveling abroad during academic breaks, he returned home to work the farm, harvesting watermelons and peaches. He exhibited a pride in his background and accomplishments that paralleled the pride he showed for the Milltown community. Mr. Martin described the principalship as “his fit” and expressed a deep sense of excitement and gratitude for the opportunity to serve the Milltown community as principal. Assistant Principal Dr. McDonald described Mr. Martin as “a great mentor who I trust… in what he’s been able to do and continues to try to do.” Assistant Principal Robinson further described Mr. Martin as someone who “always makes the best overall decision for our kids, not himself, not the teachers, but for the students of Milltown High School.”

Mr. Martin quickly understood that he entered the Milltown community as an outsider when he began eight years ago. He worked diligently and intentionally to build the trust that both of his assistant principals spoke of with the entire Milltown
community. He emphasized the importance of communication, and reiterated to me several times that he always has his office door open though he is not in his office often. Mr. Martin had somewhat of a connection with the Milltown community upon starting as principal. He also served as the principal and assistant superintendent in a neighboring district within the county before leading Milltown High School.

**Milltown High School**

Milltown High School is a relatively small high school with a student population of approximately 800. It is the only high school in the Foothills district. As I previously mentioned, the Foothills School District is one of multiple public school districts to serve the county in which it is situated. Each district in the county operates separately but is partnered with a local public-private academic nonprofit which provides support for equipping schools to prepare students to be college and career ready. Several other partnerships also exist within the county, including free tuition at the local community college. This is a critical component of the school context as it pertains to enrollment in AP classes. Not only is Milltown High School situated in a unique county equipped with a notably large number of nonprofits, but there are also seven smaller sized higher education institutions within the county that also contribute to the value that is placed on support for Milltown High School. Furthermore, the partnerships with the community college system and one public university in the county add other options for students at Milltown High School to pursue to be considered college ready. Often, the dual credit options that these partnerships provide are viewed as more practical and appealing, especially for many first-generation college attendees.
Despite its NCES locale classification as a suburb of midsize based on the location of the school building, Milltown High School serves communities that are overwhelmingly classified as rural (fringe). I compared a map of school geographic boundaries to the NCES Locale Classification map to draw this conclusion. For this reason, Milltown is often described by study participants throughout the interviews I conducted as rural. Rurality is mentioned often in connection with local opportunities and resources, and is included as an aspect of the community pride that each administrator spoke of. The communities served by Milltown High School are comprised of mostly lower middle-class families and families living at or below the poverty line. Many affordable housing properties and old mill village houses are home to what was described to me as a “sometimes transient” population of students and their families. The mill village homes used to be occupied as primary residences of the once-thriving mill communities that existed until the 1980s when industries left the area. Today, there is little industrial infrastructure on the side of the county where Milltown High School is located. As a result, families move to the Foothills School District area seeking affordable options but often move closer to their jobs which are often on the other side of the county once they have the financial means to do so.

**Student Demographics.** Milltown High School is a “majority White” School, as stated by Mr. Martin, Mrs. Robinson and Dr. McDonald. As can be seen in Table 4.4, the racial and socioeconomic demographics of the student population over the past four
school years indicate that the primary racial identities of the student body are White (71.7%), Black/African American (12.5%), and Hispanic/Latinx (10.4%). This data matches the approximations that each administrator shared with me during our interviews. It can also be seen that the White student population has been on a slow but steady decline since 2019, while the Hispanic/Latinx student population has slightly increased, and the Black/African American student population has remained relatively unchanged. These minimally shifting demographics were echoed by Principal Martin and are expected to continue based on projected city and county growth.

Table 4.4

**Milltown High School Student Demographic Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
<th>2021-22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils in Poverty</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latinx</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

**Principal Martin’s Role in Fostering Access to AP Courses at Milltown High School**

Principal Martin has been recognized for a multitude of achievements throughout his educational career. During his time at Milltown High School, the school has been recognized for increasing its graduation rate by five percentage points. Despite prime instructional time being reduced and attendance issues being prominent in a post-COVID19 context, Principal Martin and the staff of Milltown High School have continued to focus on increasing rigorous opportunities with appropriate supports for all
students. To this end, an increase in access to and success in AP courses has also been evident.

**Policy Interpretation and Enactment**

Principal Martin demonstrated a profound level of understanding of policy and programmatic aspects of AP. He applied his knowledge of resource allocation and district communication to advocate for the students of Milltown High School through policy change and the introduction of new approaches in an effort to make rigorous and engaging curriculum accessible to all students.

**Expanded Course Offerings and Implemented Support Programs.** Since beginning at Milltown High School, Principal Martin made provisions to increase the number of AP course offerings from seven courses to 11 courses. He explained that this increase entailed significant changes to the school’s master schedule to ensure that, not only were additional classes offered, but that appropriate supports were built into the school’s offerings across the board in ways that fit its block scheduling approach. Mr. Martin explained that he and his counseling team worked to ensure that AP courses were offered only during the second academic semester, given that the College Board administered exams are offered annually during the month of May. For this same reason, Mr. Martin and his team added AP “prep” courses during the first academic semester to add an extra layer of time and instructional support before students began an official College Board approved AP course during the second academic semester. For example, AP English Language and Composition was offered during the spring semester of 2023 and “AP Language Prep” was the preparatory course offered during the fall semester.
Each course was taught by the same teacher and offered during the same period each semester. This ensured that teachers were able to build relationships with students and focus on increasing student belonging, confidence, and prerequisite academic skills for each AP course.

Principal Martin also discussed scheduling changes that came as a result of his decision to implement Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). The Milltown High School leadership team agreed to implement AVID after they analyzed multiple data points that indicated a large number of students who they categorized as being a “middle group” of students. The team realized that these students seemed to be overlooked in terms of appropriate supports. Principal Martin described these students as being similar to himself in high school. He stated,

These students that would not have historically been in any of those [AP] classes. They would’ve been the group that didn’t get into trouble. They just went through the CP track and didn’t get a lot of attention because I think schools do a pretty good job catering to the upper echelon and taking care of SPED students. But what about those kids like me? Those first-generation college kids. I was in the middle and I didn’t know I could go to college.

The implementation of AVID required the administration of Milltown High School to add the AVID elective course. However, implementing AVID with fidelity meant that more students would be enrolling in advanced coursework options. This indicated that more AP and dual credit options needed to be offered for students. It also required a sustainable commitment to training and providing ongoing professional
development for teachers. Principal Martin was able to make the commitment to AVID schoolwide using the flexibility of professional development funding granted under ESSA. Implementing AVID schoolwide indicated a shift in a school’s culture and approach to ensuring college readiness for all students.

The expansion of AP courses as part of this shift also required additional funding. Principal Martin explained that he capitalized on funding flexibility as well as the fact that College Board moved many of its training opportunities online to encourage as many of his teachers, including those who were not scheduled to teach an AP course, to become AP certified. He explained,

Even if a teacher's not teaching AP, I would like them to get AP endorsed…
Because they see the rigor, they see those strategies. They see those best practices. And if it's good enough for AP kids, it's good enough for everybody. You know, sort of like AVID. If those AVID strategies are good enough for AVID kids, they're good enough for everybody.

This statement indicates a deep understanding of the instructional rigor of AP courses and operational resource management by Principal Martin. He also had each course change quickly approved by the Foothills School District and even written into its curriculum policy as official course updates.

**Changed AP Enrollment Policies and Prerequisites.** In its policy outlining Advanced Placement offerings, the Foothills School District Board of Education established only a minimum requirement of one AP course at Foothills High School. As the policy reads, at least one AP course must be offered to be considered a form of
differentiation for gifted students. Prior to Principal Martin’s arrival at Milltown High School, AP courses were typically only offered to and thus pursued by gifted students. Principal Martin shared that 15-20% of the student population at Foothills High School is typically identified as gifted. Therefore, only a small percentage of the student population was able to access the few courses that were offered. This meant that Principal Martin was first tasked with meeting with his leadership team to craft a plan to remove the immediately obvious barriers that existed in accessing AP courses. Principal Martin shared his vision for AP student enrollment when he stated,

When I go into an AP class, I’m looking for male, female, rich, poor, free lunch, White, Black, Hispanic [students]. I want to see that class look like us… I don’t want to see all White female [students]. I don’t want to see all affluent-students. Because I think, really, we all learn from each other and our experiences are what makes a good class. When you can share those different perspectives.

Principal Martin admitted that AP courses at Milltown High School did not yet look like this vision. He explained several factors that contributed to the amount of time it would take the Milltown High School community to get to this point of racial and socioeconomic diversity in AP courses. For example, he explained that he and a team of teachers and school counselors reviewed the master catalog of courses to discuss prerequisites. Together, they changed the language that was used to describe AP courses and their suggested prerequisites. Principal Martin highlighted that he and his staff emphasized the term “recommended” in prerequisite explanations to students and their families.
Principal Martin shared that he and his staff “really try not to close the doors on people getting in there [AP classes] … Most of our students are in a mix of dual credit and AP courses.” This mixture of AP and dual credit courses was also explained as a result of both working to get the “numbers right” and, as Principal Martin and others shared, of offering courses that are the most appropriate to help students meet their individual goals. For example, some years the school was able to offer a few more AP courses than during other years. The ability to offer a course is based primarily on the number of interested students. Principal Martin explained that, given limited resources, 10 to 12 interested students in a particular course are needed to be able to add a class to the master course schedule. Unfortunately, if these numbers are not met in a particular academic year, a course may have to be tabled until the following year.

Principal Martin offered honest insight on AP exam participation at Milltown High School. After being a school and district level leader for decades, he explained the ways he had seen other leaders manipulate data to check achievement boxes while isolating AP opportunity to a limited population of students. He elaborated,

You know, you can put all kind of prerequisites in, you can make your AP scores look 90% better. It's easy. Just don't let certain people in. Don't take a chance on kids. Don't push kids. And we don't believe in that. And sometimes we don't do as well with our percentage [of students] passing with a three or better… But we believe those students are much better prepared by being in those classes.

This feedback signified that Principal Martin was truly interested in individual student success over meeting certain organizational benchmarks. It demonstrated the deeper level
of understanding that he had of policy and practices that affected students’ abilities to access AP opportunities. This comment also further insinuated the value that Principal Martin saw in AP courses and the experience of sitting for the AP exam beyond a test score. As can be seen in Table 4.5, the overall number of students taking AP Exams, the number of exams taken, and the exam pass rates have remained relatively the same since the 2019-20 academic year, despite a small decrease from 2021 to 2022 following the COVID19 pandemic. While not shown in this table, each number is an increase from the 2018-19 academic year, which is when AVID was implemented at Milltown High School. An increase in each of these categories indicates more students are enrolling in AP courses. There are several data points that need to be taken into consideration, however, to fully understand what each increase means, and why a categorical increase is important to understand equity and access and outcomes of AP course enrollment. Firstly, taking the course is required to receive financial assistance or full coverage of AP exam fees. Additionally, students are required to take the AP exam if they complete the corresponding AP course. Some students may be enrolled in multiple courses and sit for multiple exams.

Table 4.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Students Who Took an AP Exam</th>
<th>Total Number of AP Exams Taken</th>
<th>AP Exam Pass Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021-22</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>64.6% (84 exams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-21</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>48.1% (88 exams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>58% (78 exams)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: South Carolina Department of Education
As denoted in Table 4.6, pass rate data by student demographic percentages was not available given the onset of the COVID19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the overall pass rate increased for all students. Additionally, pass rates increased for economically disadvantaged students. Again, this information presents only a piece of the equity puzzle that speaks to the level of just change taking place in access to AP courses.

