

# Optimizing Elementary Education for English Language Learners

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# Chapter 6

## Reaching Rigor for English Learners Through Responsive Interactions of Care

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores what happens when teacher-student and student-student interactions reflect a higher level of responsiveness to the human beings involved. It describes biography-driven instruction (BDI), a research-based method of instruction that supports all learners to reach high academic standards, while at the same time ensuring that English learners have the scaffolds and tools needed to engage fully in the curriculum. Teachers who implement BDI develop a holistic understanding of students' sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions. They use students' background knowledge as a springboard to new learning. To determine the impact of BDI on the education of English learners in elementary classrooms, this chapter explores the perspectives of 16 teachers (Grades 1-6) who received professional development on BDI and then implemented the method with their own communities of learners. Interview data was collected in Spring 2016, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed. Findings in the form of themes in participant voice are discussed throughout the chapter.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Elementary educators, district administrators, and policy makers across the country are looking for answers to the question: How do we best support English learners to achieve linguistic and academic success? New programs, curricula, apps, and strategies flood into districts each year, many promising a

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quick fix to the quandary. The results of these well-intended efforts often mean unsystematic actions on the part of the teacher to make everything work for all learners. However, in this current climate with so many variances in students' background experiences and linguistic and academic levels, such teacher efforts fall short and fail to fully utilize students' individual assets for learning (National Education Association, 2011). Often in a rush to have learners complete tasks and finish assignments to keep up with the pacing demands of the curriculum, teachers provide fewer opportunities for students to collaborate in the classroom community as well as more limited access to the kinds of challenging questions and tasks that spawn critical and creative thinking (Herrmann, 2015).

Our work with teachers and students in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) school settings for nearly two decades has led to the development of practical ways for teachers to implement research and theory surrounding second language acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 1981; Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 2012) and the tenets of culturally responsive education (e.g., Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2011). At the core of these efforts is the simple notion of human interactions of care, which become central to instructional processes for teachers. In a world where many educators feel stretched beyond their capacities due to job intensification and financial shortfalls, human relationships in the classroom tend to take a back seat.

This chapter explores what happens when teacher–student and student–student interactions reflect a higher level of responsiveness to the human beings involved. It describes a research-based method of instruction that supports all learners to reach high academic standards, while at the same time ensuring that English learners have the scaffolds and tools needed to engage fully in the curriculum. It also highlights the results of a qualitative case study featuring 16 elementary teachers committed to taking theory to practice in order to enhance their effectiveness with CLD learners.

## **BACKGROUND**

*Biography-driven instruction* (Herrera, 2010, 2016) is a method of providing culturally responsive instruction grounded in a holistic understanding of the student. This “biography,” which evolved conceptually from the work of Thomas and Collier (e.g., Thomas & Collier, 1997), comprises the sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions of the learner (Herrera, 2016; Herrera & Murry, 2016). Although the dimensions are interrelated and attention to each is essential, the sociocultural dimension is at the heart of the biography. This dimension grounds the life of the child and includes his or her home dynamics and relationships as well as cultural experiences, values, and traditions. These in turn shape the child's ways of viewing and understanding the world and interacting with others.

The linguistic dimension of the CLD student biography asks teachers to go beyond simply understanding a child's language from the perspective of proficiency levels in listening, speaking, reading, and writing based on standardized tests in English (L2) and in the native language (L1). Instead, educators explore how students use both (or multiple) languages to comprehend, communicate, and express themselves. Similarly, although considerations for students' learning styles, learning strategies, and processing—as typically defined in school settings—are not forgotten, teachers who maximize English learners' cognitive dimension attend to the specific ways they know, think, and apply in the context of each lesson. Teachers who use the student biography as the foundation for their teaching also realize that a student's academic dimension cannot be understood simply by knowing his or her history with

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prior schooling, grades, and standardized achievement tests. Rather, they consider how past and current educational experiences provide students with access, engagement, and hope.

Exactly *how* teachers should maximize CLD students' biographies during instruction has been a slippery question for educators and researchers alike. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) has provided five standards for effective practice with diverse communities of learners. These *Standards for Effective Pedagogy and Learning* (CREDE, 2002/2014) have been utilized in research with student populations that reflect different languages, cultures, and nationalities (e.g., Doherty, Hilberg, Epaloose, & Tharp, 2002; Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal, & Tharp, 2003; Tharp, 1997; Tharp & Dalton, 2007; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). Briefly, these standards include:

- **Joint Productive Activity:** Teachers and Students Producing Together.
- **Language Development:** Developing Language and Literacy Across the Classroom.
- **Contextualization:** Making Meaning: Connecting School to Students' Lives.
- **Challenging Activities:** Teaching Complex Thinking.
- **Instructional Conversation:** Teaching Through Conversation.

Yet, determining the exact nature of what instruction aligned to these standards might look like—especially in classrooms where students from multiple ethnicities are represented—has proved to be difficult. In part, this is because no classroom communities are exactly alike.

## **ACHIEVING STANDARDS IN CLASSROOM PRACTICE**

Biography-driven instruction (BDI) addresses the gap between standards and practice, emphasizing the need for teachers and students to collaboratively facilitate and navigate a unique learning space, in which the official space of the classroom and the unofficial space of students' lives are equally valued and mutually utilized to advance understanding and learning (Herrera, 2016; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 2003). Teachers who implement BDI draw on students' assets and knowledge systems as well as their own knowledge, experiences, and expertise in order to responsively guide learners to achieve curricular goals. These lofty goals become more easily attainable when students and teachers have tools to support their progression and interaction throughout the lesson cycle.

The BDI framework for lesson delivery includes three distinct phases. Both teachers and students have responsibilities and individual accountability during each phase.

1. Activation Phase (Opening)
  - a. *Teachers* provide every learner with a risk-free opportunity to document initial connections to the topic and to key concepts or vocabulary. They observe for and record insights into students' background knowledge, which comprises three distinct systems of knowledge (Herrera, 2016):
    - i. **Funds of Knowledge:** Home assets (e.g., traditions, home literacy practices, native language, family dynamics).
    - ii. **Prior Knowledge:** Community assets (e.g., family employment, language brokering, community environment and support systems).

