Hispanic Student Access to Advanced Placement Courses

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Abstract

This qualitative, collective case study describes the perceptions of academically successful Hispanic students regarding their access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses in 4 suburban Texas high schools. A multistage, purposeful sampling scheme was used to select 28 participants for 4 focus groups. Six participants from the focus groups participated in interviews. The conceptual framework focused on Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital. Classical content analysis revealed 4 major themes: (a) future, (b) course placement, (c) educational work ethic, and (d) relationships. The theme of relationships varied the most with discussion of the value of relationships with counselors, peers, parents, teachers, and other family members. Participants had both positive and negative experiences with two subcategories, counselors and teachers, who influenced their opinions about their placement in courses. Implications for researchers and practitioners are provided.

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education reported that at least 90% of occupations in the future will require a postsecondary education. Yet, several researchers have reported that few high school graduates are prepared for postsecondary education and few have taken courses designed to prepare them for college (Combs et al., 2010; Greene & Forster, 2003; Moore et al., 2010). A major trademark of a rigorous high school curriculum has been Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Klopfenstein, 2003). In fact, Geiser and Santelices

(2004) maintained that one of the best predictors of college readiness is high school students' positive performance on AP exams. However, there have been evident disparities between the number of White and Hispanic students enrolled in AP courses (College Board, 2006; Prado, 2006). In fact, Hispanic students continue to be underrepresented in completion of AP examinations. Of enrolled high school students, 17% were Hispanic (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006) compared to 11% taking AP examinations (College Board, 2006). With the predicted rapid growth in the number of Hispanic students enrolled in U.S. high schools (Murdock, 2007), the underrepresentation of Hispanic students in college preparation courses like AP courses has been an increasing concern among educational leaders (Milligan, 2005; Prado, 2006).

The AP Program

The original intent of providing a more rigorous curriculum in high school was to allow capable secondary students to receive college credit because some students were not challenged by beginning-level college courses (Cornog, 1980). In 1951, a committee of college professors met at Kenyon College in Ohio and composed the *School and College Study*. The committee drafted curricula and examinations in 12 subject areas to allow students the opportunity to obtain college credit as high school students (DiYanni, 2002). At the same time, a committee of professors gathered at Andover College in Maine and compiled a research report called the *General Education in School and College Study*. In 1956, after a brief pilot program at several schools, the College Board took leadership under the direction of the Educational Testing Service and transformed the study results into the AP program (Cornog, 1980).

Under the direction of the College Board, the AP program allows secondary school students to obtain college credit in courses taught by high school teachers. Students enrolled in an AP program typically experience rigorous courses of study and have the opportunity to take AP examinations to earn college credit (College Board, 2007). The examinations are developed and aligned to college standards, but the courses themselves are taught in high schools (College Board, 2007). Most public and private high schools participate in the AP program and high school students earn college credit when they achieve a passing score of three or higher on a score range of one to five on the AP examinations (College Board, 2007).

Access to AP Courses

One of the goals of the College Board (2006) has been to reduce the underrepresentation of certain groups of students (i.e., Hispanics, African Americans) in the AP program. In relation to this goal, several researchers (e.g., Lee, 2001; Milligan, 2005; Prado, 2006) have identified policies and practices that are correlated to the enrollment gaps in AP courses. Specific practices that have contributed to the disparity in percentages between White and Hispanic students enrolled in advanced programs are (a) the tracking of students (Lee, 2001), (b) course qualification procedures and criteria (Milligan, 2005), and (c) the roles of teachers and other school personnel (Milligan, 2005). In an effort to provide students equitable access to AP courses, the College Board (2006) enacted policies that removed some obstacles for AP access by encouraging open enrollment practices and instituting pre-AP curricula for students in middle school grades.

Tracking of students. One of the barriers identified in the literature that has limited AP access for Hispanic students is tracking, which is the placement of students into leveled courses where they remain throughout several, or possibly all, grades in school (e.g., Darity, Castellino, Tyson, Cobb, & McMillen, 2001; Lee, 2001; Oakes, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). Lee (2001) studied one school district and reported that the pattern of tracking students contributed to the concentration of Hispanic and other minority students in academically unchallenging tracks of courses. Moreover, the longer students remained on a less challenging achievement track, the more difficult it was for them to qualify for advanced tracks (Lee, 2001; Milligan, 2005; Oakes, 2005). In response to these prevalent tracking practices, the College Board (2007) recommended that school administrators use open enrollment (i.e., any student may enroll in an AP course) and add Pre-AP courses that incorporate AP instructional strategies.

