Phenomenological Research on Biography-Driven Instruction Use in Highly Diverse Classrooms

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Abstract

The merits of diversity to business success are well documented. Nevertheless, classroom diversity remains undermaximized in postmillennial schools. Differences across students' cultures, prior experiences, and even resiliency are often approached as deficits versus assets in learning. In addition, although educator awareness is increasing, teachers' maximization of student assets remains marginal. Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI) offers teachers theory, structures, and strategies for maximizing multifaceted student diversity. Accordingly, researchers collaborated with leaders and teachers in four highly diverse, low-socioeconomic-status, and urban schools to deeply examine the impacts of professional development in BDI on teachers' perspectives and outcomes regarding the maximization of student diversity. Findings and discussion surround three thematic realizations arising from this phenomenological inquiry: (a) Inclusion and student asset maximization led to teacher realization that *everyone brings something to the table*; (b) amid

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diversity, teacher praxis benefited from differentiation for relevancy to students' biographies, such that teachers desired to *go deeper* with BDI strategy use; and (c) socioconstructivist strategies and perspectives on learner potential led to active student *engagement*. Discussion and conclusions regarding teacher education and professional development elaborate upon each of these themes.

Introduction

The literature of business, psychology, and education is replete with demographic analyses and research that argue the merits of diversity and inclusion in the workplace and in schools. A diverse and inclusive workforce lends itself to more effective customer support (Mayhew, 2019), more productive flows of ideas (Chignell, 2018), and improved team-based performance and problem solving (Reynolds & Lewis, 2017). Similarly, the value of diversity and inclusion in the schools and classrooms that are preparing tomorrow's workforce is no less salient. Today's classrooms are already significantly more diverse than at any time in the past. In fact, it has been estimated that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students will be the majority of high school graduates by 2025 (Prescott, Muniz, & Ishmael, 2019).

The numbers of students in other categories of diversity and inclusion are also increasing. For example, student numbers in special education (SPED) are rising (Salem, 2018). Gay (2010) has persuasively argued that many students of color are disproportionality placed in SPED programs because their educators lack the knowledge to differentiate between cognitive and cultural patterns of behavior. Similarly, despite growing anti-immigrant sentiment (Mills, Villegas, & Cochran-Smith, 2020), the number of English language learners (ELLs) continues to increase in many parts of the country (Lynn, 2018). Among several factors influencing this number is the fact that most ELLs are not immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2018). Meanwhile, for the first time since the Great Depression, a majority of public school students hail from low-income families (Layton, 2015).

Students who have experienced at least one *adverse childhood experience* (ACE) compose a comparatively new category of diversity that is of particular import to teachers, school leaders, and policy makers. Sadly, a notable and increasing 47% of all U.S. children fall into this category (Price & Ellis, 2018). An ACE is a traumatic event in a person's life that occurred prior to the age of 18 years or comprises chronic stressors (e.g., neglect, parental separation) that the individual cannot control (Smith, 2018). Students of this group who have been identified (especially those under counseling and/or treatment) have typically been assessed for both an ACE and a resiliency score. The resiliency score encompasses, for example, asking for help; forming a positive attitude; listening to feelings; developing trusting relationships; and other student-developed capacities, skills, and actions not typically part of the curricula and instruction that grade-level students receive.

These trends toward increasing and multifaceted student diversity in grade-level classrooms can prove significantly challenging for many educators and

threatening (if not intimidating) for others. One major reason for these reactions is the sociopsychological tendency among all of us to approach difference (i.e., perceived departure from the expected or assumed norm) as a problem to overcome, a gap to address, or a deficit to correct (Stangor, 2019). Elsewhere, Herrera and Murry (2016) have argued that differences among students (e.g., races, cultures, first languages, mental processing, prior experiences, resiliency scores) are actually less indicative of deficits or liabilities than reflective of assets. When appropriately conceptualized and maximized, these differences support communication, collaboration, cooperation, understanding, comprehension, learning, creativity, problem solving, and critical thinking about concepts and applications (e.g., Cammarota, 2011; Denson & Chang, 2009; Herrera, Kavimandan, Perez, & Wessels, 2017; Murry, Holmes, Kavimandan, & Leung, 2017; Pascarella et al., 2014).

Accordingly, these analyses and findings regarding the reconceptualization of difference and diversity as assets to be optimized versus liabilities to be marginalized beg the question, To what extent are educators identifying and maximizing these assets that students bring to the ecology of learning in pre-K–12 schools? Regrettably, the pertinent literature (e.g., Mette, Nieuwenhuizen, & Hvidston, 2016; Richardson, 2018; Samuels, Samuels, & Cook, 2017; Smith, 2018) has suggested that educator awareness of diversity is increasing but that teachers' and educational leaders' maximization of the associated assets that students bring to the classroom is typically marginal. In this article, the term *culturally and linguistically diverse* will be used to highlight learner assets related to racial/ethnic and language diversity. Yet readers are reminded that CLD students also reflect innumerable other aspects of diversity.