**Table 4.6**

*Milltown High School AP Exam Pass Rates by Student Demographic Percentage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
<th>2021-22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Alaskan Native</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education
*Data not available

**Perception of the AP Program**

Principal Martin made several statements that indicated the high regard with which he held AP course experiences for students at Milltown High School. He believed these courses employed a level of rigorous instruction that all students deserved to experience, regardless of the personalized path to college or career they chose. In the conversations with Principal Martin, Mrs. Robinson, and Dr. McDonald, as well as in the language analyzed from course descriptions, a belief in rigor for all was evident in their acknowledgements of the value of an AP course beyond a test score and the students that should experience AP.
Believed in the Value of an AP Course. Principal Martin made it clear that he was more concerned about students being prepared for postsecondary opportunities than what the AP exam scores were for Milltown High School. This was evident in his comments about how he had seen other leaders manipulate who they allowed to take an AP exam based on their belief or disbelief in a students’ abilities to pass the exam. Mrs. Robinson and Dr. McDonald echoed the value that the leaders at Milltown placed on experiencing AP courses and exams, regardless of pass percentages. It is important to clarify that the team’s emphasis on experiencing the rigor of an AP exam did not negate their desires for students to pass the AP test, however.

Mrs. Robinson expanded on the value of sitting for an AP test by sharing her own experience as a former student at Milltown High School. She shared that, while she didn’t score a 3 or above on the AP US History exam, the experience of preparing for and completing the exam left a lasting impact on her as both a student and later as an educator. “It prepared me so much more for college,” she stated. She continued, “So, I think that’s one of the reasons we try to push here. We are not going to deny a kid [who wants to] get into AP, and once they’re in, they’re going to have a heck of a time getting back out.” Principal Martin and his leadership team aimed to ensure that students in AP courses were supported both academically and socially and emotionally. The implementation of AVID and its strategies schoolwide, the mentorships, and the Centurions Connect lunch hour examples of these efforts. Rather than allowing students to easily drop a course, Principal Martin explained that he wanted to make sure that students were confident in their support networks in these courses. In fact, to be able to
drop an AP course from their schedule, each student was required to meet with Principal Graves before doing so. He explained that most of the time students just needed to know someone cared and believed in their ability to succeed.

**Made Efforts to Change the Stigma Attached to Being an AP Student.** A driving factor of Principal Martin’s decision to implement AVID at Milltown High School was to destigmatize the notion of gifted students being those best fit to take an AP course. Each Milltown leader included traits of the students for whom they felt AP should be encouraged as well as their own connection to the inclusiveness needed in AP courses. Mrs. Robinson noted that, despite being a White female, she felt like an outsider in AP classes as a high school student. She described the divisiveness in AP classes in terms of socioeconomic and family cultural disparities between students. She explained,

> I can remember vividly thinking, “Here I am on the single parent side and these people have two parents.” Like you could definitely see that… and that still happens today. Some kids are still in there because their parents put them in there. They may not have what you would consider test scores or GT status or whatever you want to call it, to actually be in the class. And sometimes those kids are just good at school.

Within this statement, Mrs. Robinson spoke to the nuances of cultural capital that have historically been perceived as merit for the AP experience. In this case, AP students were perceived as either being identified as gifted, or having two parents who knew how and why to advocate for the AP opportunity. Dr. McDonald, who identifies as Black, shared another perception of what it felt like for him to be a student in an AP class at Milltown. He stated,
Take it from me. It's intimidating to sit in the class… and it doesn't help if my teacher doesn't make me feel like I can contribute or that I belong in the room. If that doesn't happen, it's hard for me to want to work hard and or achieve.

Dr. McDonald spoke beyond the accessibility of AP classes for racially minoritized students and to the importance of a student’s sense of belonging within the class in order to be successful. For this same reason, Principal Martin also discussed the value of AVID as a tool to train teachers to recognize their biases and become more culturally relevant.

**Data-driven Approaches to Creating Opportunity**

Principal Martin referenced data in multiple forms throughout his description of opportunity and working to create it at Milltown High School. He emphasized a focus on people first. In doing so, he shared ways that this focus showed up in his planning efforts.

**Prioritized Culture in Data Analysis and Decision-Making.** Principal Martin frequently referenced the South Carolina CCR indicators, graduation rates, and standardized testing measures when discussing the goals and achievements of Milltown High School. However, in doing so, he notably prioritized student well-being and support over quantitative measures of success as a school. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) was implemented as a framework for supporting students at Milltown based on a need identified through behavioral and achievement data as well as feedback from students and teachers. AVID was implemented based on the realization that a lack of support in place for students who were not in advanced courses but also not at-risk of failure. Principal Martin noted that he and his team were looking at the “expectation gaps” that drove achievement gaps at Milltown High School. He said that the
achievement gaps “are more related to the expectations… Especially our lower middle group. AVID is helping us with helping teachers and students realize themselves that they can achieve and they can do the work.” The lower middle group to which Principal Martin refers is based on historical academic performance as based on standardized achievement metrics. Over time, students’ abilities can mistakenly become attached to these numbers, exacerbating deficit thinking among themselves and their teachers.

**Used Data to Identify and Leverage Community Partnerships for Student Support.** Principal Martin, Mrs. Robinson, and Dr. McDonald each highlighted the major role that local churches played in supporting the school community. Mrs. Robinson explained, “Churches are huge. The community is still laid out as the old textile communities were, with a small church on every corner.” Principal Martin established a pastoral council, a group that he meets with monthly to share things happening at Milltown High School and to highlight the school’s needs for continued support. The churches open their doors for tutoring sessions, activities, afternoon gym and field space as needed. They also provide a space for students to take AP tests. These partnerships exist despite the fact that many of the Milltown students do not attend the churches, which tend to be attended by older adults, many of which are retired.

Principal Martin has also worked diligently to connect with many small local business partners. He and Dr. McDonald explained that, while the school community does not have major financial donors, they have strong family support across racial and socioeconomic demographics. Principal Martin attributed a great deal of the shifting culture to the pride and investment of the local community in the school. He prioritized
this aspect of the principalship and noted, “The smaller the school community, the more
visible this role is, you know?”

Summary

In this section of the chapter, I provided evidence of that ways that Principal
Martin worked to foster greater access to AP coursework at Milltown High School. In
connection with the belief that Principal Martin had that AP courses presented great value
to students regardless of their exam score, he expanded course offerings and implemented
support programs to ensure that traditionally underrepresented students were able to gain
access into a welcoming experience to an AP course. Furthermore, Principal Martin
prioritized people and culture in the data that he prioritized and the ways that he used data
to both identify and leverage community partnerships to best support students.

Principal Smith and River Birch High School

Principal Smith had been in his role at River Birch High School for five years. A
well-respected figure in the Rolling Falls School District, many aspects of Principal
Smith’s leadership had been highlighted at both the district and state levels. The role of
principal at River Birch High School is Principal Smith’s first, having served as an
assistant principal at a neighboring high school within the Rolling Falls School District
before moving to River Birch. Principal Smith referred to himself as a “nontraditional”
educator. Prior to entering the field of education, he spent many years in military and law
enforcement after quickly realizing that he was not ready for a four-year college
experience. The experiences and life lessons he gained during those years prior to coming
into the field of education were pivotal to his leadership approaches and, as he shared, his
“why” for moving into education. For example, one of the biggest takeaways he shared was his trust and belief in the goodness of people. He stated,

I believe in people. People are amazing when they are all moving in a common direction… I tell my staff, “We’ll trust people first. We’re not going to create procedures and rules and systems that come from a lack of trust.” I believe wholeheartedly that everyone comes to work to do their best job. They just don’t do a better job until somebody shows them a better way.

The River Birch community had historically been tight-knit, despite its consolidation with other schools in a large district. Principal Smith, though beginning as an outsider to this tight-knit community, employed this belief in people as he worked to develop meaningful connections with staff and community stakeholders when he began as principal. His time in law enforcement introduced the value of connecting with the communities he served. He shared that “being the minority in the community I served provided me, well, truth be told, more exposure to diversity… and cultural awareness that has helped me navigate being a public school principal.”

Principal Smith emphasized the importance he and his staff placed on focusing on every child as an individual. In a school of over 2,000 students, many people doubted that this could be possible, but Principal Smith assured me that it was possible and is happening in all aspects of decision-making. Dr. Browning, a former instructional coach under the leadership of Principal Smith, supported this idea. She explained, “John [Principal Smith] went in with the idea that we were going to look at every student every day and we would say that all the time… Every kid has a story and is an individual. We
need to look at each individual student and what they’re showing us and what they’re telling us about themselves.”

**River Birch High School**

River Birch High School was officially established in 1960s, roughly a decade before the county-wide consolidated district in which it is located desegregated its schools. The history of the River Birch High School community was described as being rich and full of growth and change. The school began as a small 2A high school and has since grown to become a 5A school with an enrollment of over 2,000 students. River Birch High School is located in a rural part of Rolling Falls County. However, suburbs are quickly beginning to develop in an area that has historically existed as farmland for families that held the land for generations. Principal Smith and Dr. Browning both described the student population as not having any “identifiably wealthy” families or students. They each explained that over 60% of the students at River Birch are economically disadvantaged and that many of the students come from “blue collar, working class” families.

Generations of families also tend to stay in the area. Dr. Browning shared that there were multiple faculty who not only attended River Birch but whose parents also attended the school. Principal Smith also explained that there was a reputation of “old River Birch” in which “old timers hold onto a narrative of River Birch that no longer exists.” Therefore, he also faced significant opposition to any changes he introduced, but explained further that, with so many subdivisions being built, there was also an influx of
“new people moving in with new ideas and new goals and kind of stirring the pot with more opinions, and more viewpoints, and more diversity.”

In the early 2000s, the school was rebuilt close to its original site. Also in the early 2000s, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program was implemented at River Birch High School. This is a critical aspect of the advanced academic opportunities that are offered at the school today. When Principal Smith began at River Birch High School five years ago, the IB program had very low enrollment and demonstrated a very small percentage of its students receiving full diplomas. These traits indicated a need for new program development and support. The surrounding community, however, actively protested when the Rolling Falls School District engaged in discussions of the program’s removal from River Birch High School. Given that school choice and other charter and private options exist in the area and introduce competition for student enrollment, Principal Smith was tasked with “saving” the IB program at River Birch High School. For this reason, he suggested I speak with the AP/IB Coordinator, Avery Meyers. Mrs. Meyers shared with me that, given the emphasis on saving IB, most of the enrollment efforts had been placed on IB over AP courses. However, this emphasis is beginning to change.

The AP Capstone diploma program was implemented at River Birch in 2020. This introduced a new option for advanced academic opportunity that also provided a significantly higher level of access to rigor that was a different approach and allowed for more flexibility in students’ schedules than IB. References were made to suggest other educational options in the surrounding area and the types of parents that pursue those
opportunities. For example, Dr. Browning stated that “the poverty rate of the surrounding community is lower than that of the River Birch High School population because many wealthier students attend other schools in the area.”

**Student Demographics.** The racial demographics of River Birch High School mirror the increasing diversity that Principal Smith, Dr. Browning, and Mrs. Meyers each referenced. Despite the population in the surrounding community being predominantly White, the current student demographics demonstrate a slight difference, with the primary demographic groups being Black and/or African American, Hispanic and/or Latinx, and White students. As can be seen in Table 4.7, the numbers of students in each of these demographics have increased since 2018-19, with the greatest increase in the Black and/or African American student demographic.