Course qualifications. Closely related to tracking practices is the use of qualifications for enrollment in AP courses. AP qualifications range from multiple restrictive criteria to open enrollment (Milligan, 2005). In a review of school practices, Milligan (2005) noted that schools used advanced course-screening instruments for student placement in addition to other criteria such as prior course grades, standardized testing scores, and teacher and/or parent

recommendations. Still, some schools used only one assessment as a sole criterion of AP access. Using only one measure or putting too much weight into standardized IQ tests or aptitude tests has been a common practice that has affected Hispanic and other minority students' access to AP courses (Ingram, 1999; Klopfenstein, 2003).

Role of teachers and school personnel. Ingram (1999) documented that students' positive relationships with parents, teachers, and counselors led students to enroll in AP courses. Likewise, Milligan (2005) concluded that teachers and counselors were key school personnel influencing AP enrollment. Specific to Hispanic students, Burton, Whitman, Yepes-Baraya, Cline, and Kim (2002) identified that teachers were instrumental in students' access to AP courses and suggested that teachers have high standards and strong content knowledge. In addition to providing quality instruction, teachers and counselors who offered advisement to students during their course selections were noted as being very influential in students' college preparation (Milligan, 2005). Kyburg (2006) concluded that social interactions with adults like teachers and other school personnel were vital to the success of Hispanic and other minority students in AP programs. In summary, many authors (e.g., College Board, 2007; Lee, 2001; Milligan, 2005) have agreed that AP access should not be limited only to those students with excellent grades from prior advanced academic courses. Lee (2001) further noted that using inclusive course placement criteria has been essential to increasing AP enrollment for all students.

Despite the call for more inclusive criteria for AP courses, there have been disparities among various ethnic groups participating in AP examinations. In particular, African American and Hispanic students have been underrepresented, and Asian students have been overrepresented (College Board, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) in AP participation. In Texas, like the United States, similar rates and comparisons occurred where Hispanic students were underrepresented and Asian and White students were overrepresented (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Therefore, bearing in mind that positive performance on AP examinations taken in high school is one of the best predictors of college readiness and success in college (Geiser & Santelices, 2004), it should not be surprising that Hispanic students in the state of Texas currently have rates of college readiness that are statistically significantly and practically

significantly lower than their White counterparts—with Hispanics in the state of Texas having 40% less college-ready graduates in reading (Cohen's [1988] $d = 0.93$) and 50% less college-ready graduates in mathematics ($d = 1.22$) than do White students (Moore et al., 2010). If the goal of equitable access to rigorous curriculum, such as AP courses in high school, is to be achieved, then more studies that examine the participation gaps in AP courses among ethnic groups will be essential (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for our study was based on James Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital. Coleman (1988) identified three aspects of social capital that contributed to positive educational outcomes within the social environment: (a) trustworthiness (i.e., the degree of the obligations and expectations within the social structure); (b) information flow (i.e., acquiring information through access to social channels); and (c) norms and sanctions (i.e., expectations of a social community that are supported by rewards). Coleman (1988) asserted that the realization of the aspects of social capital, such as trustworthiness, evolved through the relationships among people and their families, community, and other social structures. Stanton-Salazar (1997) further affirmed that ethnic minority students often do not possess adequate relationships with these institutional agents (school personnel) and, therefore, have less access to information networks throughout the social institution.

Coleman and Hoffer (1987) first used the concept of social capital in the context of comparing achievement differences between private and public high school students. They concluded that the reasons for differences in achievement between the two sets of schools related to the parental communities and their access to a supply of supportive relationships that facilitated academic success. As such, Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital in the creation of human capital has been widely used in educational research to explain achievement opportunity gaps relating to college readiness, relationships of school personnel, and family. In our study, the concept of social capital provided a framework for examining the relationships between Hispanic students and school personnel within the social institution of the school. Moreover, we explored the relationship between the actions

of institutional agents (school personnel) within the social system of the school and the level of potential social capital acquired by the high-achieving Hispanic students who did not enroll in AP classes. No other studies were located where researchers applied the social capital theory in understanding the underrepresentation of Hispanic students in AP courses.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

