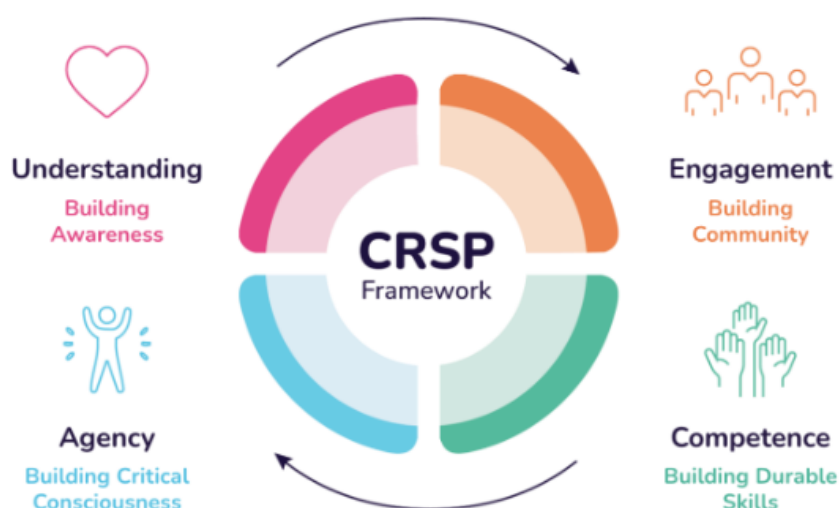


Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Pedagogy (CRSP) Framework Research Base Overview

Framework at a Glance



Throughline Learning's Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Pedagogy (CRSP) Framework is grounded in research, neuroscience, and the rationale of Geneva Gay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Sami Alim, Django Paris, and others. The framework highlights the importance of sociocultural awareness, relationships, developing student ownership, and cultivating higher-order thinking skills within an approach that builds the capacity of teachers and students to disrupt inequitable systems and create more relevant and self-directed learning environments.

Research Overview

Developing an evidence base for culturally responsive and sustaining instruction presents an interesting challenge: the majority of educational research has been conducted with white, native-English-speaking, middle-class students. While population sizes may be a factor here, the current body of research may also be prone to the assumption that all students participate in school in the same way, and that mainstream research results should apply to

everyone (Banks, 2004). Some of the most informative educational research that addresses social and cultural factors focuses on single populations (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). These studies show how multiple factors influence educational outcomes for students, and provide concrete examples of how schooling can build on student knowledge and cultural traditions — in ways that general principles often cannot (p. 19).

In conducting this research review, we focused on studies led by and centered on people of color. We found that when research emphasizes students of color and students that hold other marginalized identities, different root causes are identified and different patterns of outcomes appear — many of which diverge from the dominant, often deficit-based, narratives we hear in education. Consequently, our literature search does not center on meta-analyses or effect sizes, but instead seeks to understand and validate how students from historically marginalized communities experience school in much different ways from their white, middle-class peers.

Implementing the CRSP framework requires growth and attention across all four, inter-related domains; educators cannot pick and choose where to start or end. The non-academic student outcomes connected to the Understanding domain provide a foundation for both non-academic and academic outcomes correlated with the remaining three domains to be realized. Therefore, it is important to approach the following research base holistically.

Domain 1: Understanding
1. Build sociocultural awareness
2. Reflect on ways to promote engagement over compliance

The Understanding domain shares strategies that support educators in uncovering their own biases, learning about the harm those biases can cause, and understanding how to better know and affirm students through the multifaceted identities they bring to the classroom. Without sociocultural awareness, efforts to improve pedagogy will not generate meaningful change.

The Understanding domain includes two main parts. The first is the recognition that we must start with ourselves as actors within a racist, inequitable system. The awareness that our

worldview is not universal — but profoundly influenced by life experiences — opens the door to new levels of empathy, curiosity, and connection. The second part of Understanding is an understanding of the level of cognitive load being carried by students in a classroom. We must be conscious of the ways we perpetuate dominant narratives and how differences in teacher expectations for students can produce dependent learners. In both cases, building awareness requires identifying and disrupting intentional and unconscious bias. The research base provides ample evidence of systemic inequity within schools, underscores the importance of teacher expectations, and demonstrates that increased teacher sociocultural awareness is an important building block for improving student outcomes.

