

**Equity in Action: Examining Educational Debt and Institutional Practices Affecting Access
to Rigorous Coursework**

“The problem we face is not an achievement gap, but an education debt.” Gloria Ladson-Billings

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This project was never mine alone. It is the product of countless people who poured belief, time, grace, and opportunity into me throughout this journey. As this research argues, inequities in education are not the result of deficits in students, but the accumulation of structural barriers and unequal access to opportunity. In many ways, this work also reflects the people who intentionally disrupted those barriers in my own life and reminded me that support, relationships, and belief can fundamentally change what is possible.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In 5th grade, I moved to Portland Oregon, from Shreveport, Louisiana during the early nineties. Middle school was a pivotal yet challenging time for me; a period where I often felt unseen, misunderstood, and overlooked as a learner by curricula, teachers, and the school system as a whole. I attended Whitaker Middle School in the Portland Public School District during 1996, a school with a deeply troubled academic and environmental history after being found to have dangerous levels of mold and radon. To truly grasp the dynamics of earning an education at Whitaker, it's crucial to understand the broader context of the school's struggles. At the time, Whitaker Middle School faced alarmingly low academic performance. Reports consistently ranked the school among those with the lowest test scores in the state of Oregon. This pervasive academic underachievement created an environment where students like me could easily be overlooked, as educators were often consumed with the overwhelming challenges of raising collective performance in a resource-strapped institution.

To understand what it meant to be a learner at Whitaker, it is essential to recognize how the school's structural neglect created conditions where many students, especially students of color, were rendered academically invisible. Teachers understandably focused on crisis management: low test scores, absenteeism, and organizational dysfunction. Yet this meant little room for individualized instruction, high expectations, or culturally responsive pedagogy. My transition from a high-performing magnet program in Shreveport to this starkly different educational landscape illuminated how opportunity is not evenly distributed. It is granted or restricted by systemic forces.

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My personal experiences were compounded by the generational history of inequitable access to education within my family. My mother, who left school in the eighth grade due to barriers rooted in racism, socioeconomic hardship, and structural exclusion, viewed education as both a tool for survival and a path to liberation. Her insistence on academic excellence reflects a long-standing tradition within African American communities of using education as resistance, echoing the historical patterns Hines (2016) documents among 19th-century Black learners who fought against segregated, underfunded, discriminatory schooling structures. The inequities I experienced at Whitaker were simply contemporary manifestations of a much longer historical trajectory.

This early exposure to inequity laid the foundation for my current inquiry as a teacher in the Gresham-Barlow School District (GBSD), where I now see familiar patterns resurfacing in new forms. In both my placement at Gordon Russell Middle School and my student teaching experience at Sam Barlow High School, I observe disparities that mirror my own educational journey. These inequities extend beyond academics and show up in extracurricular and athletic opportunities as well. Barlow and its feeder schools maintain robust youth sports programs that cultivate skills and confidence long before high school; Gresham High School, where I attended, does not. Such disparities deepen existing divides by shaping which students have early access to enrichment, leadership development, and supportive communities.

Academically, the gaps are even more pronounced. Students enter my Introduction to Business and Data Science classes with widely varying levels of technological proficiency, academic vocabulary, prior content exposure, and confidence in collaborative learning spaces. These patterns reflect what Milner (2012) describes as instructional environments that assume

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equal prior opportunity, rather than acknowledging systemic barriers that shape student readiness.

My lived experiences, both past and present, affirm a central truth emphasized across national research: opportunity gaps are systemic, predictable, and preventable. They are not the result of individual shortcomings but of policies, resource allocations, instructional practices, and historical structures that distribute educational advantages unevenly.

As Hines (2016) argued, that obstacles were not incidental but designed to maintain racial hierarchies and limit upward mobility. My own experience at Whitaker mirrors these patterns. Environmental hazards, resource deprivation, and low expectations were contemporary manifestations of the same systemic inequities that historically excluded African American learners from equitable educational access.

The juxtaposition of my mother's advocacy and these institutional barriers underscores that personal resilience, while powerful, cannot substitute for systemic reform. Equity in education requires addressing the conditions that perpetuate marginalization. Conditions that, as Hines (2016) and Ladson-Billings (2006) emphasized, accumulate into what Ladson-Billings terms the *education debt*: the cumulative impact of inequities that shape opportunity across generations.

In my experience as a student teacher at Gordon Russell Middle School and Sam Barlow High School, I continue to see a pattern that I recognize. It is eerily similar to my childhood educational experience at Whitaker Middle School. The same pattern that I experienced at both Reynolds and Gresham High School in the mid 90's. The same pattern that I experienced at

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College of the Redwoods while earning my Associates Degree and again at the University of Montana-Western, where I earned my Bachelors in the early 2,000s. There is a glaring and persistent opportunity gap that exists across this district! In both buildings, I have observed how persistent this challenge is and how it cuts across both sites.

Despite districtwide commitments to equity, students in the Gresham-Barlow School District continue to experience disparities in access to Advanced Placement (AP) and advanced math coursework. Enrollment patterns suggest that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups participate in these rigorous courses at disproportionately lower rates. These disparities reflect what Ladson-Billings (2006) reframes as an *opportunity gap*, not an achievement gap, indicating that inequities are rooted in institutional structures, placement practices, resource distribution, and access to preparatory experiences rather than student ability.

National research confirms that access to advanced coursework is one of the strongest predictors of postsecondary opportunity (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Avery et al., 2022).

However, access is often shaped by structural gatekeeping mechanisms such as prerequisite tracking, teacher recommendations, counseling practices, early math placement decisions, and assumptions about readiness. These institutional practices frequently advantage students with prior exposure to academic enrichment while limiting pathways for students whose earlier schooling did not provide the same opportunities.

In my professional context, I observe how differences in prior access to technology, academic vocabulary, enrichment programs, and culturally affirming instruction shape students' confidence and academic identity. Students who have historically been positioned outside of

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advanced academic spaces often internalize narratives about who “belongs” in AP or upper-level math courses. Without intentional intervention, these patterns reproduce inequity across generations, contributing to what Ladson-Billings describes as the cumulative education debt.

Therefore, the core problem guiding this Action Research Project is that institutional placement systems and instructional conditions within GBSD may unintentionally restrict equitable access to AP and advanced math coursework. Without examining and redesigning these systems through an equity-centered lens, advanced academic opportunities will continue to reflect patterns of prior privilege rather than student potential. This Action Research Project will investigate how institutional practices, placement mechanisms, and instructional supports influence equitable access to AP and advanced math courses at the high school level.

Specifically, I will:

1. Analyze enrollment and demographic data to identify participation patterns across racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups.
2. Examine placement criteria, prerequisite structures, and recommendation processes to determine how students are selected or excluded from advanced coursework.
3. Gather student and teacher perspectives through surveys or interviews to understand perceived barriers, academic confidence, and sense of belonging in rigorous academic spaces.

The purpose of this ARP is not simply to document disparities, but to identify actionable changes at the classroom and school level that can expand access and disrupt institutional patterns that limit participation. This study seeks to determine how schools can move from

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passive access policies to proactive equity practices that affirm student potential and promote culturally relevant academic success.

Guiding Pedagogical Framework

Inequitable conditions lead to disparities in educational outcomes. As stated in Ladson-Billings (2006), the term “achievement gap” places the responsibility on students, whereas “opportunity gap” highlights systemic inequities. Examples include lack of access to quality instruction or culturally relevant curriculum. As found in the equity reports from GBSD, we can see that persistent disparities exist in graduation rates, course completion, and disciplinary outcomes for students of color, multilingual learners, and those from low-income households (Gresham-Barlow School District Equity Report, 2023).

My teaching philosophy is grounded in the belief that inequitable conditions produce inequitable outcomes. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that framing disparities as an "achievement gap" misplaces responsibility on children, whereas the "opportunity gap" highlights the systemic nature of inequity. This distinction is crucial in GBSD, where persistent disparities in graduation rates, discipline, access to advanced coursework, and participation in technology-rich learning environments disproportionately impact students of color, multilingual learners, and low-income students (Gresham-Barlow School District Equity Report, 2023).

These local patterns reflect national trends. Darling-Hammond (2010) demonstrates that unequal access to experienced teachers, rigorous coursework, and supportive learning environments drives the majority of outcome disparities in U.S. schools. Likewise, Sirin’s (2005) meta-analysis and Rakesh et al.’s (2024) research show that socioeconomic factors significantly

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affect academic achievement by shaping students' exposure to language, executive functioning development, and early learning opportunities.

Culturally relevant pedagogy offers a framework through which these inequities can be meaningfully addressed. Ladson-Billings (1995) outlines three core dimensions: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. In my classrooms, I observe how prior access shapes engagement. Students exposed to financial literacy or entrepreneurship—often through family networks or youth programs—enter my Intro to Business course with confidence and familiarity. Others, particularly those from marginalized communities, often approach the same tasks with hesitation despite having equal potential.