There is a paucity of research examining student perspectives and choices related to enrollment in high school AP courses. Specifically, researchers in this area have not focused on the viewpoints of Hispanic students and their reasons for not enrolling in AP courses. Thus, the purpose of our collective case study was to explore the reasons why high-achieving Hispanic students from four large suburban Texas high schools did not enroll in AP courses. Specifically, we examined how Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceived academic tracking, the role of school personnel, placement criteria, and other factors as they related to AP enrollment. Typically, in qualitative studies, researchers have a central research question followed by several subquestions (Creswell, 2009; see also Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). In this collective case study, the central research question was: What are the antecedents of nonenrollment in AP courses by selected high-achieving Hispanic students? Additionally, based on the review of the literature and the theoretical framework, the following subquestions were addressed: (a) How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive academic tracking as it relates to AP enrollment? (b) How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive the role of school personnel as it relates to AP enrollment? (c) How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive placement criteria as the criteria relate to AP enrollment? (d) How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive other factors relating to AP enrollment? We hoped that by understanding the antecedents and barriers that high-achieving Hispanic students face through the lens of social capital theory, educators might be more informed about how to improve access to AP courses for students from diverse backgrounds.

Method

We determined that a collective multiple-case study design (Stake, 2005) was the most appropriate approach to addressing the aforementioned research questions. According to Yin (2009), "Evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling" (p. 53). In this study, the high-achieving Hispanic students who chose not to enroll in AP courses were our units of analyses, not the schools they attended. The individual cases were bound by the individual students' ethnicity, record of high academic achievement, and lack of selection of AP courses. Data were collected by conducting focus group interviews and individual interviews with 28 high-achieving Hispanic students (11 boys, 17 girls) who attended four high schools in a suburban public school district in southeast Texas.

Selection of Participants

We used a multistage purposeful sampling scheme (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), which involved a series of three decision-making points that narrowed the pool of high-achieving Hispanic students selected to participate in this collective case study. First, we identified 12th grade Hispanic students enrolled in the district for the prior 3 years (n = 717). Next, within this sample we selected the Hispanic students who had an 83% or greater course grade average in English Language Arts and Social Studies in 11th grade. Hispanic students who were eligible but did not choose to take the AP English Language Arts or AP Social Studies course during 11th grade (*n* = 28) yielded the final sample.

Contexts: State, District, Selected High Schools

College readiness is a strong focus of the Texas educational system (TEA, 2009). Moreover, an increasing number of Hispanic high school students are enrolled in public schools in south central Texas (Murdock, 2007). The student participants in this study were selected from four high schools in a school district located in the metropolitan area of one of the largest U.S. cities. The district encompasses approximately 87.5 square miles and has 37 schools, including four high schools, eight intermediate schools, and 25 elementary schools. The total enrollment was approximately 43,000 students in 2009. The district's high schools offer a variety of AP courses for students. Table 1 displays

the racial and ethnic diversity of each of the high schools from which the study participants were selected.

TABLE 1 | High School Demographic Distribution of Students for Grade 11

Ethnicity	High school A %	High school B %	High school C %	High school D %
White	67.6	10.2	58.9	60.3
Hispanic	14.7	42.7	22.8	22.0
Asian	8.6	10.9	5.6	6.8
African American	8.9	35.9	12.2	10.5
Other	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.3
Total students Grade 11	828	808	704	759

(Texas Education Agency, 2009)

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in two stages. First, we conducted focus group interviews. After these initial interviews, we then conducted individual interviews. This allowed for the collection of more extensive and rich data.

Stage 1. Four focus groups composed of five to nine participants were formed to collect data in the first stage (i.e., Stage 1) of the study. The number of focus group members was based on the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2000) and Morgan (1997). The focus groups, which took place within the naturalistic setting of the school, were conducted during the school day and lasted for approximately 60 minutes. A member of the research team served as moderator of the focus groups utilizing a semistructured interview protocol with six predetermined questions. We solicited a high level of involvement from the students to keep the discussion focused (Morgan, 1997). The questions addressed the students' prior academic preparation, family support, knowledge of AP course offerings, the school personnels' role in recruitment, and perceived benefits of AP courses. Prior to the focus groups, a panel of experts assessed the appropriateness of the protocol instrument (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Stage 2. Focus groups in Stage 1 were followed by individual interviews in Stage 2 of the study. From the focus groups, we used a critical case purposeful sample (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) to select six participants, with at least one participant from each focus group, to explore topics introduced in the focus groups (Morgan, 1997). Participants deemed as key informants were selected and these six students from the full sample represented a nested sample (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The moderator utilized a semistructured interview protocol with eight predetermined questions, and additional questions from participants were solicited during the individual interviews (Janesick, 2004). In addition to participant interviews and field notes, debriefing interviews were conducted in Stages 1 and 2 by an experienced researcher. These two debriefing interviews, as outlined by Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2008), allowed for the moderator to reflect upon her involvement in the interview process and her potential influence on the participants' responses. Table 2 presents a sample of questions asked in the focus group interviews and the individual interviews.