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- iii. **Academic Knowledge:** School assets (e.g., school-based cooperation and collaboration skills, school literacy practices, previous content knowledge, formal school dynamics) Teachers will use these documented insights to leverage students' assets as they support language development and conceptual understanding throughout the remainder of the lesson.
- b. *Students* use both words (in their native language and in English) and drawn images to document ideas, vocabulary, skills, and knowledge that they bring to the lesson.
2. Connection Phase (Work Time)
  - a. *Teachers* support learners to make connections between their background knowledge and the new information. They serve as facilitators and cultural negotiators as students construct meaning and navigate the demands of the curriculum. Teachers orchestrate opportunities for student interaction in order to support development within each dimension of the learners' biographies. They use what students produce throughout the lesson to enter into reciprocal conversations that validate students' thinking, build up the community, and make the learning process transparent for all.
  - b. *Students* stretch themselves beyond their current levels of development to use new language, comprehend concepts, express opinions and ideas, and consider new perspectives. They evaluate initial connections from the previous phase to determine relevance and usefulness to current learning. They also continue to document connections to the new material.
3. Affirmation Phase (Closing)
  - a. *Teachers* use accumulated evidence of student learning during the lesson to affirm new understandings as well as individual and collective growth. Authentic assessments evolve from the joint productivity of the group and provide opportunities for students individually to demonstrate their new understandings.
  - b. *Students* use the tools on which they have documented their learning throughout the lesson to support their completion of end-of-lesson tasks and assessments. They reflect on the effectiveness of their own learning strategies and processes.

Throughout the entire lesson, teachers are attuned to the messages students are communicating. They consider influences both within and outside the classroom that play a role in students' affective responses to instruction. They set conditions that assure learners that the classroom is a safe place of respect and trust. Students are confident that their background knowledge, experiences, and skills will be viewed as legitimate building blocks for learning.

The BDI strategies that teachers employ during a lesson provide a through-line of processes and actions—for both the teacher and the students—that guide the reciprocal teaching and learning that occurs (Herrera, Kavimandan, Perez, & Wessels, 2017). Smaller activities, strategies, and techniques are incorporated in each BDI strategy, and hands-on tools allow teachers and students to track emerging understanding. Teachers focus on what students *do* know and *can* do as they guide them to develop a positive self-concept as a learner and attain the lesson's goals and objectives.

One such BDI strategy is DOTS. This acronym stands for determine (D), observe (O), talk (T), and summarize (S). Briefly, students first *determine* what they know in the Activation phase by recording their initial connections to the topic as they write (using their native language and/or English) and draw in the A-Z alpha boxes of their individual DOTS charts. The teacher then asks learners to write the target vocabulary words around the edges of their charts. Students continue to use this chart as a tool

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to scaffold their learning throughout the remainder of the lesson. In the Connection phase, students *observe* for links between their background knowledge (words and images recorded in the boxes) and the concepts and vocabulary of the text/larger lesson. They draw lines on their DOTS charts to indicate these connections, linking the words written around the chart to the ideas documented in the boxes. *Talk* between students (in pairs and small groups) as well as between students and the teacher is supported by the evolving connections that students document on their charts. Learners are able to share their individual perspectives on the topic and concepts, using the words and ideas on their chart to support their communication efforts. Teachers are able to formatively assess students' unique ways of processing the lesson's language and content; they use insights gleaned to advance the learning of the entire classroom community. In the Affirmation phase, students use their DOTS charts for support as they *summarize*, solve, and synthesize their learning.

Although including a description of each BDI strategy is not possible within the context of this chapter, full strategy descriptions, directions, and explications of benefits for students and teachers are provided in Herrera et al. (2017). The essence of each strategy, however, remains the same. Students and the teacher collaborate by sharing and building on their individual background knowledge, ideas, and expertise. Students use a hands-on tool to document and scaffold their learning throughout the Activation, Connection, and Affirmation phases. This tool supports students' expression in English as they interact with peers in purposeful grouping configurations. It also serves as a personalized resource for students as they complete end-of-lesson tasks. Throughout the lesson, the teacher uses what students produce to affirm learning and guide students to achieve the curricular goals and objectives.

Existing observational research indicates that teachers' instructional practices become increasingly more reflective of research-based, promising practices for culturally and linguistically diverse students when they implement BDI strategies. This effect was evidenced in a study of 175 middle school and high school teachers from across content areas (Language Arts, Social Studies, STEM) (Herrera, Holmes, & Kavimandan, 2012). Another study of 58 grade-level elementary and secondary teachers yielded similar results. In this study, Perez, Holmes, Miller, and Fanning (2012) found that when no BDI strategy was being implemented, elementary teachers outperformed secondary teachers on a classroom observation measure of effective teaching practices. On the other hand, when BDI strategies were implemented, teachers of every grade level significantly improved their performance. In fact, under this condition, the significant differences between grade levels were eliminated. In yet another study, MacDonald, Miller, Murry, Herrera, and Spears (2013) explored the impact of BDI strategy use on the teaching practices of 39 grade-level elementary and secondary teachers of math and science. Teachers demonstrated higher levels of culturally responsive teaching practices when they implemented a BDI strategy than when they did not. Moreover, although the science teachers in this study overall scored higher on the observation measure than did the math teachers, teachers of both content areas increased the effectiveness of their instructional practices at similar rates when they implemented a BDI strategy.

## **EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF BDI**

In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the implications of BDI for practicing elementary teachers, the authors of this chapter used a qualitative case study, guided by the theoretical framework of the previously described CREDE standards, to explore the perspectives of a group of elementary teachers in a metropolitan school district in the Midwest. Four elementary schools had entered into a partnership

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with a nearby public university to provide staff professional development designed to support effective practices with CLD students. The professional development (PD) offered research-based, BDI strategies for implementing culturally responsive teaching.

The PD was tailored to meet the site-specific needs of each school. Each school's leadership team collaborated with its designated university facilitator to determine the frequency and duration of each PD session (often a combination of short, 40-minute sessions and periodic 2 or 3-hour sessions). PD took place throughout the 2015-16 academic year. By the end of the year, faculty at each of the schools had received PD covering the same focal topics. Topics highlighted key aspects of BDI (e.g., four dimensions of the CLD student biography; BDI framework for lesson delivery; three knowledge systems comprising background knowledge; situational processes of teaching). University facilitators built relationships of trust with the teachers, collaborating on a weekly basis through activities such as workshop sessions, classroom observations, lesson planning, co-teaching, and teaching demonstrations.

At the end of the Spring 2016 semester, facilitators sought to explore answers to the following questions:

- What did teachers perceive were the instructional benefits of systematic implementation of BDI strategies?
- What did teachers perceive were the outcomes of classroom opportunities for uniquely human interaction among their communities of learners?
- What did teachers perceive were the benefits of BDI for students?
- In what ways did teachers' meaning perspectives change in relation to their classroom practice?