In Data Science, similar disparities emerge in students' familiarity with digital tools and data visualization. These gaps mirror what Hanselman et al. (2021) and Avery et al. (2022) identify as structural constraints that govern access to higher-level coursework long before students reach high school.

These insights force a critical question: How must instruction be designed so that students with differing prior experiences can all access rigorous, meaningful learning? This question anchors my commitment to culturally relevant, equity-centered instruction.

Research Problem Statement

Despite districtwide commitments to equity, students across the Gresham-Barlow School District continue to experience significant opportunity gaps reflected in uneven access to rigorous coursework, disciplinary disparities, inconsistent prior preparation, and differential exposure to academic and technological resources. These inequities mirror national research

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showing that socioeconomic status, structural gatekeeping, and resource distribution, not student ability, are the primary drivers of achievement disparities (Avery et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2016; Reardon, 2011; Sirin, 2005). In my current Intro to Business and Data Science classrooms, these gaps manifest as wide variation in students' academic readiness, confidence, and engagement, particularly among students from historically marginalized racial and socioeconomic groups.

Although policies within the district aim to expand access to advanced coursework and improve educational outcomes, access alone has not translated into equitable participation or success. Research demonstrates that without culturally responsive teaching, targeted academic supports, and intentional instructional design, opportunity-expanding policies often reproduce existing inequities (Fleischmann, 2023; Hanselman et al., 2021; Milner, 2012). This pattern is evident in my classroom, where students with greater prior exposure to technology, financial literacy, or academic language engage more confidently in complex tasks, while others face barriers rooted in earlier educational experiences rather than lack of potential.

Therefore, the core problem guiding this action research is that students in GBSD do not have equitable access to the instructional conditions, supports, and culturally relevant learning experiences necessary to meaningfully engage in rigorous coursework, contributing to persistent opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color, multilingual learners, and those from low-income households. Without intentional, equity-centered instructional practices that address these systemic disparities, classrooms will continue to privilege students with prior advantages while marginalizing those historically excluded from high-quality learning opportunities.

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Connections to InTasc Standards

My goal as an educator is to enact equity-minded instruction informed by developmental, cultural, and systemic awareness. Addressing opportunity gaps requires intentional planning, relational practice, and reflective pedagogy. All core elements of the InTASC standards.

This work aligns with:

- Standard 1: Learner Development — recognizing that students' developmental trajectories are shaped by their prior opportunities.
- Standard 2: Learning Differences — designing instruction that acknowledges cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity.
- Standard 3: Learning Environments — building inclusive spaces that foster belonging and reduce disciplinary disparities.
- Standard 7: Planning for Instruction — intentionally sequencing learning to create equitable entry points for all students.
- Standard 10: Leadership and Collaboration — engaging colleagues, families, and community partners in addressing systemic inequities.

Opportunity gaps are not inevitable, they are designed through policies, practices, and resource distribution. Therefore, they can be redesigned. My inquiry seeks to model what it looks like to move from awareness to action using classroom-based data, student voice, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Summary

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In summary, my personal educational history, professional observations, and grounding in national opportunity-gap research collectively shape the purpose of this action research project. The inequities I experienced at Whitaker Middle School parallel the inequities I now witness across GBSD. These patterns are deeply embedded in structural, not individual, factors, aligning with research by Ladson-Billings, Reardon, Avery, Milner, Darling-Hammond, and others. My goal is to investigate how culturally responsive instructional strategies can mitigate these opportunity gaps within my Intro to Business classroom. By integrating students' cultural knowledge, lived experiences honestly, my lesson design, expectations, and relationships allow students to start with the belief that they can thrive! Next steps for me will include collecting school-level data, conducting student interviews, and testing small-scale interventions and then observing their impact on engagement and confidence.

Based on my lived experience and pedagogical grounding, I am pursuing an action research project focused on addressing opportunity gaps through culturally responsive instruction. The inequities I experienced as a student, mirroring those historically documented by Hines (2016) and analyzed through the framework of critical race theory, justify my commitment to examining equity-minded practices in my own teaching. This inquiry is not only a professional imperative but also a continuation of a generational pursuit of educational justice. By examining how instruction can be structured to create equitable access and affirm students' cultural assets, I aim to contribute to ongoing efforts to reimagine classroom practice as a site of empowerment rather than exclusion.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

A substantial body of research demonstrates that educational inequality in the United States is deeply rooted in socioeconomic status, race, and institutional practices that structure access to learning opportunities. Foundational work documents the strong and persistent relationship between socioeconomic resources and academic achievement. Meta-analytic evidence shows that socioeconomic status (SES) is a medium-to-strong predictor of student achievement, with variation depending on how SES is measured and the level of schooling examined (Sirin, 2005). Longitudinal analyses further reveal that income-based achievement gaps have widened over time, surpassing racial achievement gaps and reflecting broader patterns of economic inequality and unequal access to enrichment and early learning opportunities (Reardon, 2011). Together, these studies situate achievement disparities within structural and stratification frameworks, emphasizing that educational outcomes are shaped by unequal distributions of resources long before students enter formal schooling. The purpose of this ARP is to investigate how institutional practices, placement mechanisms, and instructional supports influence equitable access to rigorous coursework. Specifically Advanced Placement (AP) and advanced math classes for high school students. This study seeks to identify barriers that limit participation for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and to explore strategies that teachers and schools can implement to promote academic equity

More recent interdisciplinary research clarifies the mechanisms through which SES influences learning and development. A comprehensive systematic review by Rakesh et al. (2025) synthesized evidence linking low SES to differences in executive function, language

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development, and academic achievement, highlighting stress exposure and reduced cognitive stimulation as key mediators. Importantly, this work also identifies protective factors such as preschool attendance, supportive teacher–student relationships, and enriched home learning environments that can buffer SES-related disadvantages. These findings underscore that inequality is neither inevitable nor immutable, but responsive to targeted interventions across home and school contexts.

Beyond individual and family-level factors, institutional structures and policies play a central role in reproducing or mitigating inequality. Research on advanced coursework access illustrates how ostensibly merit-based systems can operate as gatekeeping mechanisms. Avery et al. (2022) showed that ability signaling and selective enrollment practices significantly shape access to AP and advanced math courses, systematically limiting participation for low-income and minority students. Although the “Advanced” label increases enrollment, the authors caution that participation alone does not guarantee strong academic outcomes, raising concerns about insufficient academic support. Similarly, Souto-Maior and Shroff (2024) find that racial disparities in AP mathematics enrollment persist even among students with equivalent academic preparation, indicating that placement decisions, counseling practices, and institutional norms. It's not achievement alone that drives underrepresentation. These studies align with social reproduction theories, demonstrating how schools can reproduce inequality through procedural and organizational practices.

Policy reforms aimed at expanding access to rigorous coursework have produced mixed results, further highlighting the importance of institutional context. Hanselman et al. (2022) examined Algebra-for-All initiatives and showed that universal access policies interact with

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existing “inequality regimes” within schools. In well-resourced, supportive contexts, expanded algebra access can promote equity, but in schools lacking instructional support and equitable practices, such policies may exacerbate disparities by increasing failure rates and limiting progression into advanced math pathways. Complementing this work, Nomi et al. (2021) found that targeted interventions such as double-dose algebra can improve long-term outcomes, including college persistence, particularly for students with lower prior achievement. However, these benefits depend heavily on implementation fidelity, student grouping, and instructional quality, reinforcing the conclusion that access without support is insufficient.

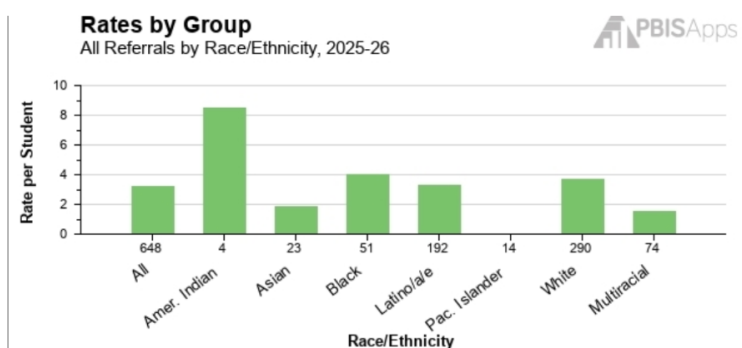
Tracking and detracking reforms further illustrate the complex equity implications of institutional change. Fleischmann et al. (2023) used quasi-experimental evidence from natural experiments to show that detracking can negatively affect the academic self-concept of lower-achieving students through unfavorable social comparisons, lending support to the contrast hypothesis rather than the labeling hypothesis. While detracking is often promoted as an equity strategy, these findings caution that without careful implementation and instructional support, such reforms may unintentionally harm noncognitive outcomes like motivation and self-belief, even if academic outcomes remain stable.