TABLE 2 | Sample of Questions Asked in the Focus Group Interviews and Individual Interviews

Focus group interviews	Individual interviews
What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the term "advanced placement class"?	What do you know about advanced placement courses at your school?
For what reasons would a student enroll in an AP course in high school?	What are the guidelines for taking an AP class at your school?
If a student were to sign up for an AP course, what would the process be?	Who do you talk to when you select your courses for the next year?

Data Analysis

First, classical content analysis (Berelson, 1952) was used to analyze focus group and individual interview data from transcripts. These content analysis procedures were used in both within-case and cross-case analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To examine further the identified metathemes, a table was created to compare the frequency rankings of emergent themes among the focus groups. As shown in Table 3, the most frequent theme discussed across focus groups was that of educational work ethic (mean rank = 3.50; 4.00 indicates highest ranking). Following was the theme of relationships (mean rank = 3.25); the theme least mentioned across the focus groups was that of future (mean rank = 1.25).

TABLE 3 | Comparison of Rankings of Frequency of Emergent Themes Among Focus Groups

Theme	Focus groups				
	A	B	C	D	Mean rank
Educational work ethic	4	3	4	3	3.50
Relationships	3	4	2	4	3.25
Course placement	2	2	3	1	2.00
Future	1	1	1	2	1.25

Note: 4 = highest frequency theme; 1 = lowest frequency theme

The themes were analyzed further to explore whether the most prevalent themes were related to the gender of the participants. Focus Groups B (2 boys, 3 girls) and D (1 boy, 7 girls), both having more girls than boys, discussed the theme of relationships more than the other themes (mean rank = 4.00). In comparison, Focus Group A (5 boys, 4 girls) had the most boys and discussed educational work ethic the most. Likewise, Focus Group C (3 boys, 3 girls) comments were most often related to the theme of educational work ethic. Thus, when 50% or more of the members were boys, the theme of educational work ethic was most prevalent; when girls were the majority in a group, the most dominant theme was that of relationships. The themes found in each of the six interviews were compared to determine if patterns emerged. As shown in Table 4, the most common theme for all of the six individuals was relationships (mean rank = 4.00; 4.00 indicates the highest ranking). Next, the theme of future ranked second, involving five of the participants (mean rank = 2.8). The least frequent theme for five of the participants was course placement (mean rank = 1.3). The distribution of theme frequency was very similar across the six participants. In addition, the theme frequencies did not vary by gender among the individual interview participants.

TABLE 4 | Ranked Frequency of Themes by Individual Interview Participant

Theme	Individuals						
	Ruben	Julio	Jose	Sabrina	Elena	Sylvia	Mean rank
Relationships	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.0
Future	3	3	3	3	2	3	2.8
Educational work ethic	2	2	1	2	3	1	1.8
Course placement	1	1	2	1	1	2	1.3
Gender	Boy	Boy	Boy	Girl	Girl	Girl	
Focus group	C	B	A	A	B	D	

Note: 4 = highest frequency theme; 1 = lowest frequency theme

Finally, to explore the positive and negative nature of the theme of relationships in students' selection of courses, three sets of metamatrices were used in the final phase of the analysis. Specifically, metamatrices are "master charts assembling descriptive data from each of several cases" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 178) and were used to examine the antecedents of course selection for individual students within the theme of relationships. Within the framework of social capital theory, we believed this was essential for a better understanding of why students elected to take certain courses over others. Three sets of analyses of metamatrices were used to examine the antecedents of course selection for individual students within the theme of relationships, as seen in Tables 5, 6, and 7.

TABLE 5 | Case-Ordered Metamatrix: Impact of Relationships on Students' Course Selections

Case	Significant relationship subthemes	Positive effect on course selection	Negative effect on course selection
Ruben	Teacher	+	
	Parents	+	
	Counselor	+	
	Peers		-
Elena	Teacher	+	-
	Parents	+	
	Other family	+	
Julio	Teacher	+	
	Parents		-
	Counselors	+	
	Other family	+	
Sabrina	Parents		-
	Peers	+	-
	Other family	+	
Jose	Teacher	+	
	Parents	+	
	Counselors	+	
Sylvia	Teacher	+	
	Parents	+	
	Other family	+	
	Counselors		-