Facilitators invited the 16 participating teachers to engage in a short, individual interview about their perspectives on teaching and learning in the classroom. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 12 minutes. In addition, nine of the teachers also agreed to be filmed as they implemented a BDI strategy of their choice with their own community of learners. All of the 16 teacher participants in this study were White, and they included 15 females and 1 male. Each taught at one of four schools involved in the university partnership. Teachers were purposively selected by their facilitator for their high level of theory-into-practice implementation of the PD provided. The teachers taught the following grades:

- **Grade 1:** Three teachers (Amy, Linda, and Katelyn)
- **Grade 2:** Two teachers (Dorothy and Shelley)
- **Grade 3:** Three teachers (Susan, Betty, and Lindsay)
- **Grade 4:** Three teachers (Michelle, Sandra, and Daniel)
- **Grade 5:** Three teachers (Samantha, Caroline, and Katrina)
- **Grade 6:** Two teachers (Evelyn and Kathy)

Each of the interviews was video recorded and subsequently transcribed. We authors then analyzed the interview data, first coding data according to one of the four primary topic areas reflected in the research questions. Next we utilized a qualitative construction of categories driven by existing research in education for CLD students (e.g., second language acquisition, culturally responsive pedagogy) and the meanings derived from teacher voices in the study (Merriam, 1998). This allowed us to engage in direct interpretation of the data, which Cresswell (1998) describes as a "process of pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways" (p. 154). Through this process we established



patterns in the data (Cresswell, 1998), which allowed us to identify emergent themes and subthemes. Table 1 summarizes the themes aligned to each coding category.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL BENEFITS OF BDI STRATEGIES**

Themes in participants’ perspectives on the instructional benefits of BDI strategies related to the activation of learners’ background knowledge, student engagement, and differentiation of instruction.

### **Activation: Bringing Their Own Ideas to the Table**

Participating teachers highlighted the importance of providing students with opportunities to document their initial connections to the topic, the academic concepts, and the language of the lesson. One first grade teacher, Katelyn, reflected on her lesson about Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Students recorded their thoughts for these words, writing and drawing on posters that each had one of the concepts written in the center.

*I just really want to see what their [students’] first thoughts are when it comes to these big concepts. So reducing. A lot of them drew that picture of trash going down and so that, to me, shows that they’re aware of what reduce means and how they can reduce waste here at school. So I really just wanted to see their initial thoughts and their definitions of these vocabulary terms and also see the connections that they’re making with their classmates and with, kind of as a group, where we are with our understanding of the concept. (CMHKL116)*

*Table 1. Coding categories and themes*

<b>Coding Category</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Instructional Benefits of BDI Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Activation: Bringing Their Own Ideas to the Table</li> <li>● Student Engagement: Having Them Make the Connections Themselves</li> <li>● Differentiated Support: Giving Them That Backbone, That Scaffolding</li> </ul>
Opportunities for Uniquely Human Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Language Development: They’re Learning from Each Other</li> <li>● Academic Self-Concept: Just Because I Didn’t Get It, Doesn’t Mean I’m Not Going To</li> <li>● Multiple Ways of Knowing: Seeing the Different Perspectives</li> </ul>
Perceived Benefits of BDI to Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Confidence to Excel: They Become Contributors</li> <li>● Higher Order Thinking: I Thought of That on My Own</li> <li>● Academic Gains: Nothing Had to Be a Guess</li> </ul>
Changes in Teacher Meaning Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● More Student-Centered: I’m Cueing Off Them</li> <li>● Realization of Students’ Capabilities: They Can Do So Much More</li> </ul>

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With the insights that she gathered, Katelyn was prepared to make informed instructional decisions. Oftentimes, as in this example, students demonstrate that they already have a basic understanding of various vocabulary terms or concepts. Knowing this information allows teachers to make more effective use of time as they focus on lesser known words and concepts.

Speaking to the flexibility of the DOTS strategy to elicit students' initial schematic connections, Shelley, a second grade teacher, shared the following perspective.

*I know the DOTS strategy in particular really lent itself nicely to kind of allow kids to bring in their culture and their knowledge base because there weren't any rules, so they could do anything [(e.g., write, draw)] that they wanted. So you do start seeing a great variety in what's produced. And because they have different experiences, they are able to be curious about what somebody else wrote and ask each other questions, and they're not only sharing what they know but then they're more interactive with each other about those. . . . The activation process is crucial because it really does focus the lesson for them. So students tend to have lots of thoughts about things and can go off on tangents. But when we kind of start really talking about a specific thing, they get interested in it and they start focusing on that, and it does allow their brain to kind of think of more deeply within that topic that we're really trying to get through to them that day. And it helps tie things around nicely when we begin the lesson and tie back to those original ideas so they can see how...kind of full circle, how things are related and how their own ideas help them learn more. (BLBSW216)*

Shelley emphasized the role of BDI strategies in providing nonthreatening techniques for gathering preassessment information. She is able to harvest ideas from students in the opening phase of the lesson. Then she bridges into the lesson by making ties between the curriculum and students' initial ideas, which are anchored in their background knowledge. In this way, students begin to see that they *entered* the lesson as knowledgeable learners.

Another first grade teacher, Linda, described how Linking Language, a strategy that uses visuals to elicit students' initial connections, supported her to begin laying the foundation for achieving the learning goals of the lesson.

*I liked to use the Linking Language strategy because we brought in some pictures and I was thinking of the goals I had in mind as far as vocabulary words that I wanted them to learn. And then linking it to a story as well kind of brought in all those concepts and it allowed everyone to bring their own ideas to the table and make those connections and hear each other share those different links that they were making. (BSKLN116)*

When teachers such as this participant provide opportunities for every student to document and share their initial associations, the entire classroom community benefits. Students are able to hear multiple perspectives on the topic or overarching lesson concepts, which makes the lesson more intriguing, comprehensible, and relevant.

### **Student Engagement: Having Them Make the Connections Themselves**

The elementary teachers in this study emphasized how their implementation of BDI strategies promoted higher levels of student engagement. They described how students took greater ownership of their learn-

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ing, becoming truly active participants in the learning process. As Susan, a third-grade teacher explained, releasing some of the control to students is an important step in fostering engagement.

*If you, as a teacher, or me in this case, step back and allow them [students] the freedom to explore their own thoughts and language and share with each other. So I think the less I intervene with them, the more actively engaged they are with each other cooperatively. . . . I think the most beautiful thing about any strategy that I have used—and especially Linking Language is one of my favorites—is that they, it’s all about them. And sharing those words, and they remember. . . . Evidence of engagement for me is their response to the strategy. If I feel as a teacher it’s best for them, and I just base what strategy I use on my feelings alone, it’s not good. So what I need to see from my students to know if they’re engaged and really liking it is what they present to me in a physical way. What they’re saying, how they’re interacting with each other. Is it positive? Are they seeming bored? It’s all kind of about, with kids this age, they’re very expressive. So if they’re really actively engaged they’re talking, they’re excited. It might seem like a little bit chaotic if you were to walk in my room. . . chaos and laughter and discussion and examples. We interrupt each other, you know, in the listening and speaking because we’re excited about it. I look for those things to see if they’re engaged. (BLBSA316)*

For Susan, higher levels of engagement are possible because she has created conditions that foster students’ desire to fully invest themselves in their learning. Because the classroom instruction builds off their own words and ideas, they see value in contributing. Susan attends to students’ states of mind throughout the lesson. She recognizes that with engagement comes excitement and natural, authentic dialogue among peers.