**Table 4.7**

*River Birch High School Student Population Demographic Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
<th>2021-22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils in Poverty</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>1,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latinx</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,028</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>1,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>1,723</td>
<td>1,870</td>
<td>2,013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

The faculty demographics, on the other hand, do not match the student demographics. Dr. Browning shared that only thirteen percent of River Birch teachers identify as Black and/or African American, 3% as Hispanic and/or Latinx and the remaining 84% identify as White. This means that hundreds of students that may not have a single course taught
by a teacher that looks like them during their high school experience. It also indicates a strong likelihood of classroom values that are attached to predominantly White values and cultural norms. Given that no mention of culturally relevant instruction or racial identity was made by Principal Smith, Dr. Browning, or Mrs. Meyers, it leaves great room for questioning the values that are or are not placed on building relational capacity in this manner at River Birch High School.

**Principal Smith’s Role in Changing Access to AP Courses at River Birch High School**

Principal Smith vocalized the role that written policy plays in how he approaches decision-making as a principal. He believed in extending opportunities as they were presented by the district. He also spoke to how he delegates responsibilities for AP oversight. Principal Smith’s focus was on enacting change based on needs of the greatest number of students, and he directed his leadership team accordingly.

**Policy Interpretation and Enactment**

Principal Smith explained a trademark of his leadership as being willing to take a risk and try things that advance from traditions established or allowed by previous leadership that do not historically serve students. He extended this philosophy to creating opportunities for students, primarily through hiring leaders he trusted and delegating responsibility for overseeing the development of AP opportunities.

**Expanded AP Course Offerings and Implemented Support Programs.**

Principal Smith developed the mission and vision of River Birch with his faculty and staff. He said,
When I got here, I asked the faculty what they loved about the school. What they wanted to see changed. And then from there, we created goals. We created our mission, our vision. I didn’t even create a mission and vision in the very first year, because I don’t think that’s something a principal should do without talking to the people.

In many ways, Principal Smith and Dr. Browning both explained that this approach improved buy-in from teachers when they attempted to implement instructional and cultural changes. In other ways, data that I collected indicated that teachers continued to have significant say in practices in admittance to AP (and IB) courses. Principal Smith considered teacher input throughout the policies and programs he enacted at River Birch High School. He also emphasized that several faculty members were encouraged to pursue other professional avenues if their philosophical approach to educating children did not align to their well-being as individuals.

Principal Smith immediately spoke to the manner in which he believed in taking risks to “do things differently” as a leader. With regard to how educators adhere to traditional approaches to educating students, he stated,

I’ve found that we’re our own worst enemy with the tradition of education in that we do things without looking to see if it’s actually written down somewhere… More times than I can recall, I’ve asked “Well, where’s that written?” and no one can find where it’s written. So, if it’s not written down, well, then that means we can interpret and we can do things differently.
Dr. Browning and Mrs. Meyers each provided different examples of cases in which they were encouraged to take this same approach to change-making for the improvement of student outcomes. The first major initiative that was implemented and required major changes to structures in place was the hour-long lunch built into the daily schedule. This idea was not written into district policy in any capacity. So, Principal Smith decided to take a chance to see if the idea would gain enough traction to demonstrate positive effects for the students at River Birch. When asked why he prioritized this change, Principal Smith replied,

We try to address the known opportunity gaps. Clubs, for example. We offer a lot of clubs. They historically meet after school, yet over 50% of our student population rides a bus… So, clubs are technically open to everyone… the opportunity is there.

But is it really? No. Because not everyone has transportation to participate.

Principal Smith added that a solution that has proven to be successful so far has been to incorporate time during each day for students to participate in opportunities that allow them to connect in new and meaningful ways with their peers. This hour during the day also offered opportunities for students to engage in study time with their peers as well as receive extra support from teachers.

AP course offerings have also increased under Principal Smith’s leadership. He approved Mrs. Meyer’s efforts to pilot the College Board’s new AP African American Studies course for the 2023-24 school year. He also approved adding the AP Capstone Diploma program to the catalog of opportunities for River Birch High School students. Receiving an AP Capstone Diploma indicates that a student has taken and passed at least
four AP courses, plus two additional AP courses: AP Seminar and AP Research. Each course offers important preparatory college experiences for students. The most current enrollment numbers by racial demographic are shown for honors and AP courses at River Birch High School in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Honors</th>
<th>AP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latinx</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Rolling Falls School District*

Delegated Leadership to Evaluate and Change AP Enrollment Policies and Prerequisites. Principal Smith did not elaborate on major changes that he, himself, made that led to increased AP enrollment. Therefore, any changes made to the master course schedule or student schedules as they pertain to AP enrollment are to be indirectly attributed to the practices of Principal Smith. He described AP and IB as very small “programs that can be managed with the people… Our Advanced Studies Coordinator, for example, manages all that and then gives me data at the end of the year where she feels those achievement gaps are occurring with our teachers.”

Principal Smith directed questions regarding specific details of how AP was implemented to Dr. Browning and Mrs. Meyers. Both Dr. Browning and Mrs. Meyers explained that, prior to Principal Smith beginning as principal, both AP and IB were very
elitist programs. They explained that students not enrolled in honors prerequisite courses with an A or high B were not even considered to be enrolled in an AP or IB course. Dr. Browning and Mrs. Meyers each explained that teachers had significant control over who they recommended for AP and IB courses and even who they approved to be in the courses they taught. As a result, AP and IB classes had very small numbers of students. Dr. Browning, especially, expressed strong disdain for how AP and IB courses were populated. She commented,

> It became very much about looking at the data and having conversations around “What are we doing that’s good for all? How is this good for all kids?” … So, it’s really about breaking the stigma of “they can’t do.” We won’t prescribe to that. Kids can do what we want to allow them to do and kids can do anything if they’re supported.

Dr. Browning explained the mindset of students being able to do what they are “allowed” and “supported” to do as a change in culture that became a priority across the school, not limited to AP and IB courses. Principal Smith also indicated his focus on a need to look more closely at individual student abilities beyond one numeric metric. He stated,

> We have students every year whose teachers tell me, “That kid is smarter than what his grades are” or “He doesn’t want his peers to know that he’s smart” or “she doesn’t want her peers to know she’s smart.” So, we do two sessions each year where we pull all honors, AP and IB kids. They automatically come to it. And then we pull any student enrolled in a CP class with a B or higher to consider enrollment in honors courses.
Principal Smith elaborated on the expanded approach to recruiting students for advanced courses. He described the process as entailing faculty jumping on board with the new approach or leaving River Birch if they did not prescribe to the new way of including students.

It is important to note that Dr. Browning had not yet worked at River Birch for one full year at the time of her interview. Furthermore, Mrs. Meyers, the current Advanced Studies Coordinator responded with a slightly different opinion of policies she felt needed to be changed to AP enrollment. She stated that both AP and IB students are “allowed to take an AP course as long as they have the prerequisites, and solid grades in honors classes.” She added that she, as the Advanced Studies Coordinator, “vets all AP Capstone and IB Diploma students through meetings” and that, while parent overrides are allowed “if a student really wants to take an AP course they can, but I make sure that myself or a counselor talks to the parent so they understand they are overriding the teachers and the Advanced Studies Coordinator’s recommendation.” This articulation of prior grades and parent overrides highlighted other potential barriers in place for students. For example, a student who chooses to challenge themselves by taking an honors course and makes a lower B or C is therefore unable to autonomously make a decision to enroll in an AP course if no parent advocate is present. This statement, ironically, carried the same nuance of opportunity that Principal Smith previously referenced when he asked “So, the opportunity is there – but is it really?”

Dr. Browning, who is now in an administrative role with Rolling Falls School District, offered a final comment regarding her frustrations at River Birch before leaving
after the 2021-22 school year for her current district position. She shared that she emphasized to the faculty that “the only way we are going to push this school forward is if we make kids feel successful, and you can’t do that by only picking the few kids you think in your mind are successful.” Principal Smith echoed the need to continue looking more closely at students and their individual goals to conduct enrollment outreach. As indicated in Table 4.9, the number of students who took an AP exam increased in smaller increments from 2019-20 to 2021-22. Likewise, the number of AP exams has shown greater increases, indicating that students are taking more than one AP course and sitting for the exams. This may be attributed to the addition of AP Capstone. However, I am unable to draw that conclusion without gathering additional data from individual student schedules, which I was not permitted to do by the Rolling Falls School District for this study.

**Table 4.9**

*River Birch High School AP Exam Participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Students Who Took an AP Exam</th>
<th>Total Number of AP Exams Taken</th>
<th>AP Exam Pass Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021-22</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>37.8% (176 exams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-21</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>41.6% (159 exams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>59.0% (184 exams)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

Similar nuance can be seen in Table 4.6, which demonstrates AP exam pass percentages by student demographic groups. For example, it can be seen that the pass rate for each demographic group decreased from 2020-21 to 2021-22. Similarly, the total pass rate percentage in Table 4.10 shows a decrease. Importantly, though, the overall number of exams taken increased. What is not known is how test taking (and thus course
enrollment) increased across demographic groups from year to year. This discrepancy is an example of how schools may receive recognition for increasing access and outcomes in AP courses, but who that access and success was granted to is left unknown in terms of equity.

Table 4.10

*River Birch High School AP Exam Pass Rates by Student Demographic Percentage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
<th>2021-22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Alaskan Native</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

*Data not available*

**Perception of the AP Program**

Principal Smith shared that when he began as a first-year student at a large university, he quickly realized that the traditional four-year college experience was not a good fit for him. He expressed that his decision to embrace a new and different path to the principalship was influential on his leadership approaches as a principal. These formative experiences extended to his views on AP, its relevance and its practicality for students.

**Valued the AP Program as an Important Option for Certain Students.**

Principal Smith openly shared his opinion that dual credit seemed to be a much more practical advanced academic opportunity for most students. He explained that the
financial relief that dual credit could potentially provide for students, who, in some cases, were able to save two years of tuition payments was a major incentive to enroll. The language he used to describe AP courses indicated that they were only useful for students who planned to pursue a four-year degree at a postsecondary institution that rewarded credit for passing an AP exam. Specifically, when asked about “open” enrollment at River Burch High School, Principal Smith stated,

They’re [AP courses] open enrollment… Now, there’s some natural expectations there… Because both of those [AP and IB] programs are very unique and rigorous, academically rigorous. So even through it is open for anyone to purse historically, it’s normally the high achieving students that value academics that pursue them.

Principal Smith’s view that AP courses were only pursued by “high achieving students that value academics” was supported in descriptions of AP courses that were dictated by the Rolling Falls School District. The language used to describe prerequisites for AP courses in the master course catalog placed similar emphasis on high achievement as a precursor to enrollment in an AP course. For example, the prerequisite listed for AP English Literature and Competition stated that students were required to show “successful completion of at least two honors-level English courses prior to attempting an AP course” as well as a “demonstrated ability to think critically” and with a “commitment to the Advanced Placement workload and examination.”

Dr. Browning discussed the increase they did see in student AP enrollment while she was at River Birch High School as being slow and incremental. While she did not use
language that explicitly addressed race or socioeconomics, when Dr. Browning referenced students who enrolled in AP courses for the first time, she expressed that,

You have to remember that you’re asking some students that see these courses as elitist to put themselves in them. That’s vulnerable for a student. So, this didn’t go from one year of an enrollment of 14 [in an AP class] to 25. This was a slow process over time, providing opportunity for kids and leveling that playing field.