It is particularly important to build the awareness of teachers and leaders around inequitable educational trends and policies within school systems:

- A 2021 study of K-12 enrollment in Virginia found that Black and Latinx students are “heavily underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses” compared to their white and Asian peers ([Siegel-Hawley et al., 2021](#)). Further, scholars have argued that the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education programs — and overrepresentation in special education — strongly related to efforts to perpetuate school segregation ([Ford & Grantham, 2003](#)).
- Another 2021 study uncovered that classes taught by the same teacher receive a lower quality of teaching when they comprise higher percentages of Black and Latinx students. ([Cherng, Halpin, & Rodriguez, 2021](#)). Cherng noted, “Without [conversations about race], existing inequalities will only widen, as teachers...continue to be ill-equipped with the tools necessary to provide all youth an equal education.” ([NYU New Release, 12/14/21](#))
- A 2021 EdTrust report found that Black and Latino students across the nation are disproportionately learning from inexperienced and uncertified teachers ([Mehrotra et al, 2021](#)). There has been little progress in addressing this issue since federal data showed similar disparities in 2014, “so stark then that the Department of Education began requiring states to outline teacher equity plans” ([T74, McMurdock, 2022](#))
- Colorblind notions of SEL (social emotional learning) do not focus enough on teacher perceptions, particularly in instances of school discipline. A 2014 report showed that preschool teachers increased the severity of disciplinary actions when their race didn’t match that of the child ([Gilliam et al., 2016](#)). A 2017 study found that adults believe Black girls ages 5-19 need less nurturing, protection, support and comfort than White girls of the same age. This adultification bias is linked to harsher punishment, with Black girls receiving treatment that is not developmentally appropriate for their age as

well as less empathy than their white peers ([Epstein et. al., 2017](#)).

- What a teacher decides to teach is also important to understand. The decision to omit socially challenging topics is often influenced by a teacher's upbringing, sociocultural environment, and mindset. "When certain subjects or topics are left out of the overt curriculum, teachers are sending messages to students that certain content and processes are not important enough to study" ([Chowdhury & Siddique, 2017, p. 148](#)).
- Deficit thinking stems from a history of white supremacist thinking that prizes dominant traditions of learning. When students of color do not adhere to these dominant styles, many teachers misrepresent them as having deficits. As a result, teachers expect less of them, and students often internalize these low expectations ([Ford et al., 2002](#)).
- Students placed in lower tracks or groups are generally given fewer opportunities to move up — either to experience grade level work or more rigorous tasks. These practices tend to segregate students by race, widen academic disparities, and magnify inequality ([Reichelt et al., 2019](#)).

Teacher perceptions of students always include some level of bias, which impacts everything from who is more likely to be called on in class to who is seen as capable of solving rigorous problems to who is subject to disciplinary action. The effects of bias are especially visible across lines of difference (i.e., race, economic status, gender, language, special education status). A study examining the impact of white teachers found that the dominant framework of most white teachers "predisposes them to have lower expectations of Black students and a lack of respect for students' families and primary culture" ([Douglas et al., 2008, p. 49](#)). Disrupting this mindset is crucial as high expectations held by teachers is one of the strongest predictors of future student achievement ([de Boer et. al, 2018](#); [Mathewson, 2016](#)). A 2013 study found that the combination of student, parent, English teacher, and Math teacher expectations were additive, and explained greater variance in postsecondary education than either socioeconomic status or academic performance ([Gregory & Huang, 2013](#)). In particular, teachers' expectations most accurately predicted postsecondary status. Similarly, lower teacher expectations contribute to lower student achievement ([Oakes, 1985](#); [Steele & Aronson, 1995](#); [Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005](#)).

Teachers who learn about their students — their identities, cultures, interests, and aspirations — are better positioned to deepen learning experiences, engage students whose perspectives are missing in traditional curriculum materials, and incorporate assessment practices that provide a more nuanced understanding of student strengths and potential ([Villegas & Lucas,](#)



2002; Koretz, 2008). Teacher affirmation of students from culturally diverse backgrounds significantly impacts student learning, student self-value, motivation, and overall performance (Krasnoff, 2016; Gay, 2000; Milner & Howard, 2004; Douglas et al., 2008; Devereaux & Palmer, 2019).