Michelle, a fourth-grade teacher, discussed the types of conversations and learning that result from BDI lessons, comparing these outcomes with what she associates with more traditional types of teaching.

*I think doing these [BDI strategies] in class, my kids actually really like doing these. We have had so many rich conversations from doing this because you’re not just trying to get through this long story that half the people aren’t listening to, some of them are. When you’re doing that, I mean, I can see that the kids aren’t taking much away but since we started doing this with our stories every week, our conversations in the classroom have gotten so much richer. You can see what they’re taking away from it, applying this in different areas. If we’re doing reading, but we’re also talking about social studies. We’re talking about history, U.S. history. I did this [Foldables] with science and we were talking about different components of water, and it’s giving them a better interaction with the examples and, you know, this takes us two full class periods to get through, but they like doing it. They like adding that information and I just really love the “What have I learned,” or the example at the end that they give of something that they didn’t know. Because it’s just really cool to see what did they take away. We were doing it on science and one of my kids was like, “I had no idea what condensation was,” because we were talking about water, and she’s like, “I know now.” And then kids came back from specials and they’re like, “Look I have condensation on my water bottle!” or “on my lunch.” And those conversations are still happening even though this lesson happened a month ago. They’re still, they’re remembering it more because they’re having more of an interaction with the text. (BLBMM416)*

Michelle sees her students benefitting from the in-depth conversations that take place as they use hands-on tools like Foldables, a type of flipbook, to document their learning. For lessons that take more

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than one day, the Foldable supports students to remember and reconnect with their learning from the previous day. Through an emphasis on personal connections and applications of content, BDI strategies foster cross-curricular conversations that further support students' integration of new learning in long-term memory.

Teacher participants discussed how BDI strategies provided sufficient support to keep students moving, while incorporating ample opportunities for students to develop their critical thinking skills by problem solving with peers. One sixth-grade math teacher, Evelyn, shared her reflection on how students took ownership over the learning process during a lesson related to complex shapes.

*Having them make the connection themselves is more meaningful than me saying, "We can use all these shapes to make, find the surface area," and they come up with it on their own. They said, you know, "We see all these shapes and we know how to find the area of all of these shapes so when we put them together we're able to find the area of the complex figure." And so that, that's more meaningful and kind of bridges the gap. When I let them kind of work to solve on their own, some interesting things kind of emerged. You have people who are using those shapes that I had shown them, and they're really kind of going true to form finding the rectangles and finding the area of all the rectangles and then mushing it together. And then you have people who, or students who just kind of do it in their own way and they end up with the same answer the way that you would with the rectangles and the triangles and finding the areas of those. So it's kind of fascinating when you don't fully bridge the gap, what they come up with to kind of finish that bridge on their own. . . . They're able to analyze both the picture and the problem much deeper than if I just gave them the problem, told them to do it individually, and try and figure it out from there. (CMHEF616)*

Students in this lesson were challenged to grapple with the content and work with others to make sense of it. This type of instruction pushes students to think more deeply and it allows them to share and celebrate multiple paths for reaching the same destination.

### **Differentiated Support: Giving Them That Backbone, That Scaffolding**

Instructional scaffolding can take many forms. Teachers can scaffold students' learning through the processes of the lesson. They might also use specific tools that scaffold learners' completion of curriculum-based tasks. The teachers in this study described using both types of scaffolding as they provided students with the differentiated support they needed to be successful in the classroom.

Sandra explained how she used the DOTS strategy with fourth-grade students. She described her own behaviors as she scaffolded the process of learning. Sandra also highlighted how the tool itself was used to track students' evolving understanding and to support development of written products.

*I like them [students] to start in pencil [to record ideas on the DOTS chart] so they know what they, the words that they started with. But then we add in different colors so they're able to see how much progress they've made and different words that they're learning. And then it also uses the words as a word bank. So then when they go to do a writing piece, they have many different options that they can choose from and different ways that they could go with their writing. . . . There's always words that, vocabulary words that I want to make sure that I hit. So as I walk around, I make sure that I'm listening to their discussions and looking at the words that they're writing down and if a student is along the*

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*same track that I'm thinking, then I like to use that as an example. So then I'll ask them to go ahead and share with the class but then I'll re-voice it also, making sure that we're on the right path in the direction that I want that lesson to go. . . . Sometimes I will just sit down, you know, by them and listen to their discussions and see what else I can pull out of them but other times I like to use other groups as an example. So I might use another group and say, "I really like how they thought about this," and model it that way so that hopefully that group can also use that as a, you know, a guide to help them get back on pace. (CMHSM416)*

Every student benefits from knowing that he or she is learning and making progress. When educators, like Sandra, revoice the words and ideas that students produce, they validate those specific contributions as well as the students themselves. Bringing the learning of individuals, pairs, or small groups to the attention of the whole learning community fosters the idea that students can be teachers, too.

Another teacher, Kathy, who likewise had used DOTS, described how sixth-grade students at all levels of readiness were supported to participate.

*I think, like on the DOTS chart, not only do they [students] get into it, but they felt ok about, "I only have 3 words on it but now I can write and borrow from others." They really got into the, "Oh, I'm going to borrow that," kind of thing and it allowed for natural differentiation and it didn't, they didn't have anything different or anything like that. It's just that it allowed them to participate. Whether they put on two words or whether they put on fifteen words, they were just as much engaged in the lesson as everyone else. . . . I think the teacher listening more and then from what you're getting from students, finding those teachable moments, that you go in so many different directions than you might have planned to go. And it's a learning, it's a great learning experience. For both teachers and kids. (RSHKC616)*

In this excerpt, Kathy described DOTS as providing "natural differentiation" that allowed students to enter into the lesson from wherever they were. Biography-driven instruction highlights teaching as both a science and an art. This excerpt reflects the art of responsive teaching. Kathy explained how, by listening to what students produce, she is able to respond situationally in whichever ways will most effectively further the learning of the class. From her point of view, this type of teaching and learning brings fulfillment to students as well as teachers.

Some CLD students might also need additional support in order to demonstrate their learning at the end of the lesson. For second language learners, comprehending content concepts while simultaneously developing proficiency in the English language takes a cognitive toll. As Katelyn, a first-grade teacher explained, BDI strategies allow educators to maintain high expectations for learning while also allowing for accommodations that support individual students' success.