**Data-Driven Approaches to Creating Opportunity**

Principal Smith frequently referenced the importance of relying on good data to drive the decisions he makes for students. Though a majority of the data he highlighted tended to be standardized, he frequently connected these metrics to how he decided to put supports in place for students in an individualized manner. For example, Principal Smith decided to add the lunch hour for enrichment opportunities after evaluating the number of students without access to transportation to access enrichment and support opportunities.

**Focused on Achievement Data in Decision-Making.**

Principal Smith selectively used the word “promotion focused” to describe how he and his staff evaluate achievement gaps at River Birch High School. He explained that he primarily focuses on “grade to grade” promotion for the majority of students and delegates the focus on AP and IB pipelines of opportunity to his Advanced Studies Coordinator. Dr. Browning shared that Principal Smith excelled at making data driven decisions that included democratic and inclusive approaches. For example, he established a Faculty Council. Principal Smith analyzed multiple data points connected to standardized achievement as well as school culture with the council.
However, she explained he also had to make difficult decisions based on standardized test
data.

These decisions often included encouraging teachers to pursue other professional avenues. Principal Smith, Dr. Browning explained, strongly emphasized coaching teachers before evaluating them too harshly. Principal Smith explained to me that his primary focus was on the performance of teachers who taught courses that concluded with End-of-Course (EOC) exams. He also suggested, however, that he analyzed AP and IB exam data to determine the effectiveness of AP and IB teachers and made decisions regarding course assignments accordingly. Mrs. Meyers highlighted the way that Principal Smith evaluates teacher performance as she explained how she determines who teaches AP and IB courses. She stated,

I work with Principal Smith and the rest of the instructional team to select teachers we believe will be successful. Any teacher who shows interest I do go and observe their teaching. But over the past four years, I have become very selective in who teaches AP and IB courses. Teachers who are not proven to be successful, I do coaching cycles with. If they continue to have three years of low data (below district, state, and national averages), then they are removed from teaching the course. That rule is per Principal Smith.

Principal Smith confirmed this approach to teacher evaluation and shared the spreadsheet tracker he uses to analyze the data, with teachers at risk of removal from their assigned course highlighted in red.
Summary

In this section of the chapter, I presented evidence to support the ways that Principal Smith changed access to AP courses at River Birch High School. Ultimately, Principal Smith expanded AP courses through adding programs like AP Capstone. He employed an Advanced Studies Coordinator to oversee all aspects of AP program management, including evaluation and expansion. Principal Smith viewed AP courses as a practical option for some students. As such, he continued to focus on achievement data in his decision-making and viewed AP exam scores as measures of student progress and teachers’ instructional capabilities in AP courses.

Dr. Johnson, Principal of Samuel Roberts High School

Dr. Johnson has been the Principal at Samuel Roberts High School for four years. He is a South Carolina native. Dr. Johnson, who identifies as a Black male, shared that his schooling experiences were very different from his professional experiences in the field of education. He explained that he grew up in a city where the schools were largely segregated by race. When he described his public school experiences, he stated,

In elementary, middle, and high school, the majority of my teachers were people of color. I saw a lot of African American men who were teachers and coaches and principals. And it wasn’t until I took my first teaching job in another location that I realized not every place was like that. I prefaced that to say that, in those previous experiences of mine, we had a lot of exposure to high level courses. AP specifically… there was an intentional drive to make sure we had access. Having a postsecondary plan was like a requirement… So that, to me, was just a regular
thing. I thought everybody did that. And it wasn’t until I became a teacher that I
realized, “Oh, this conversation’s not everywhere.”

Dr. Johnson attributed his definition of equity to his realization that his experience was
much different than many other students of color in South Carolina. He explained that he
thought “equity work is a lot about access and finding systemic loopholes that prevent
access.” Dr. Johnson began his career as a teacher and later served in other leadership
roles, including an assistant principal and a district administrator prior to becoming the
principal at Samuel Roberts High School. His experiences leading at multiple levels gave
him insight to policies and practices that both caused and perpetuated “access gaps” as he
described them. He elaborated,

And, as I matriculated through as a teacher and moved up the ladder of education,
particularly leaving the classroom… it became even more abundantly clear to me
that what my experiences were, were an anomaly. And that did not sit well with
me. That was very disturbing to me. Almost traumatic, because I’m thinking “Well,
why do we not… I don’t understand this.” So, I think those life experiences and
coming to the realization that there’s not many people of color in education, and
then only 2% of all educators are Black men.

The impact of these realizations that his own experience was quite different from other
students of color left a resounding influence on how Dr. Johnson was motivated to lead
for systemic change. He explained that he was technically considered an outsider to the
Samuel Roberts High School community. However, given the changes to the rapidly
growing city in which the school is located, he further explained that he was in a unique
position to make change that provided greater access for traditionally underrepresented students.

**Samuel Roberts High School**

Samuel Roberts High School is also one of the nearly 20 high schools in the Rolling Falls School District. The school was founded in the early 1960s but did not desegregate until the earlier 1970s. Many of the same families that attended the school during the early years have generations of family that still attend the school today. Dr. Johnson described the community as “family oriented” where “everybody knows everybody” despite the large student body.

**Student Demographics**

Samuel Roberts High School is located on the border of two NCES locale classification codes. While it is considered a large suburb by NCES locale classification standards, a large number of the population it serves resides within a geographic area classified as a small city. As can be seen in Table 4.11, the student population at Samuel Roberts High School is racially and socioeconomically diverse. The largest number of students come from three primary racial demographic groups. Approximately 57% of students identify as White, 19% identify as Hispanic or Latinx, 20% Black or African American. 45% (or 784 students) of the student body at Samuel Roberts High School has been identified as gifted.
Table 4.11

*Samuel Roberts High School Student Population Demographic Profile*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
<th>2021-22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils in Poverty</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Alaskan Native</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td>994</td>
<td>1,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>1,752</td>
<td>1,749</td>
<td>1,784</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

Dr. Johnson and Dr. Browning (who was also a teacher at Samuel Roberts High School) explained that students at Samuel Roberts High School come from rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods. In Rolling Falls School District, each school publishes a school portfolio. This portfolio is put together by each School Improvement Council. It includes background information on the school, the students that attend it, and projected goals for a five-year time period. Students are described in the most recent Samuel Roberts High School portfolio as living in homes “as varied as distressed trailers, public housing, modest single-family dwellings, and multi-million-dollar mansions.”

Dr. Johnson shared that Samuel Roberts High School has the highest number of students experiencing homelessness of any high school in the Rolling Falls School District. He further explained that the school is located near a variety of motels nearby that rent out on both a daily and weekly basis. Many students’ families choose this option of nonpermanent housing to be situated near the school. There is also a hospital within walking distance of the motels and the school and other forms of “economic accessibility” as Dr. Johnson described them. Given that many students at Samuel
Roberts lack the transportation necessary to “get across town without the bus,” the location of the school within these other types of community entities help make education at Samuel Roberts a feasible option. Dr. Johnson also explained that approximately 15% of the students at the school do not live within the school assignment territory and that many of them attend Samuel Roberts High School through school choice.

Samuel Roberts High School is known across the state of South Carolina as a school of historical excellence. Dr. Johnson described the school as being “perennially successful through every academic outcome from graduation rates to EOC scores, AP scores, you name it.” He added “this success is not equal across the board, however, and the stark reality is that not every kid is having success the way we think they’re having success.” Dr. Johnson and his leadership team conduct frequent data analyses together. When conducting a data analysis four years ago, Dr. Johnson shared that the team saw scores drop at least 15% “across the board when they removed students not zoned for Samuel Roberts High School from their calculations.

This discrepancy in achievement data across student zip codes indicated that, while Samuel Roberts was considered to be a school of excellence, it wasn’t providing inclusion of all students in its definition of meeting students need to this capacity. One example of including data that boasts of excellence without sharing who was experiencing that excellence is evident in the school’s portfolio. It reads “the percentage of AP students who scored a 3 or higher on an AP exam increased from 66% in 2019-20 to 75% in 2020-21.” However, this one data point leaves several questions to be
answered, including: What about the number of students sitting for those exams? What demographic groups participated?

In years following the COVID19 pandemic, Samuel Roberts High School also shifted from being considered an “Excellent” school (in 2018-19) to a “Good” school (in 2021-22) by South Carolina School Report Card metrics. Dr. Johnson shared that he and his staff are still working to better identify and provide support for the challenges that the school community faces in the aftermath of the pandemic. The culture of academic excellence is still prevalent, and parents are assured that rigor remains a top priority. It is also stated in the school portfolio that “one of the means of promoting rigor here at Samuel Roberts High School is through a philosophy of moving students into higher level courses if the achievement data supports it.”

The “Elephant in the Room”

The name of Samuel Roberts High School is connected to racist political leadership. When asked about the history and culture of Samuel Roberts High School, Dr. Johnson acknowledged the name of the school as “the elephant in the room.” Dr. Johnson kept his commentary regarding Samuel Roberts as an individual brief but stated “If he knew I was sitting in this chair, he probably wouldn’t be very happy about it.” He further commented that the well-known and racist history of the school creates an “awkward dynamic” but that the students are well-aware of it and contend with this aspect of the school’s identity. Dr. Johnson shared that he and the faculty try to intentionally create a “very different narrative.” For example, he referenced the school’s atrium. In the atrium, flags hang that represent countries from all over the world. Dr. Johnson stated that the
international flags represent the birth nation of at least one student in the building. He added that each time a new student is enrolled from another home country, their flag is added to the display.

Dr. Johnson shared that there is a small minority of alumni who attended the school during its early years and still adhere to the southern heritage. This small but loud group let their disgruntlement with the inclusivity of the new Samuel Roberts High School be known to Dr. Johnson. After seeing the international flags, for example, they felt that only the American flag should be displayed. Nevertheless, Dr. Johnson proudly stated that he explains the way things are done in a respectful manner that focuses on the well-being of the students at Samuel Roberts High School first. Despite his attempts to move the school forward, there are still prominent examples of a certain degree of pride in its racist history. For example, the school’s website still displays a traditional mantra that emphasizes a goal of emulating certain attributes of Samuel Roberts as a leader. Nevertheless, Dr. Johnson emphasized that his appreciation for the richness of racial and socioeconomic diversity of the students at Samuel Roberts High School continue to guide his efforts at creating a better way forward for the school community. He described this appreciation when he said “I like to think of this school as America… [The diversity] makes it quite beautiful.”

Dr. Johnson’s Role in Reducing Barriers to AP Enrollment at Samuel Roberts High School

Dr. Johnson began as principal at Samuel Roberts High School, which has historically been known for having greater numbers of AP course offerings and success
for a certain group of students within those courses. The culture of excellence did not permeate to the experiences of all students, however. Therefore, Dr. Johnson explained that his focus centered on removing barriers that were limiting AP opportunity to be access by racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged students.

**Policy Interpretation and Enactment**

Dr. Johnson spoke frequently to the role that navigating policy and enacting change played in the removal of barriers to AP enrollment for marginalized students. While he admitted that certain policies were communicated by the district in terms of student prerequisites and resource allocations, they were not always written down, and that allowed him to “push to the limits” where he could with making needed change.