Inequality is also reproduced through disciplinary systems, which disproportionately affect students of color and contribute to broader opportunity gaps. School discipline practices can influence students’ academic engagement, sense of belonging, instructional time, and long-term educational outcomes. Local discipline data (pictured below) from the 2025–26 school year reflects patterns of disproportionality among several racial and ethnic groups. For example, Hispanic/Latino/a/e students demonstrated a higher likelihood of receiving at least one referral

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compared to their peers, while American Indian/Alaska Native students showed the highest risk ratio overall, though the subgroup size was very small. Black/African American students also experienced higher average referral rates per student than the schoolwide average (SWIS Suite, 2026). Figure 1 below further illustrates these patterns which suggest that disciplinary outcomes may not be experienced equally across student groups and reinforce the importance of examining systemic practices, implicit bias, and equitable behavioral supports within schools.

Figure 1



Rates by Group - Data Table					
Race/Ethnicity	# of Enrolled Students	# of Referrals	Rate of Referrals	Comp. Group	Comp. Rate
American Indian/Alaska Native	4	34	8.50	All Other	3.42
Asian	23	43	1.87	All Other	3.51
Black/African American	51	202	3.96	All Other	3.41
Hispanic/Latino/a/e	192	626	3.26	All Other	3.53
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	14	0	0.00	All Other	3.53
White	290	1060	3.66	All Other	3.28
Multiracial	74	112	1.51	All Other	3.70
Totals:	648	2,077	3.21		

Referral Rate By Ethnic Group

Note. This figure demonstrates the number of referrals for the entire school and is broken down to show the rate of referrals within each ethnic group.

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Large-scale analyses by Gopalan and Nelson (2019) documented substantial racial discipline disparities across U.S. school districts, particularly for Black students, that persist even after accounting for socioeconomic and school-level factors. The unexplained variation across districts suggests that local practices, educator discretion, and school climate play a significant role. Gregory et al. (2017) extend this work by synthesizing research into a comprehensive framework for reducing discipline disparities, emphasizing culturally responsive practices, restorative justice, and systemic reform. However, the authors also note the need for empirical evaluations of which interventions are most effective across contexts.

At a broader policy level, economic analyses highlight the importance of sustained resource investment in addressing educational inequality. Jackson et al. (2016) provided strong causal evidence that increases in K–12 school spending lead to significant improvements in educational attainment, earnings, and adult economic outcomes, with particularly large benefits for students from low-income families. These findings support human capital theories and underscore that structural investment, rather than short-term or piecemeal reforms is critical for long-term equity.

Finally, research on intergenerational mobility situates educational inequality within geographic and economic contexts. Chetty et al. (2014) demonstrated that children's outcomes are strongly shaped by where they grow up, with substantial geographic variation in mobility across the United States. These patterns reflect differences in school quality, social capital, and local policy environments, reinforcing the idea that opportunity is unevenly distributed across space as well as across social groups.

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Taken together, this literature shows that educational inequality is produced through the interaction of socioeconomic conditions, institutional practices, and policy choices. While expanding access to advanced coursework and increasing resources are necessary steps, the evidence consistently indicates that equity-focused reforms must also address placement mechanisms, instructional supports, disciplinary systems, and broader institutional contexts. Without attention to how policies are implemented and experienced by students, well-intentioned reforms risk reproducing, or even intensifying the inequalities they aim to reduce. Just as highlighted at the beginning of this project, the purpose of this Action Research Project is to investigate how institutional practices, placement mechanisms, and instructional supports influence equitable access to Advanced Placement (AP) and advanced math classes for high school students. The literature review in Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive examination of the structural, socioeconomic, and policy-related factors that contribute to educational inequality, demonstrating how disparities in access, resources, and support can shape student outcomes. By connecting these research findings to classroom practice, this project seeks to identify actionable strategies that can promote equity and improve both access and achievement for underrepresented students.

With this purpose in mind, we now turn to the methodology section, where the “recipe” for this action research project is outlined: who participated, where the study took place, how data were collected and analyzed, and how the researcher’s positionality informed the process.

Chapter 3

Section 1: Definition of Action Research & Research Questions

Action research is a systematic inquiry conducted by teachers to improve their practice, understand student learning, and inform school improvement (Sagor, 2000). It is collaborative, reflective, and iterative, emphasizing cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. According to Sagor (2000), the typical steps of action research include: (1) identifying a focus or problem, (2) collecting data to understand the issue, (3) analyzing the data, (4) developing and implementing action strategies, (5) evaluating outcomes, and (6) reflecting on the process to inform future practice.

Action research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows a teacher-researcher to examine classroom practices related to equity and access while remaining responsive to the needs of the students. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 indicates that socioeconomic status, institutional structures, and policy practices shape student achievement and access to advanced coursework (Sirin, 2005; Reardon, 2011; Rakesh et al., 2025; Avery et al., 2022). Action research provides the methodological flexibility to explore these dynamics in a real classroom context, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to understand how instructional and policy factors affect student outcomes.

The purpose of this action research project is to investigate how targeted instructional supports and classroom practices can promote equitable access to rigorous coursework in a high school setting. The guiding research questions, aligned with the theoretical frameworks of social reproduction, equity, and human capital theories, are:

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1. How do classroom instructional practices influence student engagement and participation in rigorous coursework, particularly for students from low-SES backgrounds? (Wu, 2023; Sagor, 2000)
2. How do placement and course recommendation practices shape equitable access to advanced mathematics and AP courses? (Avery et al., 2022; Souto-Maior & Shroff, 2024)
3. What interventions or supports improve academic self-concept and persistence for students in mixed-ability classrooms? (Fleischmann et al., 2023; Nomi et al., 2021)
4. How do disciplinary practices and school structures contribute to opportunity gaps for marginalized students? (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; Gregory et al., 2017)

Section 2: Participants and Setting

The study takes place at Gordon Russell Middle School and Sam Barlow High School located in a rural area of Gresham, Oregon. The high school where I spent terms 1 and 2, serves approximately 1,600 students in grades 9–12, with the classroom in this study comprising 28 students in a 9th-grade business course. Student demographics include 50% White, 25% Latinx, 15% Black, and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander; 55% male and 45% female; 15% English Language Learners; and 12% of students receiving special education services. GRMS shares a similar demographic makeup with its student body of more than 630 students. Notably, the staff at GRMS is much more diverse including Black and Latinx licensed and classified staff members. Socioeconomic data indicate that 40% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Students' academic and cultural funds of knowledge include experiences with family businesses, technology use, diverse cultural traditions, and varied prior exposure to advanced coursework.

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My strengths include building strong teacher–student relationships and designing interactive, real-world learning experiences, while my areas for growth involve differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners and providing equitable access to advanced content.

Section 3: Data Collection & Analysis

This action research study employed multiple qualitative data sources to examine how instructional practices, institutional structures, and student supports influence engagement, access, and persistence in rigorous coursework. Data were intentionally selected to align with the four research questions guiding the study, allowing for triangulation across instructional, structural, and relational dimensions of schooling.

To address Research Question 1, which examines how classroom instructional practices influence student engagement and participation in rigorous coursework, several data sources were utilized. Unit plans and daily lesson plans provided evidence of intended instructional design, including scaffolding, opportunities for discourse, and alignment to rigorous standards. Teaching reflection journals documented ongoing instructional decisions and iterative adjustments made in response to student needs. Student exit tickets and formative assessments offered insight into levels of understanding and participation, while informal observations captured real-time indicators of engagement such as on-task behavior, student discourse, and participation patterns. Feedback from the mentor teacher and field supervisor served as an additional source of validation regarding the effectiveness of observed instructional strategies.

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Research Question 2 focuses on how placement and course recommendation practices shape equitable access to advanced mathematics and Advanced Placement (AP) coursework. To examine these structural factors, both official and unofficial curricula were analyzed. Official curricula, including district-adopted materials and course sequences, provided insight into formal pathways and prerequisites for advanced coursework. Unofficial curricula, such as classroom norms and expectations, revealed implicit messages about who is positioned for advanced opportunities. Interviews with Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teachers offered critical perspectives on course recommendation practices, student advocacy, and systemic barriers to access. Additionally, feedback from the mentor teacher and field supervisor provided contextual understanding of local placement processes and informal gatekeeping mechanisms.

To investigate Research Question 3, which explores interventions and supports that improve academic self-concept and persistence in mixed-ability classrooms, the study drew on multiple sources that captured student growth over time. Teaching reflection journals documented the implementation of strategies such as scaffolding, formative feedback, and structured discourse, as well as observed shifts in student confidence and persistence. Student exit tickets and formative assessments provided evidence of increasing competence and willingness to engage with challenging material. Informal observations further captured behaviors associated with persistence, including risk-taking and sustained engagement. Interviews with AVID teachers contributed additional insight into school-based supports that promote academic identity and long-term persistence in rigorous coursework.