Schools that pursue culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy through ethnic studies courses have seen correlated increases in student attendance, GPA, and credits earned, including for students deemed “at risk” (Dee & Penner, 2017). When teachers discuss race and privilege directly, it can lead to increased dialogue between students, a shift in positional power, and a desegregation of the classroom (Sassi & Thomas, 2008). And just as teacher perceptions of students are linked to future success, students who have high expectations for themselves have higher school achievement than their peers. In a study of 14,758 students in England, students with both high aspirations and high expectations significantly outperformed their peers on state level exams (Khattab, 2015).

Domain 2: Engagement
3. Nurture a culture of trust & belonging
4. Develop learner identity, mindset, and confidence
5. Foster an academic community
6. Deepen student capacity for productive struggle

The Engagement domain focuses on developing teacher-student and student-student relationships to support a culture of trust and belonging in the classroom. This, in turn, fosters an environment that promotes strong academic mindsets and a culture of thinking. Both pieces are rooted in stronger Understanding. The Engagement domain works to ensure that teachers develop connections and a feeling of care with all students while understanding and navigating the role that differences such as race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status play in relationship dynamics. A strong classroom community is an important precursor to an emphasis on cognitive development.

The research base begins with the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and considers the importance of relational trust in classrooms. Fostering a “sense of belonging”

correlates with increased student motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy. Honoring the cultural and linguistic traditions of students strengthens this sense of belonging and supports improved academic performance. Belonging increases student agency, which is linked to improved academic outcomes; and a strong classroom community fosters academic mindsets, which have a strong connection to higher achievement levels.

There are several critical components to building an effective classroom community. Relationship-building is a core driver of human development and students crave positive connections. The research connecting positive teacher-student relationships with improved school outcomes is supported by several meta-analyses (Hattie, 2012; Roorda, 2011; Kincade et al., 2020). However, more nuanced studies indicate the important additional layer that race adds to student-teacher relationships. A study centered on the school experience of Black males found that they felt a lack of trust toward authority figures at school and felt profiled and stereotyped by teachers (Jeffries, 2019). Black male students in the study shared that negative relationships are felt deeply, while positive, caring relationships are the “key to their success.” In a study of behaviorally at-risk Black students, increasingly positive teacher-student relationships — as reported by both teachers and students — resulted in increased social, behavioral, engagement, and academic outcomes for students (Decker et al., 2007). A 2024 randomized controlled trial of a school-wide, culturally responsive classroom management model found reductions in behavior problems and increases in student engagement across participating middle schools, offering experimental confirmation of these patterns (Debnam, Kaihoi, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2024). A study focusing on an urban high school in the Midwest found that students of color showed a significant decrease in the perception of care from white teachers (Mabin, 2016). This body of work suggests that teachers — particularly white teachers — must attend to building relationships with students of color with increased levels of intention.

There are several goals behind an intentional relationship-building focus. The first is the development of a “sense of belonging.” Studies of specific settings from elementary to junior high to college all show that a student’s sense of belonging is highly correlated to motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy — contributing to greater academic success (McMahon et al., 2009; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Freeman et al., 2007). The Stanford Integrated Schools Project found that students in higher “identity-safe” classrooms had higher scores on standardized tests, wanted more challenging work, felt a greater sense of belonging, and felt more positive about school compared to students from less identity-safe classrooms. (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). In addition, interventions designed to foster a sense of belonging have

been linked to improvements in long-term discipline outcomes for boys from negatively stereotyped groups (Goyer et al., 2019). A 2025 randomized trial replicating a brief middle-school belonging intervention in a new school district confirmed that these effects hold up across different contexts (Borman, Borman, Park, & Zhu, 2025). Yet, this concept is not easy to implement. In a 2017 Education Week survey, 41% of teachers reported that it was challenging or very challenging to make their students feel like they belong in the classroom when it comes to sexual orientation, gender, race, etc. (Blad, 2017).