**Focused on Removing Barriers to Access and Implemented Support Programs.** Dr. Johnson attributed his awareness of systemic barriers to AP enrollment opportunities to his own schooling and professional experiences. Reflection on these experiences led Dr. Johnson to consider himself an “anomaly” after seeing so many other students of color be systemically excluded from the same opportunities that he was afforded. Consequently, he explained that he naturally looks for the “systemic loopholes” that hinder opportunity and progress for many students of color, specifically. After Dr. Johnson shared how he defines achievement gaps as being “outcomes focused,” he followed up with a telling statement, “I’m hoping you can ask a question about an access gap.” As can be seen in Table 4.12, there were stark disparities in the enrollment numbers by racial demographic in both honors and AP courses during the 2021-22 school year.
Table 4.12

SRHS 2021-22 Enrollment by Racial Demographic in Honors and AP Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Honors</th>
<th>AP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rolling Falls School District

According to Dr. Johnson, the disparities were a result of systemic barriers in access to AP course enrollment for marginalized student groups. He commented,

- In general, the vast majority of students who participate in AP are White students, and specifically White male students. I think their [AP course enrollments are] somewhere in the neighborhood of 90% White to 10% anything else. So, that does not match or mirror our school population at all. And so, that’s an access and opportunity gap that exists. Whether that’s intentionally created in scheduling or is a mindset shift… I have some questions about that.

He focused his leadership efforts on identifying and removing the barriers to these opportunities. He also identified a need to change the narrative that surrounded AP course enrollment at the school. As a result, he introduced the idea of implementing AVID to his leadership team. They quickly bought in, and efforts to enact AVID as a new option to support traditionally underrepresented students in AP courses went underway in 2021-22. Given the recent timing of AVID’s implementation at Samuel Roberts High School, not enough time had passed to collect causal data and draw inferences as to
whether change had yet taken place in terms of increasing access to AP courses for these particular students.

In addition to focusing on removing barriers and providing new forms of support, Dr. Johnson also referenced the intentional work that he and his faculty had done around recruiting female students to enroll in AP Computer Science. In the front office of the school, three certificates from the College Board are on display. These certificates were presented to the AP Computer Science teacher for notably diversifying and increasing success for female students. This milestone was achieved through strategically and intentionally identifying barriers to the course in partnership with the engineering and robotics programs that were already in place at Samuel Roberts High School. Dr. Johnson described the partnership as having “a larger impact into giving students the confidence that they can also be in that space.” As this example shows, Dr. Johnson exhibited an awareness of internal resources and connected initiatives that were already in place to build opportunities for connected and deeper engagement for students.

**Changed Enrollment Policies and Prerequisites.** Dr. Johnson began to see initial mindset shifts and buy-in from faculty that was needed to continue moving forward with small changes to enrollment policies and prerequisites. The most notable change that both Dr. Johnson and Dr. Williams, the head of the counseling department, shared was a shift in the language of the perquisites. It is important to note that neither Dr. Johnson nor Dr. Williams were included in the development of local or district enrollment policy. Dr. Williams acknowledged “limitations to advanced classes based on grades needed (As and Bs) to take those classes.” While the Rolling Falls School District
requires that each school publishes courses using specific descriptions in their master
course catalogs, the counseling department at Samuel Roberts published its own
document that specifically focused on AP course prerequisites with new language
incorporated.

Dr. Johnson explained that this was only the beginning of the language shifts. He
had not been successful in completely changing the requirements in some cases.
However, where possible, the addition of “OR teacher recommendation” was inserted as
a way to break barriers for some students who may not have had the quantitative grade
requirements but possessed valuable skills that could and should be honored and valued
in the AP setting. Despite the small initial attempts to make incremental change, data that
highlights AP exam participation and pass rates indicates significantly fewer students
taking an AP exam. Since students that complete an AP course are required to take the
AP exam, it can be appropriately assumed that AP course enrollment has also decreased.
However, pass rates have increased relatively substantially. As can be seen in Table 4.13
(in addition to the enrollment data seen in Table 4.12), there remain major discrepancies
in both access to (and likely outcomes in) AP courses for underrepresented student
groups and their peers. Importantly, socioeconomic status is left out of this analysis by
the Rolling Falls School District. It is not a data point that is tracked in terms of
enrollment in AP or exam pass rates.
Table 4.13

*Samuel Roberts High School AP Exam Participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Students Who Took an AP Exam</th>
<th>Total Number of AP Exams Taken</th>
<th>AP Exam Pass Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021-22</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>729</td>
<td>78.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020-21</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>833</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

As shown in Table 4.14, the AP exam pass rates Black/African American students have remained consistent while Hispanic/Latinx students have shown an increase. Moreover, students considered to be economically disadvantaged have also shown a small increase in passing percentages. While question remain as to how many students this includes, it is reasonable to assume that intentional supports provided by initiatives like AVID for traditionally underrepresented students are beginning to prove their effectiveness.

Table 4.14

*Samuel Roberts High School AP Exam Pass Rates by Student Demographic Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019-20</th>
<th>2020-21</th>
<th>2021-22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Alaskan Native</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/ Latinx</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Department of Education*

*Data not available*

Perception of the AP Program

**Believed in the Value of AP Course Participation.** Dr. Johnson made explicitly clear that he found value in AP participation and measures of success in AP beyond the
College Board exam score. He began by explaining the current mindset around student achievement that he was seeking to change at the school. Dr. Johnson stated,

We have a culture of high expectations in our building. Teachers here view themselves as professionals. They have high expectations, and they take pride in their work. They take pride in students’ learning and achieving… The consequence to that has been that, because we have this strong desire for kids to succeed, we have tied our personal successes as adults to their achievement. So, because this has been embedded in this building for many, many years, the negative outcome of that is that we are not as willing to take risks on students who [some think] may drop that data.

The fact that standardized achievement attached to measures of success were so important that students began to be viewed as “risks” was a harmful reality that Dr. Johnson explained he was working long-term to change at Samuel Roberts High School. Dr. Johnson emphasized that he chose to lead for longer-term outcomes that were more accurate measures of student success and well-being. He indicated the value he placed on access to AP courses when he said,

We strive to be excellent everywhere. The negative part of that, and that we often have to check ourselves on is, are we willing to win the race at the expense of excluding others?... We’re trying to end generational poverty. We’re trying to give people better access to economic freedom. Like, that’s the big picture. Let’s keep our eyes on the big picture.
Dr. Johnson insinuated a correlation between participation in AP courses and experiencing the rigor of an AP exam and students’ long-term outcomes in postsecondary education and careers by implying that doing so would offer access to new ways of life, and in some cases, outside of economic disadvantage.

**Data-Driven Approaches to Creating Opportunity**

Dr. Johnson’s focus on removing barriers for students inevitably led him to focus on identifying opportunity gaps for marginalized student populations through data analysis with his faculty council. Doing so was a new approach for the team in terms of what they were directed to consider as they thought critically about student access to advanced opportunities at Samuel Roberts High School.

**Conducted Data Analyses with Leadership Team to Identify Opportunity Gaps.** Dr. Johnson, his leadership team, and the faculty council of the school conduct what he called a “DAP analysis” at the end of every academic year. The faculty council includes a “very diverse swatch of our faculty” as Dr Johnson shared. These groups work together to describe (D) what they see in terms of opportunity gaps that arise in the data, ascribe (A) or make assumptions about the data, and then prescribe (P) or decide how to approach closing the identified gaps. The DAP analysis process led to the team discovering the disparities in enrollment and achievement in AP courses as well as the decision to implement AVID as a first step toward providing better access and supports for students. Dr. Johnson also explained that these groups analyze data on postsecondary progress,
There is rich data that we get back about kids’ success once they leave here and attend two- and four-year colleges. We get that data back every single year. So, we are able to see how each cohort that graduates is doing… That data has shown that kids who have taken AP courses, no matter what they score on the AP exam, retain at a higher rate at the next institution they go to. There is a lot of evidence to say that we should give kids opportunities to take AP courses.

This particular data point, coupled with a most recent research brief published by the College Board on the value of an AP class (even if a student does not pass the AP exam), has been used to continue working to shift mindsets toward AP and its value at Samuel Roberts High School.

**Summary**

In this section of the chapter, I highlighted evidence of the ways that Dr. Johnson identified and worked to remove barriers to AP course enrollment at Samuel Roberts High School. While Dr. Johnson did not lead a school that needed AP expansion, he did lead a school that enacted significant barriers to marginalized student enrollment in advanced coursework. Dr. Johnson implemented AVID as a first step to creating a culture shift needed to begin expanding access to AP courses in equitable ways. Dr. Johnson spoke frequently of the personal experiences that enabled him to better understand the barriers that were in place and ultimately remove them for students. Shifting teacher mindsets was a major aspect of the foundation Dr. Johnson was working to create to intentionally create sustainable change.
Conclusion

In this study, I employed my analysis of extensive data collected from interviews, documents, and archival records to provide evidence of how each principal’s leadership actions were influenced to a degree by their perceptions of opportunity gaps and achievement gaps and the ways that they enacted change affected access to AP courses for racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged students. Each principal’s actions demonstrated the degree to which their understandings of opportunity gaps were evident in their policy interpretation and enactment, their perceptions of the AP program, and their approaches to creating opportunity through data-driven approaches.

Notwithstanding these similarities found in their leadership actions, each principal demonstrated a different understanding of how gaps in opportunity were present in their school community. The experiences they brought with them to the principalship, coupled with the internal and external pressures of the school and district communities, influenced each leader in ways that led to different approaches to change-making in their school.
CHAPTER FIVE
CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"It is actively immoral for school leaders to attempt to embrace any genre of administration without first grappling with the social, political, and cultural contexts in which their schools exist."

Dr. April Peters-Hawkins (with reference to Dr. Michael Dantley)

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that principals perceived opportunity gaps that exist within their school, the ways that those perceptions connected to their leadership practices, and how those practices were enacted in ways that influence access to AP courses for racially minoritized students. In Chapter Four, I described findings that illustrated three primary ways that Principal Martin, Principal Smith, and Dr. Johnson directly and indirectly affected access to AP courses for racially minoritized students in their schools: through how they interpreted and enacted policy, how they perceived the AP program, and how they identified and created opportunity using data-driven approaches. In this chapter, I use the conceptual framework to compare and contrast each leader’s perceptions of opportunity gaps in their schools and their leadership approaches to creating access in AP courses. Specifically, I illuminate the ways that each principal understood the intersectional nature of the racialized, spatialized, and socioeconomic characteristics of opportunity gaps for students in their school. Additionally, I connect the cross-case analysis to the literature to discuss the ways that the findings both support previous research and address gaps to be explored more deeply.

Policy Interpretation and Enactment
Principals have the agency (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) to positively affect educational change and increase equity in their school communities (Theoharis, 2009). The ways principals choose to structure schools, classes, and teacher and student assignments each impact school culture. In this study, each principal was included, to some regard, in expanding AP course offerings at their schools. Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson both spearheaded efforts to add AP courses based on feedback from their respective counseling departments and instructional leaders. A precursor to their decisions to add more courses was their introduction of AVID. The decision to implement AVID at their schools entailed significant buy-in from their leadership and counseling teams and a restructuring of their master course schedules. Nonetheless, Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson each acknowledged the fact that principals often are best positioned to promote these types of school-level reform efforts (Louis et al., 2010). They each stated that they encouraged staff to try new things and used the saying “own any [perceived] mistakes” to ensure their staff that they were a partner in the work. Conversely, Principal Smith explained that he delegated most of the decision-making regarding course additions to Mrs. Meyers, the Advanced Studies Coordinator. Mrs. Meyers added that she had not yet been able to prioritize AP enrollment outreach given that IB enrollment and success was a top priority for the school. Nonetheless, Principal Smith received communication from the Rolling Falls School District office with opportunities such as the addition of the AP Capstone diploma program and piloting new courses such as AP African American studies. He capitalized on these opportunities to be innovative within the district context and made the decision to add the opportunities. He
acknowledged that he was in a position that both empowered him to try new approaches but also held him the most accountable for progress or lack thereof, as is also recognized in the literature (Khalifa, 2016). Though it cannot be determined as an outcome in this particular study, questions regarding the degree to which Principal Smith’s actions were influenced by district level input remain. Given the location of River Burch High School outside of a rapidly growing city, the changing racial and socioeconomic demographics of the school community, and the fact that many affluent White families in the area choose to attend other school options, it is likely that Principal Smith’s priorities may have shifted from more of an equity focus to maintaining the status quo (Oakes et al., 2000).