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Finally, Research Question 4 examines how disciplinary practices and school structures contribute to opportunity gaps for marginalized students. Analysis of unofficial curricula, provided insight into expectations and disciplinary approaches within the learning environment. Teaching reflection journals documented disciplinary decisions and shifts toward more restorative and relationship-centered practices. Informal observations highlighted patterns of participation and withdrawal, offering evidence of how disciplinary climates impact student engagement. Feedback from both my mentor teacher and my field supervisor provided further perspective on classroom management and equity in discipline. Interviews with AVID teachers extended this analysis by illustrating how disciplinary practices intersect with access to advanced academic opportunities.

Across all four research questions, the use of multiple data sources supported a comprehensive and triangulated analysis. Instructional artifacts, observational data, reflective writing, and stakeholder perspectives collectively allowed for a nuanced examination of how classroom practices and school structures shape student engagement, access, self-concept, and opportunity.

Qualitative data were analyzed following standard procedures (Sagor, 2000). Open coding was used to identify patterns and categories in student engagement, participation, and performance. Codes were iteratively refined to develop themes such as equity in access, instructional support, and academic self-concept. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing these themes with the theoretical framework (social reproduction, human capital, and equity theories) and the literature on SES, policy, and institutional factors (Sirin, 2005; Reardon, 2011; Avery et al., 2022; Rakesh et al., 2025). Mentor teacher feedback and field supervisor

review provided external validation, ensuring the interpretations were credible and conceptually aligned.

Section 4: Researcher Positionality

As a Black, male educator from a working-class background, my layered identity profoundly shapes both the process of data collection and the lens through which I interpret and analyze findings. My lived experiences with racial and socioeconomic inequities heighten my awareness of the structural barriers that students may face, influencing how I perceive patterns of participation, engagement, and achievement in the classroom. I am constantly attentive to potential biases that may emerge from assumptions about students' abilities, motivation, or behavior, recognizing that these assumptions are often shaped by societal stereotypes and my own experiences. This reflexivity is guided by the theoretical frameworks of social reproduction and critical race theory, as outlined in Chapter 1 (Bourdieu, 1977; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; Gregory et al., 2017), which emphasize how systemic inequities shape educational outcomes and classroom dynamics.

By explicitly acknowledging my positionality, I am able to critically examine how my interactions, pedagogical decisions, and interpretive choices may influence the research process. Furthermore, this awareness drives my commitment to centering student voice, fostering equitable practices, and ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of students remain at the heart of both data interpretation and the broader narrative of the study

Chapter 4 Findings

Section 1. Overview of Themes

The purpose of this action research project (ARP) is to investigate how institutional practices, placement mechanisms, and instructional supports influence equitable access to rigorous coursework. Through the analysis of data collected across this research cycle, three major themes emerged from analyzing data collected throughout this action research cycle. These themes are: (1) inequitable prior access shapes student readiness and participation in rigorous coursework, (2) intentional instructional supports significantly increase engagement, academic discourse, and confidence, and (3) academic self-concept is shaped through instructional experiences and directly influences students' willingness to pursue and persist in advanced coursework.

These themes were identified through multiple data sources, including student work samples, exit tickets, classroom observations, informal student interviews, mentor teacher feedback, and reflective teaching journals. Instructional contexts included the 1/22 ethical reasoning lesson ("Do the Right Thing" business scenario), the 2/27 job comparison and decision-making lesson, and recorded instructional discourse focused on academic language, collaboration, and student participation.

Across all instructional contexts, one pattern remained consistent: student engagement is not simply a reflection of motivation or ability. Instead, engagement is shaped by access to prior learning opportunities, the design of instruction, and students' developing academic identities.

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These findings are presented through three interconnected themes. Each theme builds upon the others to demonstrate how opportunity gaps are produced and reproduced within classroom structures, and how intentional instructional practices can disrupt these patterns.

Section 2. Inequitable Prior Access Shapes Student Readiness and Participation

Theme overview

This theme demonstrates that students enter rigorous coursework with uneven levels of preparation, and those differences are directly tied to prior access to academic experiences rather than innate ability. Across all data sources, disparities in readiness consistently reflected exposure to academic language, structured reasoning tasks, and enrichment opportunities prior to this course.

1/22 Ethical Reasoning Lesson: Structured Thinking and Uneven Access

During the 1/22 lesson, students engaged in a scenario-based ethical dilemma focused on ownership structures, accountability, and business ethics. Students participated in structured voting (“Do the Right Thing”) and were required to justify reasoning using academic vocabulary.

Students with prior exposure to academic discourse demonstrated confidence in articulating reasoning:

“The manager is responsible because they oversee what happens in the company.”

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“Even if they didn’t directly do it, leadership is still accountable for outcomes under them.”

However, other students demonstrated conceptual understanding but lacked access to academic language structures:

“I know what I think, I just don’t know how to say it the right way.” “Can I explain it without using the vocabulary first?”

These statements demonstrate students’ growing confidence in applying conceptual understanding to real-world contexts. Specifically, they reflect an emerging ability to extend academic vocabulary such as “responsibility” and “accountability” beyond surface-level definitions and into more complex reasoning about organizational roles. Together, these responses illustrate how students are beginning to engage in analytical thinking and articulate justified claims, signaling a shift from basic comprehension toward deeper critical understanding. My reflection notes from this lesson indicate that when sentence frames and vocabulary supports were provided, participation became more equitable and discourse became more academically grounded. Without scaffolds, participation skewed toward students already familiar with academic talk norms.

One student articulated the broader experience:

“I feel like some people already know how to do this kind of thing, and I’m still learning it.”

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This statement reflects the central finding of this theme: students are not experiencing the same entry point into rigor. More specifically, it highlights how differences in prior access to academic opportunities shape students' perceptions of readiness, often positioning rigor as something already mastered by others rather than something they can grow into. This aligns with existing scholarship demonstrating that educational inequality is rooted in unequal access to resources and learning experiences before students enter advanced coursework (Sirin, 2005; Reardon, 2011). Additionally, research on placement and access to rigorous courses shows that students with similar academic potential are often sorted into different pathways due to institutional practices, reinforcing disparities in preparedness and participation (Avery et al., 2022; Souto-Maior & Shroff, 2024) .

Together, this student's reflection and the broader literature demonstrate that what appears as a gap in ability is more accurately a gap in opportunity, shaped by structural and institutional factors rather than individual deficits.

2/27 Job Comparison Lesson: Decision-Making as a Learned Skill

The 2/27 lesson required students to evaluate job offers using multiple criteria, including salary, benefits, responsibilities, and long-term growth. Students with prior exposure to structured decision-making engaged in multi-variable reasoning: "I'm thinking about long-term benefits, not just salary because that matters more over time." Students with less prior exposure tended to rely on single-variable reasoning, often focusing narrowly on salary or surface-level features of a job. For example, students stated, "I just picked the highest paying job," and "I don't really know what counts as benefits besides money." One student further reflected, "I've never really had to think about jobs like this before, so I just pick what seems easiest."

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The level of student exposure was determined through multiple data sources collected across the unit. First, pre-assessment responses and early exit tickets revealed the depth (or limitation) of students' prior knowledge about careers, compensation, and benefits. Students who demonstrated limited exposure typically provided one-dimensional answers that prioritized income without consideration of factors such as healthcare, work-life balance, or long-term growth. Second, informal classroom observations and discussions. Particularly during activities like the "Dream Job" task, highlighted which students had familiarity with career-related concepts versus those encountering them for the first time. Third, student reflections and written justifications provided insight into their decision-making processes, revealing whether they drew on prior knowledge or relied on assumptions. Finally, background indicators such as participation in AVID, stated career aspirations, and anecdotal knowledge of students' access to career-related conversations or experiences (e.g., family employment context) helped triangulate levels of exposure. Together, these measures allowed me to identify patterns in how prior exposure influenced students' reasoning, particularly their tendency to default to simplified decision-making when they lacked familiarity with more complex career considerations.

Cross-Lesson Pattern: Opportunity, Not Ability

Across both lessons, a consistent pattern emerged linking students' prior access to learning opportunities with how they engaged in the classroom. Students who had greater prior exposure demonstrated more structured reasoning, used academic vocabulary with greater precision, and approached tasks with a higher level of confidence. In contrast, students with more limited access often showed hesitation, relied on surface-level reasoning, and frequently looked to peers for guidance before attempting tasks independently. This divide was not lost on

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students themselves. One student captured it directly, stating, “It feels like some kids already had a head start in classes like this.”