Crucial to building community is the fostering of students' cultural and linguistic expression. Race, culture, identity, and language are all deeply intertwined. When teachers honor their students' language and cultural traditions, their academic outcomes improve (Canagarajah, 2006; Devereaux & Palmer, 2019; Lee, 1995). For example, researchers in Bangladesh found that students allowed to practice their home language in school in addition to the dominant language outperformed the control group in school readiness, problem-solving, numeracy, communication, literacy, language, and knowledge and understanding of the world (Vijayakumar et al, 2013). Teachers who cultivate their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds honor their students' identities, helping to create a sense of belonging and community.

A strong classroom community increases student agency. Teachers who view student perspectives and identities as a learning asset can improve self-efficacy, which has been linked to improved academic outcomes (Zeiser et al., 2018; Andersen et al., 2019). Further, when students are asked to make meaning of new knowledge by connecting it to something that is personal and relevant to them, they develop new schema more quickly. This description of student agency overlaps well with Hattie's definitions of integrating prior knowledge; scaffolding & situated learning; and student-centered teaching, all influences shown to have significant effect sizes related to student achievement (Visible Learning MetaX, 2021).

Nurturing strong academic mindsets and a culture of thinking are also powerful components of Engagement. There is a strong evidence base supporting the notion that students' attitudes about learning, beliefs about their intelligence, persistence, self-control, and quality of their relationships have an impact on student performance (Ames & Archer, 1988; Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Keith et. al., 1993; Pintrich, 2000; Schunk & Hanson, 1985; Wentzel, 1991; Zimmerman, 1990). Multiple studies also show that students who believe that their intelligence can grow based on effort and persistence score higher than their peers



(Paunesku et al., 2015; Wilson & Linville 1982, 1985; Blackwell et al., 2007). This finding was confirmed at national scale by the largest randomized controlled trial of a growth mindset intervention to date: a brief, single-session exercise raised ninth-graders' GPAs across a nationally representative sample of U.S. public high schools (Yeager et al., 2019).

These results hold true for students across the socioeconomic spectrum, highlighting the power academic mindsets have to help combat the effects of poverty (Claro et al., 2016). Finally, students in classrooms with a strong culture of thinking — where collective as well as individual thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted — have been shown to be more engaged, have more positive perceptions of learning, be more ready to explore new content, and be better positioned for higher-order problem solving (Salmon, 2008; Gardner, 1991; Ritchhart, 2015).

At the student level, this domain underscores a shift from a competitive learning environment to one that is more cooperative, with individual students feeling seen, included, and supported by their teacher and their peers. Cooperative learning environments have been linked to lower anxiety levels, higher enjoyment of learning tasks, more friendliness, and higher achievement on problem-solving activities (Johnson et al., 1973; Hurley et al., 2009; Oloyede et al., 2012). Many students, particularly those from collectivist cultures, prefer collaboration, especially in contrast to competitive or individualistic models (Ellison et al., 2005). Similarly, when a spirit of co-creation extends to instructional delivery, students are more motivated, develop more trusting relationships, and are better able to reflect on their own learning processes (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; Bovill et al., 2016). In a successful classroom community, there's a sense that everyone can achieve — an indicator of growth mindset — which research shows can be as strong a predictor of student achievement as family income (Claro et al., 2016).

Domain 3: Competence
7. Strengthen critical thinking skills
8. Differentiate using data
9. Use feedback & reflection processes to drive learning
10. Encourage student ownership through goal setting

The Competence domain emphasizes the importance of developing students' thinking skills, building on their personal and cultural strengths, examining curriculum from multiple perspectives, and sharing data to support effective feedback, reflection, and differentiation. By leveraging relationships, a mindset around equity, and learning science, we disrupt a culture of low expectations and shift the cognitive load to students by developing their information processing skills.

The research shows a clear connection between leveraging students' funds of knowledge and increasing their ownership of learning and academic outcomes. Similarly, the use of structured thinking routines has generated improved outcomes for students across content areas. Formative assessment structures and effective teacher feedback enjoy a strong evidence base within several meta-analyses; and intentional differentiation is also tied to improved outcomes.