When Principal Martin began at Milltown High School, few AP course options existed for students. Therefore, his primary focus was on fostering access to greater opportunities for students within the small school. A school’s ability to offer AP courses requires resources that smaller schools sometimes do not have. This entailed a complex understanding of how to utilize multiple forms of capital to create greater opportunity. Principal Smith and Dr. Johnson, on the other hand, began as principals at larger schools where there was already a plethora of AP offerings. In Principal Smith’s case, IB courses took precedent, as he was pressured to improve outcomes from the program by the district and community. Dr. Johnson focused on removing more obvious barriers that were in place at Samuel Roberts High School and spoke to the systemic nature of those barriers. For example, high grades in only honors courses were required of students to be admitted. Dr. Johnson acknowledged that this was a systemic barrier that dated back to
when many students were in elementary and middle school and were not identified as gifted and subsequently not tracked into honors courses.

Both Dr. Johnson and Principal Martin acknowledged aspects of their own schooling experiences that heavily influenced their decision-making as principals and connection to students. In this way, they demonstrated a greater attention to being critically reflective of their practice than Principal Smith. Dr. Johnson recognized racial identity in discussing his own recognition of opportunities he experienced as a Black male being an “anomaly.” Principal Martin referred several times to his experiences growing up in a rural setting and “poor” as he referred to his economic disadvantage. He also explicitly referenced racial identity and socioeconomic status as he described his vision for what AP classes looked like at Milltown High School. Principal Smith made a brief reference to working as the “minority” in the communities he served in his previous career, but made no elicit connection of racial identity to conversation regarding opportunity. Rather, his focus was heavily correlated with the standardized measures kept by the Rolling Falls School District and a focus on every student. To that end, he emphasized that “kids in poverty” can learn just like other kids when supported appropriately. Principal Smith also considered the historically rural setting that was quickly changing into suburban territory within the county. This change in population and proximity to resources follows the national pattern of changing suburban landscapes that merits an even greater need for further research (Diamond et al., 2021). As shown in Table 5.1, evidence of each principal’s recognition of the racialized, spatialized, and
socioeconomic barriers to opportunity was not always present in their interpretation of policy and enactment of new policies.

Table 5.1

Cross-Case Analysis of Leadership Practices Connected to Policy Interpretation and Enactment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Practice(s)</th>
<th>Principal Martin</th>
<th>Principal Smith</th>
<th>Dr. Johnson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanded course offerings and implemented support programs</td>
<td>Expanding course offerings and implemented support programs</td>
<td>Focused on removing barriers to access and implemented support programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed AP enrollment policies and prerequisites</td>
<td>Delegated leadership to evaluate AP enrollment policies and prerequisites</td>
<td>Changed AP enrollment policies and prerequisites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racialized Evidence</td>
<td>Included racial identity of students in vision for inclusive AP courses.</td>
<td>Did not include racial identity as a consideration in his planning or practice.</td>
<td>Included racial identity of students in his reasoning for identifying barriers in access to AP courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Browning referenced the significant racial disparities between the students and teachers of the school.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Included racial identity in his descriptions of the overwhelming majority of White students that participate in AP courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatialized Evidence</td>
<td>Referenced location of school in terms of being disconnected from certain resources, such as public transportation.</td>
<td>Described the growing and changing community dynamics of the rural area in which the school is situated as part of the “new ideas” he introduced.</td>
<td>Highlighted the school’s proximity to city resources and living arrangements of students’ families in identifying barriers to opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Referenced the geographic diversity of students (rural, urban, suburban communities)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Across cases, principals largely recognized the challenges that economically disadvantaged students experienced in accessing opportunities to engage in AP coursework. The language used by each principal, and especially by Principal Smith, was often vague and loaded with nuance to refer to issues of race. While poverty has deeply rooted influences over the experiences of students (Howard, 2020), the intersectionality of race, space, and socioeconomic status of students must be recognized to fully digest the nature of the opportunity gaps that individual students experience.

**Perception of the AP Program**

Each principal expressed their own viewpoints on the value of AP as an advanced academic option in high school as well as the weight it carries for a student after graduation. These perceptions seemed to also speak to the level of priority that each principal placed on expanding access to AP courses. Principal Martin indicated a deep

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Evidence</th>
<th>Included student socioeconomic status in vision for inclusive AP courses</th>
<th>Included socioeconomic status in his decision to include time during the school day for enrichment opportunities.</th>
<th>Highlighted the number of students experiencing homelessness when discussing barriers to opportunity.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Included socioeconomic status in his decision to include time during the school day for enrichment opportunities.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Described the socioeconomic diversity of the student body as a notable trait that is also highly correlated with tracking into AP courses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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understanding of the level of instructional rigor of AP courses. He believed in scaffolding to deliver rigorous content to greater numbers of students. This belief was evident in the rearrangement of the master course schedule to incorporate preparatory courses that provided the time and space needed for teachers to build relational capacity in preparation for the AP experience. Principal Martin also encouraged all teachers to become AP certified so that they better understood this value in rigor for all, as well. Dr. Johnson also indicated a similar understanding and philosophy of AP rigor for all in his description of AVID implementation and a focus on increasing rigor in all classes at Samuel Roberts High School. Both principals spoke to the fact that AP courses better prepared students for the rigor of higher educational institutions. The degree to which students are able to experience courses and the corresponding exam has also been well-documented as a strong predictor of a student’s success in college (Adelman, 2006; Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

Principal Martin expressed disdain for the manner in which other leaders often manipulated AP exam data by limiting access to both taking AP courses and sitting for the corresponding AP exams. Both Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson acknowledged the manner in which AP courses demystified many aspects of the college level course experience, especially for first-generation college students. For these leaders, experiencing the official College Board administered exam was an important part of the AP experience. They believed that students benefitted from the experience, regardless of their score on the exam. Contrarily, Principal Smith continued to find passing the AP exam as the ultimate measure of a student’s experience and the level of instruction being
delivered. He also viewed AP in terms of “practicality,” with his opinion being that dual credit courses presented as a much more appealing option, particularly for economically disadvantaged students. Moreover, Principal Smith’s reference to AP courses as being designed for “high-achieving students who value academics” mirrors the origin of the AP program, which was intentionally designed for high-achieving students at high-status schools in the United States (Schneider, 2009). The reservation of AP courses for students who were thought to value academics in Principal Smith’s perception acted as a driver for the work that Mrs. Meyers engaged in in terms of expanding access to AP courses and also contributed to the lack of emphasis placed on prioritizing participation outreach efforts.

Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson each implemented AVID at their schools in an effort to begin to change the narrative of who was fit for AP courses at their schools. Specifically in the case of Principal Martin, he admitted that their current AP courses still showed great discrepancies in enrollment numbers by race and socioeconomic status, but explained that AVID and the reconstruction of the master course schedule was a first major step toward mitigating these differences. Given that Milltown High School is the only high school in its district, Principal Martin was quickly able to get full support from the Foothills School District administration to make these changes to the master schedule and the addition of preparatory classes. Conversely, in Rolling Falls School District, both Principal Smith and Dr. Johnson were privy to receiving communication and financial resources from the district administration, but were restrained to a degree in their ability to deviate from certain prerequisites needed to shift the narrative as quickly for AP in
their schools. However, Dr. Johnson began to look for ways to work around certain aspects of prerequisite communication to students, given that there was no official policy written by the Rolling Falls School District Board of Education to follow.

Principal Martin and Mrs. Robinson of Milltown High School and Dr. Johnson and Dr. Williams of Samuel Roberts High School each highlighted evidence of the racialized and socioeconomic stigmas attached to the identities of AP students at their schools. Principal Smith clearly stated that he did not consider subgroups in his analyses, because he instead focused on every child. This focus on “every” and “all” students replaced a focus on the racial identities of students who have historically been marginalized. Furthermore, the lack of recognition of the role that race plays in the way that barriers to opportunity exist seemed to perpetuate deficit narratives of students of color (Milner, 2012). For this reason, Mrs. Meyers shared that students of color often did not attempt to register for AP courses.

As evident in Table 5.2, racialized and socioeconomic evidence was evident in the ways that, primarily Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson, perceived AP courses to be of value in their schools.

**Table 5.2**

*Cross-Case Analysis of Leadership Actions Connected to Perceptions of the AP Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Practice(s)</th>
<th>Principal Martin</th>
<th>Principal Smith</th>
<th>Dr. Johnson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believed in the value of AP course participation</td>
<td>Made efforts to change the stigma</td>
<td>Valued AP courses as an important option for certain students</td>
<td>Believed in the value of AP course participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence Type</td>
<td>Acknowledged in Descriptions of Stigma Associated with Being an AP Student</td>
<td>Not referenced.</td>
<td>Acknowledged that Many Other Students of Color Have Not Been Granted the Same Opportunities to Advance Like in AP, Including Students of Color at Samuel Roberts High School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racialized Evidence</td>
<td>Referenced in Terms of Student Belonging in AP Classes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Evidence</td>
<td>Acknowledged in Descriptions of Stigma Associated with Being an AP Student.</td>
<td>Acknowledged that AP was not always the most practical option for economically disadvantaged students as compared to dual credit courses.</td>
<td>Acknowledged that generational poverty could be changed by student success in AP courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Referenced in Terms of Student Belonging in AP Classes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each leader demonstrated more awareness of how socioeconomic status played a role in who has historically been present in AP coursework. Acknowledgments of race and space were limited or absent entirely.

**Data-Driven Approaches to Creating Opportunity**
Each principal prioritized data differently in their analysis and planning processes. Principal Martin prioritized developing a positive school culture. As a result, he implemented PBIS and AVID. He explained that quantitative measures of success for all students were beginning to increase following the implementation of these programs, most notably in increased graduation rates but also in AP exam participation data. Principal Martin emphasized a focus on “expectation gaps” as a causal factor in the achievement gaps that existed across demographic groups. He prioritized working across the board with his teachers to ensure they better understood culturally relevant instruction and believed in rigorous instruction for all students. Overall, Principal Martin emphasized his focus on people first in terms of data analysis. He applied this people first mentality to his intentionality placed on developing meaningful community partnerships.

Similarly, Dr. Johnson also emphasized people in his focus on engaging DAP analyses with his faculty council to identify opportunity gaps, specifically those experienced by racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged students. Rather than focusing on AP exam pass rates exclusively, Dr. Johnson also prioritized analyzing postsecondary progress of former graduates to better understand how AP was beneficial to student experiences after high school graduation. From there, Dr. Johnson moved his faculty council to an examination of student enrollment in AP courses, as well as honors and CP courses. Principal Smith also discussed an analysis of this data, but he did not lead the analysis. Mrs. Meyers reported the findings from her analysis to him for future planning.
Principal Smith prioritized supporting students to increase standardized measures of academic achievement and ensure “promotion” for each child. Dr. Johnson and Principal Martin also took these measures into consideration, but highlighted the importance of looking beyond these measures to determine if students are actually being supported and succeeding in ways that contributed to their best futures. Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson also highlighted differential access to opportunity in how they defined the origin of achievement gaps. Their understandings aligned to the findings Nadelson et al. (2020) that school leaders who understand the importance of advocating for educational equity were more likely to prioritize data analyses with the goal of eliminating student marginalization.