*So we'll just kind of keep those anchor charts or those Linking Language posters up so they [students] can kind of use those connections to modify their work. So maybe I say, "Instead of giving me five things in your paragraph or your writing, go find one word or one sentence that you've written and apply it there. So it's kind of giving them that backbone, that scaffolding that they need and also modifying it in a way that, you know, quality over quantity, you know. These kids are asked to do a lot during the day, especially in the morning, that core time. So I just want to understand that they have that core definition, understanding of the concepts and have them feel supported—that they don't feel like they need to be*

*writing pages and pages if that's not where they are. So I think it's been a help to, very helpful to have these posters as kind of that backbone, that support for them. (CMHKL116)*

As Katelyn noted, the tools in BDI strategies are used throughout the lesson to support learning. Teachers and students return to the tools as they discuss concepts and when they need to be reminded of the words and ideas they have generated.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNIQUELY HUMAN INTERACTION**

Biography-driven instruction encourages teachers to incorporate intentional opportunities for interaction among students in pairs, in small teams, and as a whole group. The themes in the interview data suggest that participants perceived such collaborative interactions to promote language development, bolster students' academic self-concept, and allow communities of learners to celebrate multiple ways of knowing.

### **Language Development: They're Learning From Each Other**

Teachers described many ways in which opportunities for interaction supported students' development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Although all students need practice with using the academic language of a lesson, such opportunities are paramount for English learners. Susan, a third-grade teacher, described the benefits of classroom interaction for a newcomer student in the following way.

*I have a student who has been in the country less than a year and with her, she has an extensive language in her first language, which is Spanish. So she loves these activities where she gets a chance to share that part of her. Also the linking for language [Linking Language] strategy is one that not only allows her to share that language of hers with others, but to look around and see the language of her peers, what they're saying, and referencing the same types of things. So it's a shared experience. . . . Linking Language supports those four skills [listening, speaking, reading, writing] in that not only are we seeing the words and the ways to say, we're hearing. So, for example, a student that may not be working on grade level per say, and maybe has difficulty with words, doesn't have to have that fear of "I don't know how to say this word," because he or she is hearing their peers say the very same words and so then pretty soon they're saying the words in the right way as well. So again, they're learning from each other. (BLBSA316)*

In this excerpt, Susan shared how students serve as language models for one another. Students feel safe to participate because they know that they won't be left to struggle with the language on their own. Moreover, because teachers who implement biography-driven instruction encourage students to use their native language as a resource for learning English and as a springboard for comprehending content, students' identities are validated at the same time.

Teachers who strategically place students in pairs often partner a more advanced student (based on current socio-emotional, linguistic, cognitive, or academic abilities) with a less advanced student. Caroline, a fifth-grade teacher, shared how this type of purposeful grouping configuration supported one of her learners in a recent lesson to share more openly with the whole group.

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*But then talking with their partner allowed them to share those experiences with each other and so they're kind of learning from each other . . . And then feeding off of each other so when my lower student, he maybe doesn't really talk very much, but having a partner allowed him to kind of feel more comfortable because it's just one on one and then he is more open to sharing. And then when we shared out as a class, he felt more comfortable because he'd already shared and he already knew what he wanted to say and so he was more willing to be involved in the classroom. . . . And then by having this visual and having these bullet points and these words, helped him discuss it with his partner more because he had that visual of what he wanted to say and what he wanted to talk about and this allowed him to feel more comfortable and confident in his speaking, 'cause he doesn't speak out in class very often. So then kind of what I referred to earlier, this in return [turn] made him more willing to speak out in the classroom and be more involved because he had the visual, he had it written, had the time to talk with his partner, and then knew that he could speak out in class. (BLBCI516)*

As Caroline described, various levels of support are built into BDI lessons. Students have individualized learning tools that scaffold their initial interactions with partners. Then, after having an opportunity to express their ideas to one peer, they have more confidence to share their ideas with a small group or the larger class. Without such scaffolded opportunities for interaction, many students are, in effect, silenced during whole-group discussions that rely solely on hands-up questioning.

Even students who are academically more advanced benefit from opportunities to interact with fellow members of the classroom community. Another fifth-grade teacher, Katrina, shared an example of this type of scenario.

*One of my highest students, she is incredibly smart, reads at a very high level, does her work, is always focused, but does not like to speak—like, whispers to her friends, like that sort of thing. And I found that with the Magic Book she could write her ideas down, I could walk around the classroom and really praise her for what she had to offer, and then she became more open to sharing with other people. And even if it was just like walking over to someone and saying, "This is what I put," in a quieter voice, but she could still share her ideas and her knowledge. That was really helpful for her and I ended up hearing her voice the more we went through all of the strategies. (RSHKL516)*

Katrina saw the value in helping all of her students become more well rounded. Each dimension of the student biography is strengthened when students have opportunities to work with one another. Students who have strengths in one particular area likewise can be supported by peers who have strengths in other areas.

### **Academic Self-Concept: Just Because I Didn't Get It, Doesn't Mean I'm Not Going To**

Participants recognized that classroom interaction also fostered greater levels of participation, especially among students who often struggled with literacy in the classroom. Speaking to this issue, Michelle, a fourth-grade teacher, described how she uses opportunities for interaction to meet students where they are and support them to advance.

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*For any kid who's a struggling reader or writer, well maybe they're not reading, they're not picking up that information so they're missing that information. So if they're missing that information when they go to write, obviously they're going to be missing that component. So what is he [a fourth grade student] really taking away from the lesson in working on his own? But giving them that chance to listen to other people and then to talk themselves, you're kind of taking them from that lower level of "I can't do this on my own, I'm not going to do well on this because I can't get the information out of the text," you're bringing them up so that, "Oh! He is actually learning something from the text," because he's talking about it, he's listening to what his peers are saying. (BLBMM416)*

Through biography-driven instruction, all students find that they *can* engage with text and they *can* be successful in school. Many typical routines in today's classrooms unfortunately allow a significant proportion of students to remain disengaged and fall farther and farther behind. Teachers like Michelle use purposeful student interaction to interrupt this cycle.

Classrooms become true learning communities when students listen and validate each other and recognize that they learn better together than in isolation. In describing interactions that she has witnessed in her own classroom, Samantha, a fifth-grade teacher, shared:

*Because two heads are better than one and so as they're talking to each other they're writing more words down like "Oh you said that, that's a good one." So then they just start talking and engaging each other and it feeds off each other and builds so by the time we're ready to hit the text, we've had some really deep and meaningful conversations about what's going on in each other's lives or what's going on, what's happened in their past that are shared experiences. (BSKSC516)*

Samantha homed in on the importance of students connecting with each other as fellow human beings. Shared experiences bring people closer together. School learning becomes less of an imposition and more of a meaningful journey when students are allowed to bring themselves and their background experiences into the learning process.

Katrina, another fifth-grade teacher, likewise highlighted the compassion that students can show one another as they collaborate. Students realize that working with peers helps them progress in their own learning.

*Each story we would go through [inaudible] words being used, they have to write something down, then we talk about it as a group, then they talk to a partner and say, "Oh I didn't get that from that sentence. Thank you. Like, that's helping me 'cause now I think I understand that word better." So it is, it [the Vocabulary Quilt strategy] has a lot of individual writing but also learning from each other and seeing that just because I didn't get it from the sentence, doesn't mean I'm not going to. "He's helping me. He's helping me learn." (RSHKL516)*

Partner and small group interactions provide opportunities for students to test out their thinking. They can confirm/disconfirm their ideas and serve as the more capable peer for each other as they grapple with challenging text and work within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The more students see their own incremental progress, the more they develop positive concepts of themselves as capable learners.