This observation reflects broader patterns identified in the literature. It aligns with Gloria Ladson-Billings’ concept of the “education debt,” which frames disparities in student outcomes as the result of cumulative historical and structural inequities rather than individual deficits. It also reinforces research by Selcuk Sirin (2005) and Sean Reardon (2011), both of whom demonstrate that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in shaping academic readiness well before students enter high school coursework.

Recorded Lesson Reflection: Discourse Control and Access

In my recorded reflection, I noticed that while students participated in discussion, I often mediated meaning-making rather than fully decentralizing discourse. For example, during a class discussion on evaluating job offers, a student initially stated, “I picked this job because it pays the most.” Instead of allowing peers to question or build on that idea, I stepped in to guide the thinking by asking, “What about benefits or long-term growth?” and then revoiced the response by saying, “So you’re considering salary, but we also want to think about total compensation.” In doing so, I redirected the conversation toward the intended learning goal rather than allowing students to collectively construct that understanding through dialogue.

In another instance, when a student expressed uncertainty; “I don’t really know what counts as benefits”, I quickly defined the term and provided examples, rather than opening space for peers to contribute their own ideas or partial understandings. While these moves supported clarity and kept the lesson moving, they positioned me as the primary sense-maker in the room.

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As a result, students had fewer opportunities to wrestle with concepts, build on one another's thinking, or co-construct meaning through academic discourse.

I reflected:

“Students often responded with what they thought I wanted to hear rather than fully developed reasoning.”

This suggests that academic conditioning and prior classroom experience influence participation norms as much as content knowledge.

Theme 1 Summary

This theme demonstrates that inequitable prior access creates uneven entry points into rigorous coursework, and these uneven entry points are consistently visible across student participation patterns, academic discourse, and performance on complex tasks. Across the data collected in this action research cycle, students did not begin learning from the same starting point. Instead, their ability to engage with ethical reasoning, structured decision-making, and academic language varied significantly based on prior exposure to similar types of cognitive and linguistic demands in earlier educational experiences.

More specifically, students who had previously experienced structured academic discourse, exposure to disciplinary vocabulary, and opportunities to engage in multi-step

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reasoning tasks were able to access rigorous coursework more quickly and with greater confidence. These students were more likely to articulate their thinking using academic language, engage in multi-variable reasoning, and independently navigate complex tasks. In contrast, students with less prior exposure often demonstrated conceptual understanding but struggled with how to express their thinking, how to structure their responses, or how to connect ideas using academic frameworks. This was evident in classroom interactions where students stated that they “knew what they wanted to say but didn’t know how to say it,” highlighting a gap between cognitive understanding and academic expression.

Without intentional scaffolding, these differences risk becoming embedded structural barriers that shape not only day-to-day participation but also long-term academic outcomes. In lessons such as the 1/22 ethical reasoning activity and the 2/27 job comparison task, students who lacked prior access were more likely to rely on surface-level responses, defer to peers, or disengage when tasks required unfamiliar academic processes. Meanwhile, students with prior exposure were able to navigate the same tasks with greater independence, reinforcing existing disparities in participation and confidence.

These patterns matter because they extend beyond individual assignments. Over time, repeated experiences of either access or inaccessibility contribute to the formation of academic identity; specifically, whether students see themselves as capable of engaging in rigorous academic work. When students consistently experience difficulty accessing content without adequate support, they may internalize those experiences as indicators of ability rather than opportunity. Conversely, students who repeatedly experience success in structured academic environments are more likely to develop confidence and persistence in challenging coursework.

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Ultimately, this reinforces a central finding of the study: inequitable prior access is not simply a background variable, but an active force that shapes how students engage with learning in real time. As documented in the literature, disparities in socioeconomic resources and early learning opportunities significantly influence students' academic readiness long before they enter rigorous coursework (Sirin, 2005; Reardon, 2011). These differences are further compounded by institutional practices such as course placement and ability signaling, which can limit access to advanced learning opportunities even among students with similar potential (Avery et al., 2022; Souto-Maior & Shroff, 2024) .

Within this context, students' varying levels of participation, confidence, and reasoning observed in this study reflect not differences in ability, but differences in opportunity and prior exposure. Without intentional instructional scaffolding designed to bridge these gaps, classrooms risk reproducing existing inequalities, allowing initial disparities in preparation to become long-term differences in participation, achievement, and academic identity. This finding also aligns with research on educational policy and access, which warns that expanding opportunities without adequate support can inadvertently exacerbate disparities rather than reduce them (Hanselman et al., 2022). These differences in prior exposure are not random individual experiences, but reflect broader institutional and socioeconomic inequalities that shape which students are given access to academic discourse, enrichment opportunities, and rigorous learning environments before entering advanced coursework.

Section 3. Instructional Supports Increase Engagement, Discourse, and Academic Confidence

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Theme Overview

This theme demonstrates that intentional instructional scaffolding significantly improves student engagement, participation, and academic confidence. Across all instructional contexts, when supports such as modeling, sentence frames, structured discussion, and visual organizers were implemented, students demonstrated increased access to rigorous thinking.

Instructional Adjustments in 1/22 Lesson

During the 1/22 ethical reasoning lesson, I intentionally:

- frontloaded vocabulary
- introduced sentence frames
- increased structured discussion time
- emphasized evidence-based reasoning

These adjustments were made in response to initial observations that students defaulted to opinion-based responses without structured support.

Students responded positively:

“The sentence starters helped me explain my answer better.”

“I didn’t feel as lost when I had the words to use.”

These responses demonstrate that scaffolding did not reduce rigor; it increased accessibility by making the thinking required for the task visible and attainable to more students. Rather than simplifying the content or lowering expectations, scaffolds such as modeling, guided

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questioning, and structured discussion supports helped students engage in the same complex reasoning as their peers. For example, when students were prompted to consider multiple variables (e.g., salary, benefits, and long-term outcomes), they moved beyond single-factor decisions and began constructing more sophisticated, evidence-based explanations.

In this way, scaffolding functioned as a bridge between students' prior knowledge and the demands of the task. It supported students in using academic vocabulary, participating in discourse, and justifying their reasoning, practices that are central to rigor. As a result, more students were able to access and demonstrate high-level thinking, not because the task was made easier, but because the pathway to engaging in that thinking was made clearer and more supported.

Instructional Supports in 2/27 Lesson

In the job comparison lesson, I implemented:

- structured comparison charts
- guided reflection questions
- step-by-step decision frameworks

Students demonstrated increased engagement and depth of reasoning:

“The chart helped me see everything I wasn’t thinking about before.”

“I usually just guess, but this made me actually think about it.”

One student noted: “I usually don’t talk in groups, but this time I felt like I understood it.”

Engagement and Participation Shifts

Observation data showed:

- increased voluntary participation
- more balanced discourse
- higher task completion rates
- improved academic language use

Before scaffolding, responses were often limited: “It’s just wrong.”

After scaffolding: “The manager is responsible because they oversee company actions.”

This shift demonstrates a direct relationship between instructional design and cognitive engagement because the scaffolds changed *how* students were able to think and respond. Prior to scaffolding, students’ answers reflected surface-level judgment without explanation. After scaffolding through modeling reasoning, providing academic language, and prompting students to justify their claims, students began to articulate causal relationships. Students were able to connect ideas to broader concepts like responsibility and accountability. In other words, the task itself did not change; what changed was students’ access to the cognitive tools needed to engage with it.

This pattern is supported by research showing that instructional supports can significantly influence how students participate in rigorous learning. For example, studies on access to advanced coursework emphasize that opportunity alone is insufficient. Students must also be provided with the necessary academic supports to succeed in those environments (Avery et al.,

2022; Hanselman et al., 2022) . Similarly, research on socioeconomic influences highlights that differences in prior exposure shape students’ ability to engage in complex reasoning, but these gaps can be mitigated through intentional instructional practices and supportive learning environments (Rakesh et al., 2025) .

Taken together, this shift illustrates that cognitive engagement is not fixed; it is highly responsive to instructional design. When students are given structured opportunities to practice reasoning, use disciplinary language, and explain their thinking, they are more likely to move from simple judgments to deeper, more analytical responses.

Recorded Lesson: Modeling and Discourse Limitations

In the recorded lesson, I modeled academic vocabulary (e.g., payroll, HR systems, employee records) to support comprehension. While this approach was effective in clarifying meaning and reducing confusion, my reflection noted, “This modeling supported understanding but limited student co-construction of meaning.” In practice, I was doing most of the cognitive lifting. I was defining terms, providing examples, and guiding application, while students primarily received and applied the information rather than generating meaning themselves. This highlights a key instructional tension: scaffolding must be paired with opportunities for student ownership. For example, instead of pre-defining all key terms, students could engage in a structured vocabulary inquiry task where they analyze real-world artifacts (e.g., a sample pay stub, onboarding documents, or job descriptions) and collaboratively generate definitions based on context. In this model, students might work in groups to interpret the term “payroll” by examining where and how it appears in a document, then propose a definition, justify their

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thinking, and refine it through class discussion. The teacher's role would shift from delivering definitions to facilitating, probing, and validating emerging understandings.