**Table 5.3**

*Cross Case Analysis of Leadership Actions Connected to Data-Driven Creation of Opportunity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Practice(s)</th>
<th>Principal Martin</th>
<th>Principal Smith</th>
<th>Dr. Johnson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prioritized culture in</td>
<td>Prioritized culture in data analysis and decision-making</td>
<td>Focused on achievement data in decision-making</td>
<td>Conducted data analyses with leadership team to identify opportunity gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>data analysis and decision-</td>
<td>Used data to identify and leverage community partnerships for student support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on achievement data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in decision-making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducted data analyses with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership team to identify</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opportunity gaps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racialized Evidence</td>
<td>Dr. McDonald acknowledged the strong familial support that Black/ African</td>
<td>Principal Smith explicitly stated that he did not emphasize focus on “subgroups.”</td>
<td>Intentionally included racial data in DAP analyses with his faculty council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American families offered to the school community.</td>
<td>Instead, he referenced individualism in how he focuses on every student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mentioned by Principal Martin as an area for continued outreach and support with regard to AP course access.

Principal Martin described Black/African American males as outperforming White males in terms of achievement data, yet White males continue to be the largest demographic in AP courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spatialized Evidence</th>
<th>Established community councils that met monthly to collect feedback and discuss student support.</th>
<th>Not referenced.</th>
<th>Referenced intersectional disparities in achievement between students who were “zoned” for Samuel Roberts High School and those who were not.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged local businesses and churches, the primary stakeholders in the community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Evidence</td>
<td>Frequently referenced as a driver in strengthening community partnerships (particularly with local postsecondary institutions)</td>
<td>While race was referred to as a subgroup, socioeconomic status was referred to in Principal Smith’s description of all kids being capable of learning and achieving.</td>
<td>Referenced intersectional disparities in achievement between students who were “zoned” for Samuel Roberts High School and those who were not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. McDonald and Principal Martin each describe the intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status in their description of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each principal included aspects of student socioeconomic status as part of their data analysis and approaches to creating opportunity in their schools. While Principal Smith did not consider race in his data analyses, Principal Martin and Dr. Johnson each prioritized racial identity of students as an important aspect of the school culture they were working to develop, where students of color felt a sense of belonging in AP classrooms that had become seen as domains of White and/or affluent students (Tyson, 2013).

In Figure 5.1, I outline the ways that each principal’s perceptions of opportunity and achievement gaps in their schools ultimately affected student access to AP courses. Importantly, I considered in my analysis the ways that principals understood (or did not demonstrate an understanding of) opportunity gaps as: (a) causal factors of achievement gaps; (b) existing at the intersectional boundaries of race, place and space, and socioeconomic status; and (c) being enacted and perpetuated by the simultaneous interactions of people, practices, and policies (as seen in Figure 2.1). The application of these perceptions was evident in direct and indirect ways in each principal’s leadership actions. The ways in which those actions were applied to the people, practices, and policies (2) led to changes in access to AP courses for students; and (b) created outcomes and contexts that further influence principal perceptions of opportunity and achievement.
gaps in a cyclical nature. A critical component of the outcomes in access to student courses was the district context within which the principal leads.

**Figure 5.1**

*Principal Perceptions of Opportunity Gaps and their Influence on Student Access to AP Courses*

![Figure 5.1 Diagram](image)

**Conclusion**

As shown in Figure 5.1, each principal ultimately directly or indirectly influenced student access to enrollment in AP courses. Principal Martin, Principal Smith, and Dr. Johnson each demonstrated their influence in ways that were suited to the contexts in which their leadership actions were embedded. The connection between each principal’s perceptions of opportunity gaps in their schools and their leadership actions exemplify that which has been highlighted throughout the literature: that the ability of principals to adapt critical leadership skills in different contexts and in ways that result in equitable outcomes lies within principals’ skills, orientations and behaviors (Grissom et al., 2021)
and their understandings of the complexities of the school communities they serve (LaCour et al., 2017).
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Introduction

In this chapter, I synthesize the findings, cross-case analyses and discussion to provide a conclusion that summarizes the major ways that the principals’ perceptions of opportunity gaps in their schools contributed to their leadership actions and how those actions affected marginalized students’ access to AP course enrollment. In doing so, I highlight the similarities and differences in understandings and approaches taken by each principal in ways that are specific to the unique contexts in which their current leadership position is embedded. I also address the research questions that guided this study.

Conclusion

In this multiple case study, I demonstrated that, as reemphasized by Grissom et al. (2021), principals’ influence is indeed a factor (whether directly or indirectly) in student learning outcomes, and in this case their access to AP opportunities within their schools. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that principals perceived the opportunity gaps that existed within the current schools that they lead. The purpose was also to explore the ways that each principal’s perceptions connected to their leadership actions, and how those practices were enacted in ways that contribute to the access experienced by marginalized students in their school to AP coursework. The findings of the study illuminated the understandings that each principal had of opportunities that existed in their schools, and the gaps experienced by student demographic groups. Specifically, the findings highlighted that, although each principal enacted change in
unique ways according to their different understandings of opportunity and the life experiences they brought with them to their work, their leadership actions were applied in similar fashion. Each principal explained opportunity gaps and their approach to leading for equitable student outcomes as being enacted through policy interpretation and enactment of new policy and support programs, according to their perceptions of the AP program, and in ways that exemplified data-driven approaches to creating opportunity. Importantly, while each research question was answered by the findings of this study, the second research question, How do principals perceive opportunity gaps that exist for racially minoritized students in their school, merits further investigation given the colorblind language used by principals when discussing oppressive practices and, in some cases, a complete overlook or disregard for race as a factor in opportunity identification.

**Implications of the Study**

In this section of the chapter, I discuss implications of the study for research, practice, and policy. The implications for research and policy are intended to provide deeper insight to the challenges that school principals face in making change to enhance accessibility of AP coursework for racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged students. The implications for policy are also intended to provide a broader understanding of the intricacies of analyzing AP course enrollment and exam data for school and district leaders. The implications for practice are intended to provide practical suggestions for school leaders to consider to increase access to advanced coursework in their school in ways that most appropriately establish equitable pathways for student success.

**Implications for Research**
This study illuminates the need to more deeply investigate the ways that school principals engage in leadership practices that exhibit evidence of an awareness of the manner in which opportunity gaps exist at the intersection of racialized, spatialized and socioeconomic aspects of individuals’ experiences. To date, there is minimal research that focuses on the intersection of each of these three elements with regard to opportunity. More specifically, I have been unable to locate any research that investigates opportunity to AP courses at the boundaries of race, space and place, and socioeconomics. Given that AP prerequisite policies and preparatory efforts carry an incredible amount of nuance and complexity from school to school, it is important that school leaders understand a multitude of contextual factors that influence student access to AP courses and their learning experiences within them.

In this study and across the literature, racially, spatially, and socioeconomically marginalized students faced challenges in both accessing admittance to AP classes and feeling a sense of belonging within them as contested White and/or affluent learning spaces. Further research is also needed that employs frameworks to adequately assess the degree to which principals play a role in the experiences of students after they are admitted to AP courses. Researchers should investigate with close attention to the rapidly expanding opportunities for advanced academic challenge. For example, further research is needed to understand the ways in which dual credit, AP, IB, and Cambridge programs may play out as new forms of tracking students that may also be racialized, spatialized, and/or socioeconomic in their manifestations. True equity cannot be measured without considering each of these avenues of opportunity for students in different settings.
While this study demonstrated that there are feasible steps that principals can take to increase access to AP courses, it does not examine the systemic nature of the problem of inequitable access to advanced courses that begins in elementary school. Future research is needed that connects identification systems to levels of access at the secondary level and how middle and high school principals can work together creatively to increase access to enriching and rigorous curriculum for all students.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

There are numerous implications for policy and practice that come from this study. These implications are intricately connected, as they are intended for leaders whose practices enact them. Firstly, data that fully captures each aspect of opportunity to AP courses and student success within them is both limited and varied. While ESSA encourages states to report data specific to demographic access and achievement to receive additional funding for advanced coursework access, not every state prioritizes access to AP courses as a need. Principals, specifically, are positioned to actively create their own measures to identify at an individual level the demographic data of student enrollment in AP courses. Furthermore, principals are well-positioned to create measures of the AP experience, dependent on student experience and postsecondary success. This study offers rich data for principals to consider as they ask the questions that are necessary to diving deeper into access on their own campuses.

Principals have agency to make decisions on resource allocations for increasing access to AP courses. An understanding of how financial resources can be more flexibly applied to hiring and training teachers, developing partnerships with local higher
education institutions when possible, connecting students virtually when necessary, assisting students with exam fees (in states where assistance is nonexistent), and providing support programs such as AVID is critical to both policy development and the exercise of new practices.

Attention to racial identity was paid in limited amounts by the principals in this study. With colorblind legislative measures on the rise, it is imperative for school principals to understand the systemic inequities directly tied to race that have historically and continue to hinder student access to AP courses. While understanding the interconnection of race and socioeconomics is also important, principals must not lean on socioeconomics to divert from conversing about the role that race plays accessing advanced academic opportunities. Furthermore, school principals must also understand how to understand the complex existence of racial identity in differing spaces and places. The degree to which principals are able to discern racial inequities in their own schools will also contribute to the policies they develop locally and advocate for at greater levels. Schools will continue to be considered “good” by standardized measures but will fall short of being “great” as many students continue to be left behind otherwise.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study centered on a purposeful sample of three principals in unique settings within the state of South Carolina. Despite the fact that Dr. Johnson and Principal Smith led schools within the same district, they each led in contexts with very different histories and current realities. The recommendations for additional interviews were based on personal understandings and perceptions of equitable leadership. Future research is
needed to randomly sample populations in each school to limit bias as much as possible in findings. Additionally, I was the primary researcher for this study. I had never met the principals or the staff that I interviewed. Consequently, no level of trust or comfortability had been established with study participants prior to engaging with them in conversation that centered around matters that are often uncomfortable for people to discuss, particularly in a time in which racialized language and conversation has been riddled with inflammatory political attacks.

This also falls short of analyzing the principals’ influence on student experiences within AP courses. Given the sizable nature of this problem, research was limited to better understanding the role that principals play in access to AP courses only. Similarly, and most importantly, this study leaves out arguably the most important component of evaluating issues connected to influences on the student experience: student voice. Students were not included in the interviews used to triangulate data on each principal’s practices. This absence of student voice is both a limitation of this study as well as a critical focus an extension of the research. Additionally, while this study moves the literature forward in identifying opportunity according to race, place and socioeconomic status as intersectional in nature, it does not address the myriad of other aspects of student identities that may also play into barriers to opportunity based on localized and individual contexts. This includes but is certainly not limited to gender identity, religious beliefs, and differently abled learners.

Finally, this study was limited by the fact that it was conducted by me. It is inevitable that both my prioritization of data collection and analysis was influenced at
times by feelings connected to a subject matter that I am most passionate about. As I referenced in Chapter Three, I attempted to reflectively attend to these feelings and levels of bias using peer-reviewed tools.