## **Multiple Ways of Knowing: Seeing the Different Perspectives**

Participants in this study saw opportunities for interaction to be integral to providing learners with exposure to alternative perspectives. Developing the ability to see things from more than one point of view is especially important for learners given our current sociopolitical context. One fifth-grade teacher, Caroline, relayed:

*And then being able to share out [with the class] I think helped them [students] kind of broaden their understanding, being able to see, “Oh, this person drew a picture of this. I didn’t even think of that.” Or when somebody gave an example, then it kind of makes that connection for them as well. So, just being able to think their way but then seeing how other students saw it. (BLBCI516)*

Caroline pointed out that students are able to express their own ways of making meaning while also having a window into another person’s way of viewing the word, concept, topic, or world.

Another participant, Michelle, related how interactions among peers advanced learning in relation to a fourth-grade science lesson on Benjamin Franklin’s inventions.

*They’re having that conversation and you could actually see kids adding to their Foldable because they were having that engaging conversation and then talked about, as a class, how our things that we wrote down are similar, how are they different, did you learn something? So I think giving them that independent time to work with the partner and then as whole group really allows them to see the different perspectives and what other people knew about Ben Franklin and maybe after reading a section from the book, what did they find out or what did someone else write down that they hadn’t thought about of something that was cool and interesting about him. (BLBMM416)*

Michelle allowed her students to stretch their thinking about Benjamin Franklin, moving beyond their own views to consider different ideas presented by peers. Opportunities such as this remind students that there is always more than one way to interpret input from the world around us, whether in the form of text, speech, or lived experiences.

Interactions between students that involve sharing about themselves promote their ability to negotiate meaning together. One fifth-grade teacher, Samantha, described how her class engaged deeply with the content before even getting into text, which in turn supported higher levels of engagement with the text during the lesson.

*As they talked, they started sharing stories about themselves and how they adapted to change and what changes might be coming in the future that they could help each other with. After all, they’re going to middle school in two years so that was a big topic, or subject of focus with them. Or how they’ve helped their friends through things so by the time we actually got to the historical fiction piece, which was about depression, which they didn’t know a lot about, but they were so engaged in the subject matter of “How do we help each other adapt to change?” that it took them much deeper into the text and they were so much more engaged, they got a lot more out of it, they were making connections, and so I noticed through the whole process that they were doing text to self, text to each other, text to the world. Before we even hit text to text. So I thought it was great. (BSKSC516)*

Conversations such as the example from this excerpt are meaningful to students. They allow the curriculum to come alive as students see the interconnections between academic concepts, their own lives, the lives of others, and the larger world.

## **PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF BDI TO STUDENTS**

Themes in interview data related to the elementary teachers' perceptions of ways students benefit from BDI largely revolved around increases in student confidence, evidence of higher order thinking, and academic gains.

### **Confidence to Excel: They Become Contributors**

Students' motivation to engage in school relates to the level of belongingness they feel and the degree of confidence they have in their abilities to succeed. From the perspective of teachers involved in this study, their acceptance and validation of students' cultures and languages had much to do with CLD students' level of engagement and the quality of their learning. One fourth-grade teacher, Daniel, shared what a difference it made when his students realized that their cultures and languages had a place in the classroom.

*I have about 5 Hispanic students in class and . . . this student was able to share a tradition in their culture, in their family, where they bake a small toy or doll into a cake and what I . . . I almost want to say intense confidence that I started to notice in these students because they were able to share who they were. . . . They were able to use their own language and write in their own language and share their culture. . . . The confidence level in these students was exponential. . . . Another instance was just recently and this was less academic but I have a student in class who speaks Mandarin and we, he had to call his grandfather during class to ask a question about a field trip or something and the class was quiet and we started to listen to him speak to his grandfather in Mandarin and we were fascinated. And when that student got to share what he was talking about with his grandfather, it's just, they become the expert. . . no one in the room knows what they know and that confidence just shines through. (RSHDT416)*

Students who have opportunities to share their wealth of knowledge more easily see themselves as valuable members of the learning community.

Another teacher, Katrina, shared how CLD students in her fifth-grade class gradually overcame their fears and gained the confidence they needed to use both English and the native language in the classroom.

*I found that the strategies with the Magic Book or the Vocabulary Quilts or the Linking Language, like that helped a lot 'cause it got the kids really making their own connections and finding out that their knowledge was important. What they brought, even if it was wrong at first, they still had a link there to connect the vocabulary to their previous learning. That made a big difference. And getting them over, 'cause kids don't want to write anything down unless they're copying it 'cause they're afraid it's going to be wrong, but having them be able to write in their own language, to draw pictures if that's what works well for them, to write down the wrong thing first so that I can go back and make that connection. "Remember when I thought gradual was gravel, and so I put rocks because I thought rocks, like gravel on*

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*a driveway. But now I know that it's gradual, and I know that I have to look for that d difference versus the v," and all the phonemic awareness stuff that you can put back in there. . . . "Good, good, this is a good learning moment!" and saying, "Look, he made a mistake and it's great!" So I think that helped build the confidence with a lot of my ELLs . . . telling them that learning is a process and mistakes are great because we can learn from those too, that helped a lot just to get them writing and to get them exploring and talking with each other, and not having that fear. (RSHKL516)*

Teachers often worry that by allowing students to document initial connections, they introduce the possibility that students will record inaccurate information. Katrina candidly explained how moments such as these serve as teachable moments. Through BDI, students always have opportunities during the lesson to revisit their initial ideas and evaluate their relevance and accuracy, given new learning.

Susan, who taught third grade, described the dramatic change that she saw in one of her struggling readers as a result of BDI.

*The student that I most think of here is . . . really probably on a first grade reading level and she said to me, and she asked me again, "Can we do the paper thing?", she calls it. "The paper thing with the picture." And I asked her, "Why? Why do you want to do this again?" and she said, "Because I get to work with others." She gets to work with others so for her, she demonstrates really her learning and efficacy through her words, through her actions. She really is not one to jump up and say, "I want to." It's usually kind of a "Oh, I have to do this." Silent, where as now I hear more of her voice. She feels confident in using the words because again, she has rotated and she has heard her peers and now she's starting to feel a part of these activities. She contributes. . . . I get chills when I think of a student who has been silent or seemingly not contributing, disengaged. It just gives me chills to think about the day when that smile comes, they raise their hand, they have something to say and they want to make sure that everyone hears what they have to say. They become contributors, and that's the, it just, that's the most gratifying thing for me. It's not so much they mastered, it's have they engaged with it? Are they using it? Are they loving it? And thus far, I've had really, really good success with what they're showing me using these strategies—classwide. (BLBSA316)*

As exemplified in this excerpt, Susan recognizes that learning is a process. The first step is simply to get students engaged.