TABLE 6 | Partially Ordered Metamatrix of Gender Versus Relationships

Case	Significant relationship subthemes	Positive effect on course selection	Negative effect on course selection	Gender
Ruben	Teacher	+		Boy
	Parents	+		
	Counselor	+		
	Peers		-	
Julio	Teacher	+		Boy
	Parents		-	
	Counselors	+		
	Other family	+		
Jose	Teacher	+		Boy
	Parents	+		
	Counselors	+		
Elena	Teacher	+	-	Girl
	Parents	+		
	Other family	+		
Sabrina	Parents		-	Girl
	Peers	+	-	
	Other family	+		
Sylvia	Teacher	+		Girl
	Parents	+		
	Other family	+		
	Counselors		-	

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TABLE 7 | Content-Analytic Summary: Impact of Relationships on Students' Course Selections by Gender

	Individuals							
Subtheme	Ruben	Julio	Jose	Sabrina	Elena	Sylvia	Total +	Total +
Gender	Boy	Boy	Boy	Girl	Girl	Girl		
Teachers	+	+	+		+/-	+	5	1
Parents	+	-	+	-	+	+	4	2
Other family		+		+	+	+	4	0
Counselors	+	+	+			-	3	1
Peers	-			+/-			1	2
Total +	3	3	3	2	3	3		
Total -	1	1	0	2	1	1		

Note: + indicates positive effect on student course selection; - indicates negative effect

Throughout the data analysis process, Constas (1992) maintains that procedures should address origination, verification, and nomination. To undertake this, an audit trail was developed that outlined the strategies used to facilitate and to verify category development. Comparing sources of data contributed to the legitimation of the research findings and interpretations by initiating triangulation among data gathered via interviews, focus groups, field notes, and debriefing interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Four metathemes emerged from the cross-case analyses and analyses of metamatrices of all focus group interviews and individual interview transcripts, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 | Summary of Themes and Subthemes

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┌─────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Educational work effort       │
│                     │        └──────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Educational work    │───────▶│ Educational work commitment   │
│ ethic               │        └──────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Time management               │
│                     │        └──────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Grades earned                 │
└─────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Relationships with parents            │
│                     │        └──────────────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Relationships with teachers           │
│                     │        └──────────────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Relationships       │───────▶│ Relationships with peers              │
│                     │        └──────────────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Relationships with counselors         │
│                     │        └──────────────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Relationships with other family members│
└─────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Past course placement         │
│ Course placement    │        └──────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Current course placement      │
└─────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ College/Postsecondary education│
│ Future              │        └──────────────────────────────┘
│                     │        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│                     │───────▶│ Jobs                          │
└─────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────────┘
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Metathemes consisted of future orientation, course placement, educational work ethic, and relationships. Within each metatheme, we interpreted various subthemes, many of which related to Coleman's social capital theory and prior research on AP course enrollment. After identifying emerging metathemes and subthemes, we used these results to address each research question. Each emergent theme was not mutually exclusive to a specific research question. Rather, most of the themes were interwoven in response to the study questions.

Metatheme 1: Future Orientation
All of the participants were in their last year of high school when data were collected. Thus, the theme of future emerged when participants discussed any upcoming events in their lives, whether they were predicted or planned. One

example of the future theme was, "My parents always said … go to college, go to college, go to college." The theme of future was divided into the subthemes of college/postsecondary education and jobs. The subtheme of college/postsecondary education resulted when students discussed their plans to obtain a postsecondary degree from a two- or four-year college or university. An example statement of the postsecondary subtheme was, "AP helps you experience what it will be like in college." Another option students discussed was that of working in a job not requiring a postsecondary degree; thus, this theme was named jobs. Although the majority of the participants discussed attending college in the future, one participant offered the following statement regarding his observations of the Hispanic culture:

> If you are going for [examining] the Hispanic community as a whole and you are thinking more what it [the Hispanic community] is like, a lot of [Hispanic] people aren't as well off as a lot of us right here [in this community]. A lot of them [Hispanic high school students] would have to work instead of focus in school because they have to help their family pay for bills and stuff.

Metatheme 2: Course Placement

Another topic frequently mentioned by participants involved their previous courses taken during their public school education (i.e., Grades K–11). Participants examined the past (i.e., middle or high school advanced or regular courses) and their current pathway of courses (i.e., whether or not the participant had regular or advanced level courses in high school); thus, the subthemes of past course placement and current course placement were identified. Student comments included, "I would rather have a B or low A in a regular class than have to put in a bunch of hours of work to barely pass an AP class," and, "People that are in AP right now started taking advanced classes in middle school." One participant shared this reflection about her course placement decisions:

> Well, to tell you the truth, yes [she thought about taking AP]. But my sophomore year whenever I got to high school I was barely learning English and people said, "Oh you're smart you should take AP classes" and I didn't understand English really well yet. I didn't know if I could do it [be successful in AP]. For my sophomore [year] they put me in English AP and I told my counselor no because I was not ready. I probably could have done it, but I thought I was not there yet.