Closing Remarks

A Note on Language

Often in education, differences from a particular norm are projected as deficits onto learners. In this study, such deficit orientations often showed up in the language used both in the literature and data collection. Colorblindness was also overwhelmingly present in the dialogue with nearly all participants. In a presidential address at the 2017 University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) conference, Dr. April Peters-Hawkins called for the use of a lexicon that “empowers and places people at the center, honors humanity, and decanters the dominant.” In this study, I have exerted a concerted effort to consistently reflect and expand my own language choices and, at times, choose different vocabulary than correlational terms in data released by governmental agencies. For example, while “subgroup” is used at the state and national level of data reporting, I elected to use “demographic groups” in an attempt to equalize the lexicon in my writing and avoid “value laden language” as further outlined by Dr. Peters-Hawkins. I address this aspect of the research, and my role as the researcher, with fervor, as a hopeful next step in beginning to “address the elephant in the room” as it pertains to the segregation of learning spaces and opportunity both across and within public schools in the United States post Brown v. Board.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Greetings Principal __________,

My name is Parker Morse Andreoli. I am a graduate assistant and doctoral candidate in the Educational and Organizational Leadership Development Department in the College of Education at Clemson University. Your name was recommended to me by several leaders and colleagues for potential dissertation outreach. I realize you have a very busy schedule of your own, but I appreciate any feedback you are able to provide as a potential participant in this relevant and timely study.

The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in a research study that examines principal perceptions of opportunity gaps and the ways that their leadership actions affect access to and success in Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

As a participant, you will be asked to conduct one 60-minute interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed for analytical purposes. Any information shared during the interview will remain confidential and anonymous. After the completion of the interview, individuals will receive a $25 gift card for their participation.

This study has been approved by the Clemson University Institutional Review Board. Approval will also be requested from the district in which you are employed prior to your participation in this study. The Clemson faculty member overseeing this research is Dr. Hans Klar (email: hklar@clemson.edu). Additional information on this research study is included in the attached document entitled, Addressing Gaps in Opportunity Adult Consent Form.

Thank you for considering this request. Your participation will contribute important information to the field to enhance policy and practice for more equitable student opportunities and leader support. Furthermore, information from this study will contribute to the development of more equitable policy for participation in Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

Please respond to this email with any questions (epmorse@g.clemson.edu).

Again, I greatly appreciate your time.

Warmest regards,

Parker
Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Principal Participants

Principal: _____________________________        School: _______________________

Introduction:

Thank you for your willingness to take the time to meet with me. As part of my dissertation, I would like to talk to you about how you lead for equitable student outcomes. In particular, we will focus on any gaps among student groups in AP course enrollment and success in outcomes.

Questions:

Principal and School Background

1. How long have you been the principal at this school?

2. In what ways do you consider yourself a leader of equity work?

3. What life experiences have contributed to the development of your leadership style?

4. Describe the local community that your school serves.

5. Describe the history of your school.

School and Community Demographics

6. What are the socioeconomic demographics of your school?

7. What are the socioeconomic demographics of the local community in which your school is situated?

8. What are the racial demographics of the local community in which your school is situated?

9. What are the racial demographics of your school?

Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

10. How do you define achievement gaps? Describe any achievement gaps that exist in your school.
11. How do you define opportunity gaps? Describe any opportunity gaps that exist in your school.

School Culture

12. Describe the culture of your school. How do teachers and staff work to support this culture?

13. What are the major goals for your school?

14. How are these goals connected to the school’s mission and vision?

15. How are achievement gaps considered in these goals as they are set? How are they considered as you and your staff go about reaching these goals?

16. How are opportunity gaps considered in these goals as they are set? How are they considered as you and your staff go about reaching these goals?

Advanced Placement Program

17. Describe the AP program in your school.

18. When can students begin taking AP courses?

19. What are the AP enrollment policies in your school?

20. What are the racial demographics of students enrolled in at least one AP course in your school? Socioeconomic demographics?

21. What other kinds of advanced courses does your school offer?

22. How are opportunities to participate in AP courses communicated to students? To parents?

23. How does the local community support your AP program?

Principal Influence

24. How is your leadership performance evaluated? (Are these standards set forth by the district? State?)

25. How does the district support your leadership endeavors?
26. Who is included in the development of AP enrollment policy in your school?

27. Who determines what teachers are selected to teach AP courses?

28. How are AP teachers supported? Who leads this support?

29. How are funds appropriated for the expansion and/or support of AP programming at your school?
Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Non-Principal Participants

Interviewee: _______________ Title/Role: _______________ School: _______

Introduction:

Thank you for your willingness to take the time to meet with me. As part of my dissertation, I would like to talk to you about how the Advanced Placement (AP) program functions in your school. In particular, we will focus on any gaps among student groups in AP course enrollment and success in outcomes.

Questions:

Employee and School Background

1. How long have you worked at this school? Describe your role.

2. Describe the local community that your school serves.

3. Describe the history of your school.

School and Community Demographics

4. What are the socioeconomic demographics of your school?

5. What are the socioeconomic demographics of the local community in which your school is situated?

6. What are the racial demographics of the local community in which your school is situated?

7. What are the racial demographics of your school?

Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

8. How do you define achievement gaps? Describe any achievement gaps that exist in your school.

9. How do you define opportunity gaps? Describe any opportunity gaps that exist in your school.
School Culture

10. Describe the culture of your school.
   a. How do teachers and staff work to support this culture?

11. What are the major goals for your school?

12. How are these goals connected to the school’s mission and vision?

13. Describe the AP program in your school.

14. When can students begin taking AP courses?

15. What are the AP enrollment policies in your school?
   b. Were you able to take part in its creation and implementation? Were other staff members and/or students or school community members?

16. What are the racial demographics of students enrolled in at least one AP course in your school?
   c. Socioeconomic demographics?

17. What other kinds of advanced courses does your school offer?

18. How are opportunities to participate in AP courses communicated to students?
   d. To parents?

19. How does the local community support your AP program?

20. How do teachers get to participate in an opportunity to teach an AP class?
## Appendix D

### Rationale for Interview Question Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Concept/s</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nadelson et al., 2021</td>
<td><strong>Defining achievement gaps</strong></td>
<td>How do you define achievement gaps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladson-Billings, 2006</td>
<td></td>
<td>Describe any achievement gaps that exist in your school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milner, 2012</td>
<td><strong>Defining opportunity gaps</strong></td>
<td>How do you define opportunity gaps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Describe any opportunity gaps that exist in your school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Racialized opportunity gaps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Concept/s</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster, 1999</td>
<td>To ensure a better future for all students, particularly the students of color to whom the United States owes this education debt, it is critical to understand the historical inequities that have attached opportunity and academic assets to Whiteness as a societal norm.</td>
<td>What are the racial demographics of the local community in which your school is situated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milner, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>What are the racial demographics of your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What are the racial demographics of students enrolled in AP courses at your school?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Spatialized Opportunity Gaps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Concept/s</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tieken, 2017</td>
<td>Tieken (2017) defined <em>place</em> as a specific setting and <em>space</em> as its more abstracted counterpart.</td>
<td>Where is your school located?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Describe the local community that your school serves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drescher et al., 2022</td>
<td>One major finding of Drescher et al.’s (2022) analyses to date highlights the challenges that rural districts face in providing challenging, differentiated instruction to support high-achieving students and thus continue to focus their resources on prioritizing efforts to ensure students meet a minimum level of proficiency.</td>
<td>Describe the history of your school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Socioeconomic Opportunity Gaps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Concept/s</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tieken, 2017</td>
<td>Historically, the relationship between property ownership and educational opportunity has been a racialized system of oppression that ensures people of color</td>
<td>What are the socioeconomic demographics of the local community in which your school is situated?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
remain property poor and educationally underserved.

Gorski, 2018 Additional disparities in access that children from low-income backgrounds experience. These disparities include: preschool; well-funded schools; adequately resourced schools; shadow education; school support services; affirming school environments; high academic expectations; well-paid, certified, and experienced teachers; student-centered, higher-order curricula and pedagogies; opportunities for family involvement; and instructional technologies. While many of these disparities are macrolevel policy issues, What are the socioeconomic demographics of your school?

Howard, 2020 …focusing on macrolevel structures must happen alongside microlevel interactions in order to more accurately understand the complexity of why gaps in educational outcomes exist as they do.

School culture
Describe the culture of your school.
Describe how teachers and staff work to support this culture.

Advanced Placement Program
Describe the AP program in your school.
When can students begin taking AP courses?
What are the AP enrollment policies in your school?
What are the racial demographics of students enrolled in at least one AP course in your school?
Socioeconomic demographics?
What other kinds of advanced courses does your school offer?
How are opportunities to participate in AP courses communicated to students? To parents?

Milner, 2012 Tyson, 2011 Tyson, 2013 (with regard to racial tracking outcomes) - In these instances, students often believe that advanced classes are reserved for the smartest and hardest working among their peer group.

Theokas & Saaris, 2013 It [the AP program] is larger than the International Baccalaureate program and serves more students than dual enrollment programs, which vary based on local school contexts.

Starr, 2017 While enrollment and test-passing numbers are important indicators of opportunity in a school, these are first level indicators of equity and closing actual gaps in opportunity and outcomes requires a much deeper understanding of how AP classes are administered and to whom they are offered.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tyson, 2013</td>
<td>Studies find that the process through which students are assigned to courses is complex and can include localized policy factors such as teacher recommendations, course scheduling, and parental requests and demands as well as student socioeconomic status and race.</td>
<td>How does the local community support your AP program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoharis, 2007</td>
<td>Decades of good leadership in a high-stakes accountability era have also created unjust and inequitable schools</td>
<td>What are the major goals for your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadelson et al., 2020</td>
<td>Other research has highlighted principal equity mindsets – which have been found to provide insight into the philosophies that guide their work, priorities and actions</td>
<td>How are these goals connected to the school’s mission and vision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How are achievement gaps considered in these goals as they are set? How are they considered as you and your staff go about reaching these goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How are opportunity gaps considered in these goals as they are set? How are they considered as you and your staff go about reaching these goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How is your leadership performance evaluated? (Are these standards set forth by the district? State?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How does the district support your leadership endeavors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leithwood &amp; Riehl, 2003</td>
<td>Principals often have the positional authority to assert influence on both the formal and informal microlevel structures that allow second-generation segregation to persist in their schools.</td>
<td>Who is included in the development of AP enrollment policy in your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoharis, 2009</td>
<td></td>
<td>Who determines what teachers are selected to teach AP courses?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grissom et al, 2021</td>
<td>Grissom et al. (2021) explained principal contributions to student learning by identifying what they consider to be three overlapping realms of skills and knowledge that principals need in order to be successful in meeting the new demands placed on them as professionals: instruction, people, and the organization.</td>
<td>How are AP teachers supported? Who leads this support?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khalifa, 2016</td>
<td>Leithwood &amp; Jantzi, 2006</td>
<td>Principals are often the most knowledgeable about resources and are best positioned to promote and support school reform efforts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Brooks et al., 2013 | Brown, 2005 | Aspects of schooling over which principals have agency to influence:  
- Organizational structures  
- Communication strategies  
- School culture  
- Instructional assignments  
- Professional development opportunities and planning  
- Finance issues  
- Resource allocation | |

**Principals as Leaders of Equity Work**

| Grissom et al., 2021 | Principals must develop an equity lens, particularly as they are called on to meet the needs of growing numbers of marginalized students.  
Equity mindset: reflective of individual identities, how they perceive themselves, their environments, and responsibilities, and how that perception influences interactions with others | In what ways do you consider yourself a leader of equity work? | What life experiences have contributed to the development of your leadership style? |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taylor &amp; Gollwitzer, 1995</td>
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</table>
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