This differs from my original approach in that modeling positioned vocabulary as something to be transmitted, whereas a co-construction approach positions vocabulary as something to be built through dialogue, inquiry, and application. While direct modeling provided clarity and efficiency, particularly for students with limited prior exposure. It did not fully leverage opportunities for students to engage in deeper meaning-making. Moving forward, a more balanced approach would maintain clear scaffolds while intentionally creating space for students to actively construct and negotiate academic language, increasing both ownership and long-term retention.

The distinction is subtle but important: in my original approach, scaffolding often preceded thinking, whereas in a more student-centered model, scaffolding would emerge in response to student thinking. Supporting and extending it rather than directing it from the outset.

Mentor Feedback and Triangulation

Mentor feedback confirmed:

“Students who are typically quiet are more willing to participate when expectations are modeled and structured.”

This aligns with observational and student voice data across lessons.

Theme 2 Summary

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Instructional supports function as equity tools that redistribute access to rigorous academic content by making complex thinking visible, structured, and achievable for all students. Across this action research cycle, the data consistently demonstrated that when supports such as vocabulary frontloading, sentence frames, structured discussion protocols, modeling of academic language, and visual organizers were intentionally embedded into instruction, students showed measurable increases in engagement, participation, and academic confidence.

More specifically, these supports helped bridge the gap between students who entered the classroom with prior exposure to academic discourse and those who were still developing foundational skills for engaging in rigorous reasoning tasks. Rather than lowering expectations, these strategies created multiple entry points into the same high-level learning targets, ensuring that rigor remained constant while access expanded. This shift was particularly evident in both the 1/22 ethical reasoning lesson and the 2/27 job comparison lesson, where students who initially demonstrated hesitation or surface-level reasoning were able to contribute more fully when scaffolds were in place.

Additionally, the data showed that instructional supports did more than improve task completion. They directly influenced student identity in the learning process. Students who previously self-reported uncertainty or disengagement began to participate more willingly in academic discussions, use discipline-specific vocabulary with greater confidence, and persist longer when confronted with complex tasks. This suggests that scaffolding not only supports cognitive access but also reinforces students' belief that they are capable of engaging in rigorous academic work.

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Ultimately, this theme reinforces a central finding of the study: equity in the classroom is not achieved by simplifying content, but by intentionally designing instruction that removes unnecessary barriers to participation while maintaining intellectual rigor. When instructional supports are thoughtfully planned and consistently applied, they transform the classroom into a space where all students, not just those with prior advantage, can meaningfully access, engage with, and succeed in advanced academic thinking. These findings suggest that scaffolding should not be viewed as remediation or simplification, but as an equity-centered instructional practice that redistributes access to rigorous thinking.

Section 4. Academic Self-Concept Influences Willingness to Pursue Rigorous Coursework

Theme Overview

This theme demonstrates that students' beliefs about themselves as learners significantly influence their engagement in classroom tasks and, more importantly, their willingness to pursue advanced or rigorous coursework such as AP classes and upper-level mathematics. Across the data collected in this action research cycle, academic self-concept emerged as a powerful and consistent factor shaping how students approached challenging tasks, interpreted their own abilities, and envisioned their future academic pathways.

The findings show that students do not make decisions about participation and course enrollment based solely on skill or performance. Instead, those decisions are heavily influenced by internalized beliefs about who they are as learners and whether they perceive themselves as belonging in academically rigorous spaces. These beliefs were evident across student conversations, written reflections, and classroom behaviors during both the 1/22 ethical

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reasoning lesson and the 2/27 job comparison lesson, as well as in informal interactions throughout instruction.

In many cases, students who demonstrated the academic ability to engage with complex tasks still expressed hesitation, self-doubt, or disengagement rooted in identity rather than capability. Statements such as *“I’m not really an A student”* or *“That’s for smart kids, not me”* illustrate how students often position rigorous coursework as something externally defined and socially restricted, rather than something accessible and achievable through effort, support, and practice. These perceptions reflect long-standing structural narratives about ability, intelligence, and belonging in advanced academic spaces.

At the same time, the data also reveal that academic self-concept is not fixed. Instead, it is highly responsive to instructional experiences, feedback, and opportunities for success. When students were provided with structured supports such as sentence frames, guided reasoning tasks, collaborative discussion structures, and scaffolded decision-making tools, they demonstrated increased confidence, participation, and persistence. Over time, these experiences contributed to subtle but meaningful shifts in how students described themselves as learners. Phrases such as *“I didn’t think I could do this, but I actually understand it now”* and *“Maybe I’m not as behind as I thought”* signal emerging shifts in academic identity.

This theme is particularly significant because it connects directly to access and opportunity. Even when students are technically enrolled in rigorous coursework, their willingness to fully engage with challenging material is shaped by whether they believe they belong in that space. In this sense, academic self-concept operates as both a gateway and a barrier to participation in advanced learning environments.

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Ultimately, this theme highlights that expanding access to rigorous coursework is not only a structural or instructional issue, but also an identity-based one. Students must not only be given opportunities to enroll in advanced classes, they must also be supported in developing the belief that they are capable of succeeding within them. Without intentional attention to academic self-concept, opportunity gaps may persist even when formal access has been expanded.

Across lessons, students frequently expressed limiting beliefs about their academic identities. Statements such as “I’m not really an A student,” “That’s for smart kids, not me,” and “I just don’t get that kind of thinking” reflected a broader pattern of self-doubt and fixed perceptions of intelligence. One student captured this tension by explaining, “I could probably do it, but I don’t see myself in those classes,” highlighting a disconnect between ability and a sense of belonging in more rigorous academic spaces.

As instructional supports became more intentional and accessible, students began to shift their perceptions of themselves as learners. They expressed increased confidence and a willingness to reconsider their academic potential. Comments such as “I didn’t think I could do this, but I actually get it now,” and “Maybe I’m not as behind as I thought” signaled meaningful changes in self-concept. Another student noted, “I might try a harder class next year,” suggesting that these shifts extended beyond the immediate lesson and into future academic decision-making. Together, these responses demonstrate that academic identity is not fixed, but responsive to instructional experiences and opportunities to succeed.

These changes in self-perception were also reflected in student behavior. Observation notes indicated increased participation, greater academic risk-taking, and stronger persistence when students encountered challenging tasks. During group work, one student remarked, “Wait,

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I think I get it now. Can I try this part?” This moment represents a clear shift from avoidance to engagement, illustrating how changes in identity can translate into more active involvement in learning.

In my recorded reflection, I noted that while students were participating, opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge were still limited. This suggests that although students were beginning to see themselves as capable learners, there remains a need to further shift instructional practices to center student agency and collaborative meaning-making.

From a Freirean perspective, grounded in Paulo Freire’s critique of the “banking model” of education, this reflects a partial reliance on teacher-mediated discourse, where the teacher still plays a central role in directing knowledge rather than fully co-constructing it with students. Freire’s framework emphasizes dialogue, shared authority, and student agency as essential to meaningful learning. However, even within this more teacher-guided structure, students demonstrated increased engagement when supported through structured scaffolding, suggesting that these supports can serve as a bridge toward more student-centered, dialogic learning environments.

Theme 3 Summary

Academic self-concept is shaped, reinforced, and often redefined through repeated classroom experiences, particularly those that require students to engage with rigorous academic tasks in structured and supported environments. Across this action research cycle, the data consistently demonstrate that students’ beliefs about their academic ability are not static traits, but evolving perceptions that are directly influenced by how instruction is designed, how

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feedback is delivered, and whether students are provided meaningful opportunities to experience success in challenging work. This aligns with the work of Carol Dweck, whose research on growth mindset emphasizes that intelligence and ability are not fixed, but can be developed through effort, effective strategies, and supportive learning conditions. Students' beliefs about who belongs in advanced coursework are shaped not only by classroom experiences, but also by broader institutional narratives regarding intelligence, tracking, and academic placement.

When students encounter rigorous content without adequate scaffolding or prior preparation, they are more likely to interpret struggle as evidence of inability, which reinforces limiting beliefs about their place in advanced academic spaces. However, when instructional supports are intentionally embedded such as guided practice, modeling of academic language, structured discussion protocols, and step-by-step cognitive scaffolds, students are more likely to persist through difficulty and successfully complete complex tasks. These moments of success become critical turning points in how students perceive themselves as learners.

This pattern was evident across both the 1/22 ethical reasoning lesson and the 2/27 job comparison lesson. In each case, students who initially expressed hesitation or uncertainty began to demonstrate increased confidence after engaging with structured supports. For example, students who first relied on surface-level responses or expressed doubt about their ability to participate in academic discourse later contributed more developed reasoning once sentence frames and guided questioning were introduced. These instructional moments created conditions where success was not accidental or reserved for students with prior advantage, but deliberately accessible to all learners.