### **Higher Order Thinking: I Thought of That on My Own**

One of goals of learning that all educators can agree upon is that students need to develop capacities for higher order thinking. Teachers in this study shared how BDI supported students to engage in and demonstrate these higher levels of cognition. One such fifth-grade teacher, Katrina, stated her perspective in the following way.

*Higher order thinking, as I look at it with my class, it's...it's not the rote... "Ms. \_\_\_\_ says I have to memorize this and here are the steps and I'm going to look at it, look at it, look at it, practice it, practice it, practice it until I just know it." It's not that rote, but the seeing that everything is intertwined and being able to create on something you've learned and then create something bigger from it. . . . I feel like a lot of them, especially in their writing process, I've noticed a lot of them think they don't have an original*

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*thought to write down on their own. And getting these conversations, getting more vocabulary, making more connections—whether it be through science or history and...or current events now, and getting them to . . . start talking about it, sharing their ideas, and all of a sudden going, “Wait, I thought of that on my own. I am capable of more than just reading, memorizing, putting it back out there.” (RSHKL516)*

Another fifth-grade teacher, Samantha, described her students’ success at making deeper connections while reading. These connections supported students’ comprehension of text and retention of learning.

*These [BDI] strategies are getting kids to think at a much higher level and make connections that truly stick in long term memory versus “Oh we’ve just read it, now we’re going on to something else.” . . . I think their reading has improved much more and their comprehension, all of them, because of what we’ve been doing. I will have them read to each other so one person will read, partner read, and then the other one. They’ll stop after a minute or two and say, “What did you just read about?” and at the first of the year it was very basic. And now that we’ve been using these strategies and we’ve been working on these things throughout the year, their summaries and what they say about what they read in the minute or two are much more at a higher level. They’re giving more examples, they’re going further into what they’ve read, they’re making so many more connections than they did before I started using the strategies. (BSKSC516)*

Through the participants’ eyes, successes with challenging activities that required higher order thinking often were made possible by the tools that supported students throughout their learning experiences. As fourth-grade teacher, Daniel, explained:

*That [BDI] tool was good for the kids because during discussion they could, for example, we might be creating a sentence out of several of the vocabulary words. They could take out that tool. That tool would have their own thoughts on it, which caused more buy-in and it would have other students’ thoughts on it. So they could use that throughout the week or throughout the series of the lesson to produce a way higher quality work that was not prescribed by a workbook, that was not prescribed by a lesson in our Wonders unit. It was very personalized learning and it was accurate, and it was good. That’s what I like. (RSHDT416)*

Teaching and learning that transcends prescribed curricula allows students to experience learning that is more personally meaningful. When students are invested in the learning process, they often exceed expectations that were originally set.

### **Academic Gains: Nothing Had to Be a Guess**

Participants provided a multitude of examples to illustrate the kinds of academic gains among students that they attributed to use of BDI in the classroom. These gains often carried over to students’ success on standardized tests. One third-grade teacher, Betty, explained:

*I think some of the strategies that you [facilitator] taught us that I was able to use, it just made them [students] feel more comfortable while reading a text and analyzing it and picking things out. So when they went to take the MAP test and they’re reading, ‘cause it has all articles on it and they have to read*

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*and answer questions, I think they knew more what to do. They knew what to expect because they were used to reading articles. (RSHBL316)*

Sharing a similar experience, Lindsay, another third-grade teacher, relayed:

*Instead of just guessing and sticking with that, they [students] used their resource and went back and checked, which then I saw them doing during their tests—state assessments and MAP tests. They knew that they had resources available to them and nothing had to be a guess. So as they're reading the passage they would read it twice then they'd go and answer the questions and before they would submit that question they would go back and check, just like they were doing with the [BDI] tool in their hand throughout. (RSHLL316)*

Katrina, a fifth-grade teacher, described the growth that students were able to demonstrate in reading, based on the tests associated with the classroom curriculum.

*I also had great gains in just reading those, the Wonders tests, which we hadn't really done at the beginning of the year 'cause as a fifth grade team we said, "They're very rigorous. They [students] can't read at this level yet. They're not being successful, so let's try and figure out a different way to collect data on them." Well, now they're taking them and my one percenter at the beginning of the year . . . he's getting hundred percent on those tests. He was reading at a first and second grade level and now he's taking fifth grade reading texts and he's reading on level and getting a hundred percent on the test. (RSHKL516)*

Teachers also shared their experiences with students' gains in writing. As one second-grade teacher, Shelley, noted:

*They ask for more time, like, "Can we do this [work on the DOTS strategy] more?" You know, there's never a time when I need to say, "You need to keep writing." I feel that their ideas are kind of always coming there so it helps the low learner, the ESL, the gifted, and just really every student. (BLBSW216)*

These excerpts provide just a glimpse of what teachers shared regarding the academic gains they have witnessed as a result of their own implementation of BDI.

## **CHANGES IN TEACHER MEANING PERSPECTIVES**

Themes in the interview data that reflected changes in participants' meaning perspectives were associated with becoming more student-centered and more fully realizing students' capabilities.

### **More Student-Centered: I'm Cueing Off Them**

Teachers in this study expressed that implementing BDI has made them more responsive to their learners. Oftentimes, this increased responsiveness involved a concerted effort on the part of the teachers to reduce the amount of teacher talk. Susan, a third-grade teacher, explained:

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*The biggest thing for me . . . is that I have had to really scale back on the teacher talk. I have learned to be a more active listener, to get to know my students more. I can learn so much and have learned so much, especially this third and fourth quarter, with less teacher talk, more listening. So as I walk around the room, it lets me know what they are absorbing. Not only from each other, but from the lessons. (BLBSA316)*

Another participant, Samantha, connected her ability to be “student driven” with providing fifth-grade learners the opportunity to first share what they already know before diving into the new content.

*Working with these [BDI] strategies has helped me become a better teacher for my students because I am now doing things that are much more student driven and I’m cueing off them versus taking a topic and saying, “Okay, today we’re going to learn about this,” and me talking, them listening. Now they’re so much more engaged because I’m, I wouldn’t say forcing it, but I’m giving them the opportunity [to share their knowledge] and making that happen before we start on the subject that I’m teaching that day or the activity we’re doing that day. (BSKSC516)*

Daniel, a fourth-grade teacher, explained how, after students have shared their thoughts, he finds ways to build off those ideas and validate their thinking.