Metatheme 3: Educational Work Ethic

When students discussed factors influencing their decisions not to participate in AP courses, the theme of educational work ethic emerged. Students acknowledged that AP courses required an extensive amount of work and commitment. Within the theme of educational work ethic, the following four subthemes were identified: (a) educational work effort (i.e., the amount of work involved for success in AP courses), (b) educational work commitment (i.e., the dedication of the individual to the amount of work involved in AP courses), (c) grades earned (i.e., the numerical value assigned to successful mastery of objectives), and (d) time management (i.e., juggling all of life's activities in addition to AP courses). One student commented in regard to time management, "When you are in sports and a lot of stuff, it is hard to manage it all." Another student shared a convincing example regarding educational work ethic:

> It [educational work ethic] all depends on where you come from, but [it] also depends on what is going on in your life. In my case, I motivate myself because I will be the first man in my family to graduate so it all depends. Some people look at it as like something to move forward and other people use it like as an excuse. A lot of Hispanics make up excuses and I don't know, it brings everybody [Hispanics] down.

Metatheme 4: Relationships

During focus groups and interviews, students frequently mentioned their relationships with other people as they considered their course selections and their future plans. These people were teachers, school counselors, peers, parents, and other family members, and they comprised five subthemes. Participants discussed having both positive and negative experiences with school personnel, peers, and family members. In particular, many comments focused on those people who influenced their opinions about their placement in courses. For example, students commented, "I am lucky to have a mom that supports me," and "If I have a problem, I go ask my friends; they will help me." A persuasive example was shared about relationships with parents and planning:

> I know like a lot of kids here like in the most nonracial way their parents don't have a college degree, they just have like technical jobs or like clerical jobs you know. So they're like the first generation to like have the ability to go to college, but because their parents don't like they feel like they don't

have to go to college they can just do what their parents do. So I think that's another like reason why and of course Texas is close to the border so we have a lot that like first generations being able to go or going to college.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive academic tracking as it relates to AP enrollment?
Students confirmed their experiences with academic tracking as they described moving from advanced-level classes to regular-level classes in high school. Some students wanted to receive higher course grades and perceived this was more likely in regular-level courses. Other participants stated that they had been advised by school personnel to leave advanced classes in middle and high school. Several students concluded that the decision not to take an AP courses meant that they might not be as prepared for postsecondary coursework. One participant described a situation involving the influence of relationships with teachers and parents and the outcomes of academic placement decisions:

> I was in honors English Grades 6, 7, and 8, and I was going to do honors English and AP English through this high school career. You know, but my eighth-grade English teacher told me that she did not recommend me to take these AP classes because she told me I did not ask enough questions and it was like "Ok, I'm not asking questions because I understand." But my mom said "Well, maybe we should listen to her, she is your teacher, let's go ahead and put you into regulars." And I really regret it, I really do think I should have taken AP and I'm kind of mad about it too.

Research Question 2: How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive the role of school personnel as it relates to AP enrollment?
Students mentioned their relationships with teachers, parents, counselors, peers, and other family members, and the theme of relationships emerged as the most common theme in both the focus groups and interviews. The most common relationships mentioned were those with teachers, who seemed to be the most influential people in the school for these students. Counselors were mentioned less frequently than were teachers. Outside of school, the supportive relationships most mentioned by students were those with their parents. The degree that parents were informed about the necessary preparations for advanced courses, such as AP, varied among the participants. Overall, the essential relationships that these students had within the school community were with

teachers and parents, and these relationships were mentioned as being major influences in students' graduation from high school. However, students lacked a consistent relationship with school personnel for the purposes of academic and career advisement. One participant expressed her dissatisfaction with the lack of adults who encouraged an educational work ethic in Hispanic students:

> They [school personnel] just give up because they're like, "It seems like you [students] been here, like what, say five years and you still don't know English and you should have known it already." And they [school personnel] are like "Ok." They [school personnel] just give up on you. They need somebody that is going to help them, like motivate them, so they could like decide to go to school, take harder classes, and not just be on the lazy side.