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Importantly, these experiences of success had effects beyond immediate task completion. Students began to shift how they talked about themselves as learners, moving from deficit-based language such as “I’m not good at this” to more growth-oriented reflections like “I actually understand this now” or “I didn’t think I could do it, but I got it.” These shifts indicate that academic self-concept is being actively constructed within the classroom, not merely revealed by it.

Furthermore, students' beliefs about who belongs in advanced coursework are shaped not only by classroom experiences, but also by broader institutional narratives regarding intelligence, tracking, and academic placement. As students build confidence through scaffolded academic experiences, they become more likely to participate in complex discussions, attempt challenging tasks, and consider enrolling in higher-level courses. This progression highlights a critical instructional implication: when students are consistently positioned to experience success through intentional design, their perception of what they are capable of expands.

Ultimately, this finding reinforces the idea that academic self-concept is not an independent variable, but a product of instructional context. When classrooms are structured to provide equitable access to rigor through scaffolding, relational support, and opportunities for guided success, students begin to internalize new narratives about their academic identity. Over time, these shifts in self-concept become a key mechanism through which access to rigorous coursework can be expanded and sustained.

Summary

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Across all three themes identified in this action research study, the data demonstrate a clear, consistent, and interconnected pattern that helps explain how opportunity gaps are produced and sustained within the classroom, as well as how they can be meaningfully disrupted through intentional instructional practice. First, students enter classrooms with unequal prior access to academic experiences, which directly shapes their readiness for rigorous coursework and their initial participation in complex learning tasks. Second, instructional supports, when intentionally designed and consistently implemented, significantly increase student engagement, improve access to rigorous content, and expand the quality of academic discourse across all student groups. Third, academic identity plays a central role in shaping students' willingness to engage in challenging work and to pursue advanced coursework, including AP and higher-level academic pathways.

Taken together, these three findings are not isolated outcomes, but rather mutually reinforcing components of a larger instructional system. Prior access influences how students enter learning experiences, instructional design determines how students navigate those experiences, and academic identity shapes how students interpret their success and envision their future academic possibilities. In this way, the data suggest that student engagement and achievement are not simply products of motivation or ability, but are deeply connected to systems of opportunity, instructional practice, and identity development that operate simultaneously within the classroom environment.

These findings reinforce a central conclusion of this action research study: equity is not achieved through access alone, but through the instructional conditions that determine how students experience that access. In other words, simply enrolling students in rigorous coursework

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is insufficient if the instructional environment does not provide the scaffolds, supports, and relational conditions necessary for all students to meaningfully engage with the content. Without these conditions, existing disparities in prior preparation and academic identity are likely to persist, even within environments that are formally designed to be equitable.

The data further suggest that opportunity gaps are not abstract policy issues or distant structural problems removed from daily classroom life. Instead, they are visible and measurable in real time through student interactions, classroom discourse, task completion patterns, and the ways students talk about themselves as learners. They appear in moments when students hesitate to participate because they “don’t know how to say it,” in responses that rely on surface-level reasoning due to limited prior exposure, and in statements that reflect internalized beliefs about who belongs in advanced academic spaces. At the same time, these gaps also become visible in moments of growth. When students successfully engage in rigorous tasks after receiving scaffolds, when they begin to use academic language with confidence, and when they reconsider their own academic potential.

However, the findings also make clear that these gaps are not fixed or predetermined. While students may enter classrooms with unequal prior experiences, the data demonstrate that instructional practice has the capacity to significantly reshape student outcomes within a relatively short period of time. Through intentional instructional design such as structured discourse routines, explicit vocabulary instruction, guided practice, modeling of academic thinking, and scaffolded opportunities for success, educators can create learning environments that expand access to rigorous content for all students, not just those who arrive with prior advantage.

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Furthermore, the data suggest that when students experience repeated success within these supported environments, they begin to shift how they perceive themselves as learners. These shifts in academic identity are critical, as they influence not only immediate engagement but also long-term willingness to pursue advanced coursework and academic pathways. In this sense, instructional practice does not only impact what students learn in the moment; it also shapes how students understand their own potential and the educational opportunities they believe are available to them.

Ultimately, this final synthesis reinforces the central argument of the study: equitable outcomes in rigorous coursework are not produced through access alone, but through the deliberate construction of instructional environments that acknowledge unequal prior experiences, provide meaningful scaffolds for engagement, and actively support the development of positive academic identities. When these conditions are present, classrooms become spaces where opportunity gaps can be disrupted, student engagement can be expanded, and all learners can be positioned to succeed in rigorous academic work.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

The findings of this action research project reinforce and extend the scholarship examined in Chapter 2 by demonstrating that opportunity gaps are not simply the result of student ability, but are produced through unequal access to prior learning experiences, institutional structures, and instructional conditions. Across all three themes, inequitable prior access, instructional supports as equity tools, and academic self-concept, the data consistently aligned with research demonstrating that educational outcomes are shaped by structural

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opportunity rather than individual deficit (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012; Reardon, 2011; Sirin, 2005).

In addition to classroom observations, student discourse, reflective journals, and instructional artifacts, survey data collected from a mixed sample of 37 students across both 9th grade Introduction to Business and 6th grade STEAM classrooms provided further insight into how students at different developmental stages perceive rigorous coursework, academic confidence, instructional support, and academic belonging. The cross-grade findings reinforced the broader conclusion that students' willingness to pursue advanced academic opportunities is shaped less by fixed ability and more by access to support, prior exposure, and the development of positive academic identity. While much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 examines inequity through large-scale institutional patterns such as tracking, AP enrollment, and policy structures, this study extends that research by examining how those broader inequities become visible within everyday classroom interactions, instructional practices, and student identity formation.

My instructional approach is closely aligned with culturally relevant pedagogy as outlined by Ladson-Billings (1995), particularly the emphasis on academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness. The instructional scaffolds identified throughout this study reflect principles of culturally responsive teaching by intentionally adapting instructional delivery, academic discourse structures, and collaborative learning opportunities to meet the needs of diverse learners (Gay, 2002). In practice, this meant designing lessons that connected rigorous academic thinking to students' lived experiences while also intentionally scaffolding access to disciplinary language and reasoning. For example, the ethical reasoning lesson and job

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comparison lesson positioned students to analyze real-world scenarios connected to labor, business ethics, compensation, and accountability rather than abstract textbook exercises. Similar to the scholarship examined in Chapter 2, my pedagogy attempted to make rigorous content accessible without reducing cognitive demand. The findings support Avery et al. (2022) and Hanselman et al. (2022), who argued that access to rigorous coursework alone is insufficient unless students are also provided meaningful instructional support.

At the same time, my instructional approach extended this research by showing how opportunity gaps become visible in everyday classroom discourse and participation patterns. Participation patterns may also reflect broader school experiences related to discipline, voice, and classroom belonging, which research has shown disproportionately impact students of color. Existing literature often focuses on large-scale enrollment trends, policy structures, or demographic disparities in access to AP and advanced coursework. While those patterns are important, this study demonstrates how those inequities materialize in real time through student hesitation, reliance on surface-level reasoning, limited academic vocabulary, and self-perceptions about belonging in rigorous spaces. Survey findings further demonstrated that many students possessed moderate-to-high confidence in their ability to complete challenging work while simultaneously expressing uncertainty about how to respond when they became confused academically. This distinction is important because it suggests that many students do not lack motivation or intellectual capacity, but rather access to the strategic academic support necessary to independently navigate rigorous tasks. Students' statements such as "I know what I think, I just don't know how to say it the right way" revealed that academic participation is deeply connected to prior exposure to academic discourse practices. In this way, my findings extend

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Milner's (2012) discussion of opportunity gaps by illustrating how inequitable prior access operates not only structurally, but interactionally within classroom learning environments.

The findings also aligned with research on instructional scaffolding and equitable access to rigor. Similar to Rakesh et al., the study showed that differences in prior exposure affect students' readiness for complex reasoning tasks. However, the findings demonstrated that intentional supports such as sentence frames, structured discussion, guided questioning, visual organizers, and vocabulary frontloading; all helped increase participation and strengthen academic reasoning without lowering rigor. Instead, these supports expanded access to rigorous learning by making thinking processes more visible and attainable. Figure 2 below, indicates that across both middle school and high school contexts, students identified teacher support, parent encouragement, and structured academic help as critical factors influencing success in challenging classes.