When teachers are able to tap into the background knowledge, interests, and identities of their learners, students increase their ownership of learning and improve their academic outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995); additionally, students display higher levels of independence and responsibility, more positive student attitudes toward learning, stronger collaboration skills, and more confidence and pride in their identities as learners, a key component of academic mindset (Brozo et al., 1996). For example, in a study of 8 different schools, after building upon 3rd-6th grade students' funds of knowledge, teachers reported increased engagement and more positive attitudes toward learning among their students: students became more independent, better at collaborating, more supportive of their peers, more confident as learners, and happier in class; classes also became more cohesive as students became closer to one another and were better able to disrupt preconceived notions of one another (Volman & 't Gilde, 2021).

The use of thinking routines helps scaffold student thinking and make it visible, and a growing evidence base supports this focus in the classroom (Project Zero, 2016). Thinking maps have been linked to increased student comprehension and improved connections between topics (Long & Carlson, 2011). Scaffolding student thinking and integrating thinking routines have been shown to deepen academic conversations, increase vocabulary, improve participation, increase critical thinking skills, improve engagement, raise test scores, and enable teachers to more easily recognize student misconceptions (Dajani, 2016; Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008; Ritchhart et al., 2011). For example, in a study of 4th grade English Language Learners,



students drew reminder cards with symbols representing how to engage in academic conversations. By the end of the study, students had engaged in deeper conversations, made more meaningful connections with texts, used new vocabulary, became more independent thinkers, and improved as writers and critical thinkers (Zwiers & Crawford, 2009). Thinking routines have also resulted in positive shifts in school culture as well as increased student ownership and participation (Marshall, 1988; Ritchhart et al., 2006; Ritchhart et al., 2009).

Within the CRSP framework, formative assessment structures, ongoing teacher feedback, and student reflection practices collectively support cognitive development and critical thinking skills. Formative assessment practices are supported by several meta-analyses (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Kingston & Nash, 2011; Graham et al., 2015) and have been shown to be “highly effective in raising the level of student attainment, increasing equity of student outcomes, and improving students’ ability to learn” (OECD, 2005, p. 2). For example, in a study of fifth graders over two semesters, students who received formative assessments significantly outperformed control-group students on a social studies achievement test. The experimental group students also held more positive attitudes toward the social studies class than the control group and expressed that the formative assessments helped them see their mistakes (Ozan & Kincal, 2018).

One of the most foundational elements of formative assessment is teacher feedback. Several meta-analyses place teacher feedback among the top 10 influences of any kind on achievement when feedback is timely, specific, and focuses on cognitive processes versus overall proficiency (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Van der Kleij et al., 2015). A more recent meta-analysis of 435 studies and more than 61,000 students reaffirmed and extended these findings (Wisniewski, Zierer, & Hattie, 2020).

An important caveat is positive feedback bias; a 2012 study found that teachers give more positive, less constructive feedback to Black and Latinx students, contributing to the insufficient challenge that can undermine the academic achievement of students of color (Harber, 2012).

There is a substantial evidence base in support of differentiated instruction in order to tailor teaching to the needs of different learners (Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014). While the use of targeted, small group instruction has gained traction in schools and districts, the lack of consistent intentions, frameworks, and definitions (Bondie et al., 2019) and the challenge of effectively implementing differentiated groups in the classroom requires some important



parameters. Guidance from the Institute of Education Sciences includes a focus on using data and progress monitoring tools and ensuring frequent regrouping ([U.S. Department of Education, 2009](#)). It is important to note the impact that heterogeneous grouping can have on segregation practices in the classroom — and how disproportionately often low test scores of students of color can separate them from their White peers in the classroom (Hawley, 2007).

At the student level, the Competence domain encourages students to own their learning journeys and persist through rigorous work. Students who take control of their learning experience are more active in the learning process and develop a meta-cognitive awareness of what they are learning ([Baxter Magolda, 2006](#); Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Activities that support student reflection have been qualitatively linked to improved academic motivation ([Cavilla, 2017](#)), critical thinking skills, civic engagement, and personal growth ([Ash et al., 2005](#)), as well as increased confidence and use of strategic thinking approaches ([Cleary et al., 2008](#)).

Structured, scaffolded activities that increase academic demands strengthen students' cognitive skills. The use of academic conversations has been found to accelerate oral language skills while deepening connections and supporting critical thinking ([Zwiers & Crawford, 2009](#); [Reznitskaya et al., 2007](#)). Studies also link the impact of higher-order thinking to significant gains in academic achievement and English proficiency, pointing to the value of “increasing the level of cognitive challenge when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students” ([Teemant et al., 2016](#); Hammond, 2014).