Research Question 3: How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive placement criteria as the criteria relate to AP enrollment?
In general, participants seemed to be aware of the existence of AP courses, the process to sign up for AP courses, and the preparation that students needed for success in AP. These students also knew that AP courses prepared individuals for college. Consequently, it appeared that school procedures and placement criteria to enroll in AP were present. Regarding course placement, a participant acknowledged:

> Well, anybody can sign up for it [AP course], but if you are having a hard enough time in regulars, you are not going to try to jump in [to AP]. Even if you are having a hard time in honors, you are not going to try to get there [to AP]. If you think you could do it, you could probably. Whenever I signed up, I thought I was able to do it, but time-wise it was not working for me. With my sister I'm trying to sign her up for, she's transferring to middle school and she's going, "I don't want to [go into AP]." She is a good student when she puts her mind to it, but she is going, "I don't want to do all that work." But then again that is what it takes.

Research Question 4: How do high-achieving Hispanic students not enrolled in AP courses perceive other factors relating to AP enrollment?
Many of the students seemed to make course selections with limited guidance from their families or school personnel. Further, many students decided that their overall grade point average and having time for other activities were more important than was participation in AP courses. Thus, even with the knowledge that they had regarding the value of the AP course experience for college, none of

their relationships with teachers, parents, or counselors convinced them to enroll in AP courses. One young lady described her experiences with course choices:

> Well, with [choosing a course level for] history, whenever I was debating whether to go regulars or up [higher level, like honors or AP], I thought I had already gone through [taken] the honors for English and that had already messed me up [received a lower grade]. So I knew it [if I took AP history] would be a lot of work. I figured I would rather have a high grade in regulars than in AP because I am not one that excels in stuff like that. I was in honors in middle school and freshman year. I'd rather do well in regulars than higher [honors or AP]. Then I thought about all of the time [AP courses take] and then I thought I still have sports and work and I wouldn't be able to balance all. That it would be too stressful. I mean you can do it, but if you are ready for a lot [of work].

Contextualizing the Findings

Social Capital Theory

As previously stated, Coleman (1988) identified three aspects of social capital that contributed to positive educational outcomes within the social environment. Similarly, Stanton-Salazar (1997) defined social capital as the student's

Students attempting to gain social capital must have access to relationships that foster trust, so that they can acquire information necessary to succeed in the social environment.

relationships with school personnel who had the capacity to convey the necessary norms and expectations for academic progress. Therefore, students attempting to gain social capital must have access to relationships that foster trust, so that they can acquire information necessary to succeed in the social environment.

The participants in this study cited relationships as the second most frequent theme associated with the focus group and interview data. Specifically, the most repeatedly cited relationship for participants was with their parents. Nevertheless, even though the parents were not school personnel, according to Coleman (1988), parents were integral members of the school community who influenced the students' access to information.

Participants stated that teachers were the most prominent school personnel from whom they gained information. Students indicated that teachers both positively and negatively influenced their abilities to navigate the school system. Moreover, the participants' relationships with counselors seemed to be inconsistent, and students noted having lower degrees of trust with counselors throughout their middle and high school experiences.

Overall, the extent of the diverse relationships varied among the participants, but most had trustworthy parental support. Consequently, the various advisory relationships present for these students provided some support, and the students themselves developed their own schema for navigating the school system by obtaining information from a variety of relationships. As a result, one of the most important aspects that contributed to the potential acquisition of social capital for these Hispanic participants was that the relationships were based on trust. Participants acquired various degrees of potential social capital based on the amount of trustworthiness acquired from these individual relationships. Therefore, both the degree of support in the relationship and the quality of the academic-related guidance given were essential to the degree of social capital gained (Coleman, 1988).

Implications

Hispanic student participants in this study gave several reasons for not enrolling in AP courses. As shown in Figure 2, these factors were (a) the tracking of students into less challenging courses; (b) a lack of application of educational work ethic toward the preparation for AP courses; (c) the lack of consistent, well-informed relationships to encourage students to take challenging courses; (d) a deficiency in the systematic advisement given by school personnel; and (e) a lack of goal setting and planning occurring in middle school grades. Study results suggested that when these students experienced one or more of these factors, it might result in nonenrollment in AP.