*First off, it’s through the validation process, which was also a component of the strategies that changed me a lot. . . . I remember going through the PD portion when you came in to teach us these strategies and you validated some of my thinking and some of the other people’s thinking, and it just created a very positive atmosphere. So that validation piece is important. And when students feel validated, then we take those thoughts, those ideas and a lot of times for me that turns into a . . . discussion in class where I would say, “Okay, Brady, you were talking about how series relates to baseball. Can you explain that?” And then I might say, “Turn and talk to your neighbor about how that might relate to the solar system. How does baseball relate to the solar system?” So we would take that idea and pull it back to what we were talking about in science or reading. (RSHDT416)*

It is through situational responsiveness to what students produce, as illustrated in this excerpt, that teachers actually implement what theory has described as culturally responsive teaching.

### **Realization of Students’ Capabilities: They Can Do So Much More**

Teachers also spoke about changes in their own perspectives regarding what students were capable of. For example, one fifth-grade teacher, Caroline, shared:

*For a few of my ELLs and lower students, it definitely shows me that they can do the work. They’re just either taking longer to think about it or they need a different way to do it rather than me say, “Pull out a piece of paper and write the vocab.” (BLBCI516)*

As Caroline noted, students need to be provided the necessary support to demonstrate their actual capacities. Another teacher, Shelley, discussed how, under the right conditions, students can exceed our expectations.

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*This strategy [DOTS] has really just opened up and kind of shown me that their [students'] ability really is however far we can take it. I don't know, it just gives more hope that they can do even more than what you ever think or expect because when you give them the creativity and the ability to share whatever they're thinking about, and come together and work together, it [learning] really does go farther. (BLBSW216)*

This second-grade teacher's reflection emphasized the importance of exploring students' ways of knowing and utilizing interaction in order to support learners to reach their full potential.

Another second-grade teacher, Dorothy, tied students' capacities to achieve their personal best to her own provision of the appropriate kinds of supports.

*They've [students have] shown me that they are all capable of doing much more. Sometimes they need a bit more push. Some need a bit more push than others. Some lessons may be more difficult, but they're still so much more capable of [than] what you might think of maybe just knowing their background. They can do so much more, and I've found that with the right scaffolding . . . if I give them what they need at the beginning, the end product or the end result is very . . . much higher than what I might anticipate. (BLBDT216)*

Dorothy recognized that the beginning of the lesson, the Activation phase, is essential to effective instruction, because it sets the stage for all subsequent learning.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter began with the question: How do we best support English learners to achieve linguistic and academic success? The findings of this qualitative case study provide evidence of the potential that BDI holds for accelerating students' language development and supporting them to achieve academic success while engaging in a rigorous curriculum. Rather than isolating the linguistic dimension or the academic dimension of the student and simply applying a disconnected intervention developed outside the context of the classroom, these teachers contextualized their teaching within the four documented dimensions of the learner. Teachers purposefully observed, listened to, and used what students produced throughout the lesson to make the content comprehensible and to inform their instructional decisions about vocabulary, techniques for differentiation, and opportunities for interaction. The BDI strategies that teachers implemented supported them to develop solutions that were unique to their individual classroom communities of learners. Participants spoke to the improvements that they saw in students' holistic development, including their linguistic and academic gains.

The in-service teachers in this study participated in on-site professional development. The professional development focused on the site-specific contexts of the teachers' classroom practices and prioritized relationships of trust among teachers, facilitators, and students. BDI professional development of this kind promotes teachers' application of theory, research, strategies, and skills in ways that foster each educator's creativity and ownership over learning. The changes in pedagogy that result in turn make systemic change that benefits English learners within a school possible. As the diversity in schools continues to increase and the biographies of all individuals become more complex, educators must begin to rethink their paradigms in order to meet the needs of all students.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

BDI has proved valuable for supporting teachers to achieve standards of effective pedagogy with diverse student populations. Moreover, this method of providing culturally responsive pedagogy has led to increases in student achievement that are evident in teacher voice and in student artifacts collected. Future research efforts are needed to quantitatively document student achievement gains. Classroom observations of student behavior and analysis of students' growth on standardized assessments will lend further insights into the multifaceted benefits of BDI for CLD students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Biography-driven instruction is a method of providing culturally responsive instruction for CLD students. BDI strategies support teachers to implement rigorous lessons that support language development and content learning throughout the lesson cycle. At the heart of BDI is teachers' commitment to discovering their students' biographical assets (sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic) and background knowledge and using that wealth of experience and knowledge to accelerate learning. The perspectives of the 16 elementary teachers who participated in the qualitative study reflected teachers who have found a renewed passion and dedication to teaching. These teachers described the benefits of BDI strategies for their own instruction. They also shared how opportunities for student interaction advanced the learning of their classroom communities. Participating teachers explained ways in which BDI has benefitted their students, especially those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. They also reflected on ways their own meaning perspectives have changed as a result of BDI. Together, the voices of these teachers lend credence to the power of BDI to foster responsive interactions of care that promote rigorous instruction for English learners.

*Video clips of classroom teaching captured in relation to this study illustrate key points and highlight culturally responsive practices in elementary classrooms. These videos are available for viewing at [www.coe.k-state.edu/cima/biographycrt/](http://www.coe.k-state.edu/cima/biographycrt/)*

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Academic Dimension:** One of the four dimensions of the CLD student biography. Includes facets of the student’s received curriculum and instruction from prekindergarten to high school classrooms and throughout higher education pursuits. Essential to this dimension are factors related to access, engagement, and hope.

**Background Knowledge:** A student’s accumulated knowledge and skills that can be used to accelerate learning and that have been acquired through three distinct but related knowledge systems: funds of knowledge (home), prior knowledge (community), and academic knowledge (school).

**Biography-Driven Instruction:** A research-based instructional method that emphasizes the reciprocal facilitation and navigation of the official classroom space and the unofficial space of students’ lives outside the classroom. Draws on assets of both spaces to promote culturally responsive teaching and learning.

**Biography-Driven Instructional Strategies:** A unique combination of processes (contextual and situational) and actions (teacher and student) that guides reciprocal teaching and learning throughout the entire lesson. BDI strategies incorporate smaller, point-in-time activities, strategies, and techniques along the way.

**CLD Student Biography:** This concept accounts for the challenges and processes associated with each of the four dimensions of the culturally and linguistically diverse student: the sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic dimensions.

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**Cognitive Dimension:** One of the four dimensions of the CLD student biography. Includes what the student knows, how he or she makes sense of new information, and how he or she applies learning in personally meaningful ways. This dimension also highlights the student's background knowledge (including assets and understandings acquired in the home, community, and school).

**Linguistic Dimension:** One of the four dimensions of the CLD student biography. Includes the learner's proficiency in the first and second languages (and any additional languages) and highlights his or her capacity to comprehend, communicate, and express in each language.

**Sociocultural Dimension:** One of the four dimensions of the CLD student biography. Includes the student's social and cultural variables, which influence how he or she navigates academic success. This dimension is critical to understanding the whole student and how the other three dimensions work.