Growing studies have shown that connecting challenging work to the cultural identities of students increases academic outcomes for students across diverse cultural traditions, such as urban African Americans ([Adjapong & Emdin, 2015](#); [Lee, 1995](#)), the Adivasi people in Bangladesh ([Vijayakumar et al., 2013](#)), the Yup'ik Eskimos in Alaska ([Lipka et al., 2005](#)), and Navajo Nation ([McCarty, 2002](#)), for example.

Domain 4: Agency	
11.	Leverage student inquiry, analysis, and values to increase motivation
12.	Apply and extend learning in ways that promote justice



The Agency domain centers a vital component of academic mindset — that school work “has value” for students. Students are more willing to engage in rigorous work when learning is relevant, interesting, and affirming of their identities and perspectives. Engaging in critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action has been shown to be a gateway to academic motivation and achievement, particularly for marginalized students.

The research base supporting Agency begins with a strong connection between ethnic studies coursework and a host of positive personal and academic outcomes. These outcomes are enhanced when coursework includes the analysis of inequitable systems and the active promotion of justice. Critical action, in particular, has been connected to higher graduation rates and college matriculation. The academic and social value of centering coursework on the cultural identities and backgrounds of students has been well established. Positive effects include increased confidence, higher college attendance, a strong positive relationship between the racial identity of students of color and academic achievement, higher student engagement, significant skill growth, improved attitudes toward learning, and increased student agency (Altschul et al., 2006, 2008; Chavous et al., 2003; Carter, 2008; O'Connor, 1997; Brozo et al., 1996; Bean et al., 1999; Copenhaver, 2001; Krater et al., 1994; Gay, 2010; Rickford, 2001; Lee, 1995; Matthews & Smith, 1994; Tyson, 2002; Halagao, 2004, 2010).

Many studies have also noted positive effects — particularly for students of color — when students analyze unjust systems and work to promote equality, including increased academic achievement and engagement, enrollment in higher education, and persistence in school (Escalanté & Dirmann, 1990; Foster, 1995; Krater et al., 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sheets, 1995; Sharp & Gallimore, 1988; Cabrera et al., 2014; Cammarota, 2007). More specifically, analyzing examples of systemic racism results in higher levels of critical consciousness and higher levels of career development for BIPOC high school students (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

Similarly, studies have shown that students who are inspired to take action against injustice are more likely to attend college, attend selective colleges, and be civically engaged (Cammarota, 2007; Rogers & Terriquez, 2013; Diemer et al., 2017; Ginwright, 2010). In one study, mostly remedial level Latinx students enrolled in a Chicano Studies course and participated in an action research project from a critical race theory lens. By the end of the class, all students reported their writing and reading skills had improved, and 93% said they felt better able to attend college. Accordingly, 88% of enrolled students graduated with 58% attending college, significantly higher than the national averages for Latinx students at the



time (59% and 26% respectively). In interviews, students described how they learned the struggles they faced were not necessarily due to personal shortcomings but a result of systemic oppression, which increased their motivation in school. Others reported feeling empowered and motivated while learning about their own history rather than the dominant Eurocentric curriculum (Cammarota, 2007).

High levels of critical consciousness have also been associated with increased school engagement, high extracurricular engagement, and plans for future university study (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016); as well as improved attendance and GPA gains. In one study, 9th grade students exposed to critical consciousness in an Ethnic Studies course realized an average increase of 1.4 GPA points, 21% attendance, and 23 earned credits. Students below a 2.0 GPA in this study also improved their academic outcomes, with GPA increasing by 0.39, attendance by 5.6%, and earned credits by 6.3 (Dee & Penner, 2017).

A 2021 follow-up study using a preregistered regression-discontinuity design found that this same course produced longer-run gains in high school graduation rates, larger than the effect of a comparable doubled-instructional-time intervention, with no evidence effects faded over time (Bonilla, Dee, & Penner, 2021).

In another four year study of high school students, with each increase in students' levels of critical reflection of 0.1 units, GPA increased on average by .254 points (Seider et al., 2020).



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