FIGURE 2 | Factors Related to Major Findings of High-Achieving Hispanic Students' Nonenrollment in AP Courses
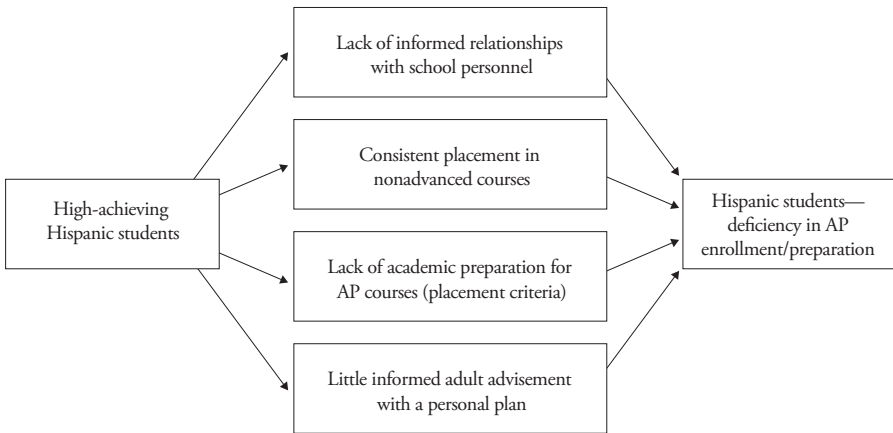
The results of this research have several implications for the topic of college preparation in high school for Hispanic students. Regarding systematic barriers, previous researchers (e.g., Combs et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2010) have concluded that educators need to examine processes such as advisement and course enrollment in supporting the college readiness rates of high school students. Moreover, students in this study indicated that it was vital for them to understand as early as possible in their school careers the necessity of enrolling in advanced courses for their future success in college preparation.

A summary of the implications for practitioners is displayed in Figure 3. Based on our interpretations, the following strategies might have assisted these high-achieving Hispanic students in selecting AP courses: (a) informed and consistent relationships with informed school personnel, (b) early and continued placement in advanced academic courses, (c) the development and monitoring of a personal course-selection plan, and (d) possible development of a cohort system for Hispanic students in advanced academic courses.

FIGURE 3 | Implications for Practice Related to High-Achieving Hispanic Students' Enrollment in AP Courses
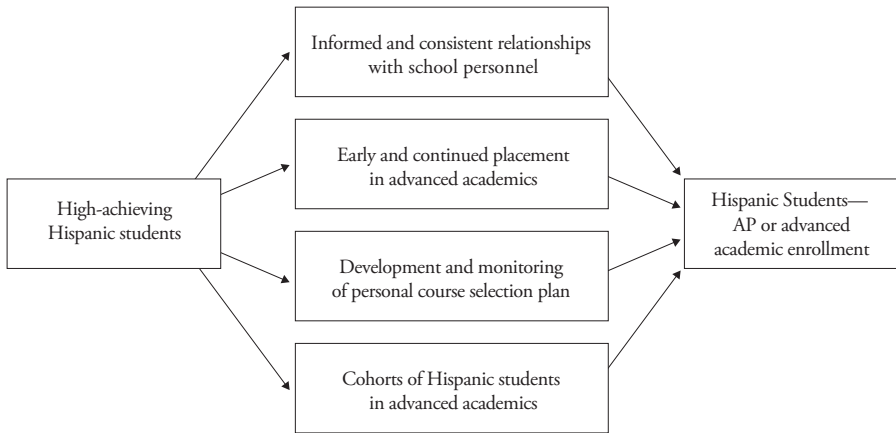
Conclusions

In a recent study of college readiness rates among Texas high school students, Moore et al. (2010) noted that only 20% of Hispanic students were categorized as college ready in reading and mathematics, as compared to more than 50% of White students in 2006–2007. Thus, interventions are needed to increase the rates of college readiness among Hispanic students. Yet, until now, little was known about why Hispanic students—especially academically successful Hispanic students—do not enroll in AP courses. As such, the purpose of this collective case study was to identify and to describe the reasons that selected Hispanic students from four suburban Texas high schools did not enroll in AP courses.

Examination of the major themes led to the conclusion that for this particular group of high-achieving Hispanic students, there was a need for more consistent, knowledgeable adult advisement in their high schools. Although parental support seemed to be available for these students, having an informed adult mentor in the school system was needed to help them benefit from advice about advanced courses and college preparation. Second, students expressed concern regarding the competition for their time in regards to taking AP courses. Also, some students had to work for financial reasons or did not want to give up their social time to take AP courses, whereas others reported having many time-consuming extracurricular activities. Moreover, the perception of some participants was that it took a "super student" to be able to juggle all of the requirements for AP

courses. Overall, the participants had supportive relationships with their parents and were knowledgeable about the general course selection processes. Although these students had parental support, the absence of personal academic advisement by knowledgeable adults in the schools might have been related to these Hispanic participants' decisions not to participate in AP courses. Although participants were relatively confident about their futures, their success in completing college without the benefit of an AP course experience is yet to be determined.

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