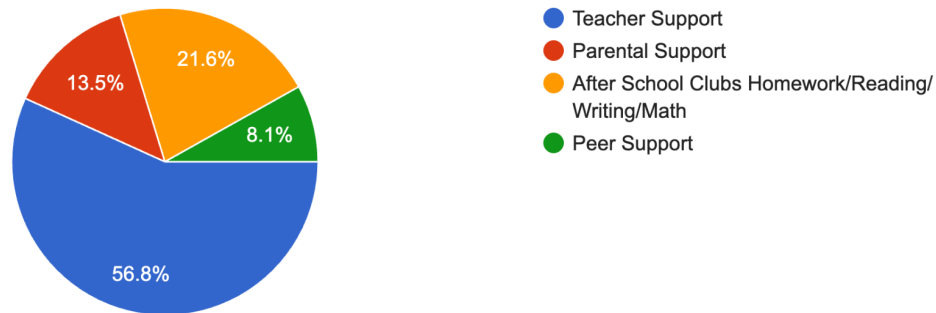
Figure 2

Support With Rigorous Coursework

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What would help you do better in challenging work?

37 responses



Note. These figures show that a majority of students surveyed believe that increased teacher support would help them do better with rigorous coursework.

These findings reinforce the idea that scaffolding is not merely an instructional strategy, but also a relational and equity-centered practice that helps students feel capable of participating in rigorous learning environments.

This approach also connects to Paulo Freire’s critique of traditional “banking” models of education. It creates a one-sided relationship where knowledge is deposited by the teacher and disconnected from students’ lived experiences. In my reflections, I recognized moments where my teaching still relied heavily on teacher-directed meaning-making, particularly when clarifying vocabulary or redirecting thinking before students could collaboratively construct meaning themselves. While these strategies supported comprehension, they sometimes limited student agency. At the same time, the study showed a shift toward more student-centered learning through structured discourse, scaffolded inquiry, and collaborative reasoning, while acknowledging the ongoing challenge of fully decentralizing classroom discourse.

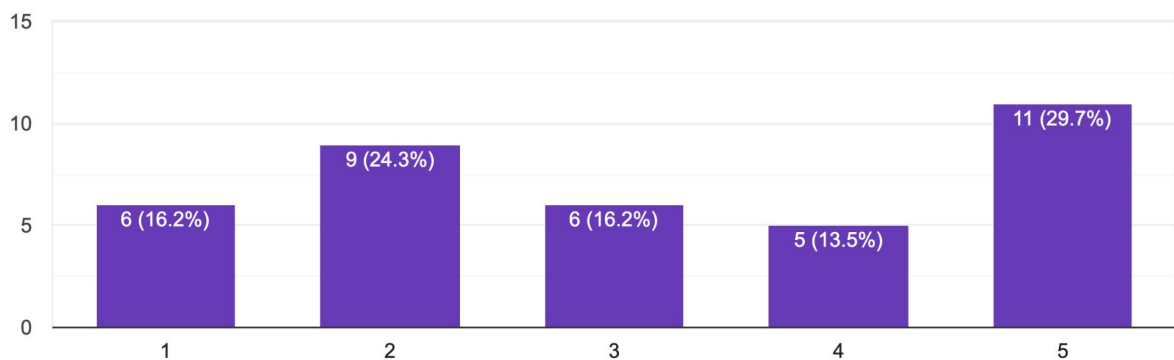
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The findings additionally align with Dweck's (2006) work on growth mindset and academic identity. Across lessons, students' beliefs about themselves as learners significantly influenced their willingness to participate and consider future rigorous coursework. Survey responses additionally revealed mixed perceptions regarding representation and belonging in advanced academic spaces. While some students reported seeing people like themselves succeed in rigorous coursework, Figure 3 below shows the uncertainty that students have about whether they belonged in those environments.

Figure 3

Students Feeling Belonging In Rigorous Classes As Measured from 1-5 (Agree-Disagree)

I feel like I belong in this class.
37 responses



Note. This figure shows the results when students are asked if they feel they belong in challenging classes.

These findings suggest that academic identity is shaped not only through individual success experiences, but also through school culture, representation, and students' perceptions of who is

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traditionally positioned for academic advancement. Students frequently expressed internalized narratives such as “That’s for smart kids, not me,” even when they demonstrated the ability to successfully complete complex tasks. However, repeated experiences of scaffolded success contributed to observable shifts in academic self-concept. Students began to express greater confidence, increased willingness to take academic risks, and stronger consideration of enrolling in more challenging coursework. These findings support research suggesting that academic identity is not fixed, but shaped through instructional experiences, feedback, and opportunities for meaningful success.

Finally, the study reinforces the broader argument presented throughout Chapter 2: educational inequities are systemic, cumulative, and historically rooted. The findings align closely with Ladson-Billings’ (2006) concept of the “education debt,” which reframes disparities as the result of accumulated inequities across generations rather than isolated academic shortcomings. In this study, students who entered the classroom with greater exposure to academic language, structured reasoning, and enrichment opportunities consistently demonstrated greater confidence and participation. Conversely, students with less prior exposure often interpreted initial struggle as evidence of inability. Without intentional scaffolding and relational support, these patterns risk reproducing the same inequities that shape access to advanced coursework at institutional levels.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that equitable access to rigorous learning is not achieved through enrollment alone. Rather, equity is produced through deliberate instructional design that acknowledges unequal starting points, provides structured pathways into complex thinking, and actively supports the development of positive

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academic identities. The findings suggest that culturally responsive scaffolding, relational teaching practices, and opportunities for supported academic success can function as meaningful mechanisms for disrupting opportunity gaps within classroom settings. The findings further suggest that many students are willing to pursue advanced coursework when they perceive those environments as supportive and accessible. A significant number of students expressed interest in taking more rigorous classes either independently or with additional support, reinforcing the idea that participation in advanced coursework is often constrained more by confidence, belonging, and preparation than by ability alone.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it did not fully implement all aspects of culturally responsive and Freirean pedagogy. While instruction included scaffolds and collaborative discussion, classroom discourse often remained teacher-directed rather than fully student-centered. Future research should explore how more student-led inquiry and dialogue influence engagement and academic identity.

The research occurred across a limited sample of students drawn from one high school Introduction to Business classroom and one middle school STEAM classroom over a relatively short instructional period. Although the inclusion of cross-grade survey data strengthened the study by providing insight across developmental levels, the sample size remained relatively small and may not fully represent broader student populations across different schools or demographic contexts. Much of the data relied on qualitative observations, student reflections, and teacher journals, which limits generalizability. Future studies could include larger samples, multiple classrooms, and longitudinal data to strengthen findings.

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Another methodological limitation involves researcher positionality and potential bias. As a Black male educator whose own educational experiences were shaped by opportunity gaps and systemic inequities, I entered this study with strong commitments to equity-centered instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy. Research has consistently shown that Black educators often bring culturally responsive practices, higher expectations for marginalized students, and increased attention to issues of equity and belonging in schools. At the same time, districts such as GBSD continue to face challenges recruiting and retaining Black educators, making these perspectives difficult to replicate or scale institutionally through staffing alone. As one of relatively few Black educators within the district, my lived experiences and professional lens likely influenced how I interpreted student participation, engagement, and instructional outcomes.

While reflexivity and ongoing reflection were intentionally incorporated throughout the research process, I may have been more attuned to evidence supporting equity-focused interpretations while overlooking alternative explanations. Although mentor teacher feedback and triangulation across multiple data sources strengthened the study's credibility, the findings remain shaped by my positionality as both teacher and researcher. Future research could benefit from collaborative analysis with additional researchers or peer reviewers representing diverse perspectives to broaden interpretation and reduce potential bias.

Finally, the instructional supports implemented in this study required significant planning, flexibility, and reflection. These approaches may be difficult to sustain in classrooms with larger class sizes, strict pacing requirements, or limited resources. Future research should examine how equity-centered scaffolding can be implemented across different school contexts.

Conclusion

This action research project examined how instructional supports, opportunity gaps, and academic identity influence equitable access to rigorous coursework. The findings demonstrated that students' engagement and confidence are shaped not only by ability, but by prior access to learning opportunities and the instructional conditions within the classroom.

The study showed that intentional scaffolding, structured discussion, and supportive learning environments increased participation, strengthened academic reasoning, and improved students' confidence in their abilities. As students experienced success with rigorous tasks, many began to reconsider limiting beliefs about themselves as learners and their potential to succeed in advanced coursework.

Conducting this research reinforced my understanding that equity requires more than access alone. Students must also experience instructional environments that provide meaningful support, maintain rigor, and encourage positive academic identity development. The findings also demonstrated that students are more likely to consider advanced coursework when they experience instructional environments that foster confidence, belonging, and support academic success. Across both middle school and high school settings, many students expressed openness to rigorous learning opportunities when adequate support systems were present, reinforcing the idea that equitable participation in advanced coursework depends heavily on instructional design and school culture rather than innate academic ability alone. Ultimately, this study reaffirmed that intentional instructional design can help disrupt opportunity gaps and create more equitable pathways for student success.

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