Precisely because CLD students (especially newcomers) are sometimes shy, reticent, withdrawn, quiet, and/or nonverbal, teachers and other students may assume they are nonconversant in English, learning English as a second language, below grade level academically, cognitively deficient, and/or unmotivated. Each of these is a potentially false assumption, and at least three of them are, according to Gonzalez (2016), among the top 10 assumptions made by teachers about CLD students. For some educators, significant numbers of CLD students in the classroom is a new phenomenon; for others, ELL students have often been educated on a pull-out basis (i.e., in separate classrooms) for both academic and language instruction. Although their realities are, in many ways, different from those of other students, CLD students typically bring rich, untapped biopsychosocial histories to the classroom—funds of knowledge, experience, and learning that are regularly undermaximized in school settings. Herrera (2016) has argued that these rich *biographies* are the place to begin in teaching and learning that is culturally responsive and socioconstructivist in nature.

Culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy, which can be used to support learning and language acquisition, builds upon what is already meaningful and salient to learners, especially as a result of their primary socialization in a particular culture, familial ways of knowing, first language use, engagement history with

certain methods or strategies of teaching, and more (Gay, 2010; Herrera et al., 2017; Herrera & Murry, 2016). Much of what is learned in meaningful ways via primary and secondary socialization is insensible or subconscious to the learner (Herrera & Murry, 2016). Teaching that actively resurfaces and reactivates the student's culture-bound background knowledge can help make such knowledge and skills more readily accessible as resources for learning.

A socioconstructivist perspective on teaching and learning champions social interaction as an optimal milieu for the learner's construction of meaning from his or her experiences (Vygotsky, 1931). Students may often learn as much from a more capable peer as they do from the classroom teacher. According to Pitsoe and Maila (2012), a constructivist pedagogy is better situated to students' current realities and contextualized to their experiences and prior knowledge.

Recent and emergent studies have pointed to noteworthy relationships between asset-maximizing pedagogy (e.g., socioconstructive perspectives in design, biography-driven strategies for delivery, and culturally responsive practice guidelines) and positive outcomes for both diverse groups of students and their teachers (e.g., Byrd, 2016; Frye, Button, Kelly, & Button, 2010; MacDonald, Miller, Murry, Herrera, & Spears, 2013). For example, Byrd (2016) found that students' perceptions that teachers used constructivist methods, especially in culturally responsive teaching, were related to increased interest in school, feelings of belonging, and interest in other racial groups and cultures. In terms of impacts on teaching, MacDonald and colleagues (2013) found that teaching strategies that activate, connect, and affirm promote asset-driven teaching and longitudinally improve teachers' capacities for culturally responsive teaching.

Theoretical Framework

Biography-Driven Instruction (BDI; Herrera, 2016) is a cognitively targeted, communicative method of teaching and learning that has been designed to simultaneously bolster content learning and accelerate language acquisition. BDI supports teachers to maximize assets of the student biography in the context of socioconstructivist classroom ecologies to provide culturally responsive teaching. This method of instruction is grounded, first and foremost, on the prism-based perspective on assets for learning, language acquisition, and academic performance that are often underutilized in teaching for CLD and other students (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Herrera, 2016; Herrera, Holmes, & Kavimandan, 2012; Thomas & Collier, 1997). That is, biography-driven praxis builds upon four interrelated dimensions of student biographies: the academic, the linguistic, the cognitive, and the sociocultural.

The heart of the student biography is the sociocultural dimension, which encompasses the learner's primary socialization in the home and secondary socialization through institutions and influences like family, religion, culture, and schools. BDI explores and maximizes the cognitive biography of the student, including his or

her funds of knowledge, ways of knowing, and culture-bound ways of processing and utilizing information (Herrera & Murry, 2016). Inextricably aligned with the cognitive is the academic dimension of the student biography, encompassing, for example, the student's prior schooling in the United States and in the home country (if applicable), exposure to constructivist or other instructional approaches, and experience with domain-specific language and concepts of complex subjects like mathematics and science.

BDI optimizes a three-phase cycle of lesson delivery that begins and ends with the student biography. During the *activation phase* of BDI, all learners are afforded both structured and open prompts and opportunities to recall, consider, and document their biographical connections to the lesson topic, associated concepts, and/or pertinent vocabulary. During this phase, students may use their L1 or L2 or may draw images to chronical their explorations.

During the *connection phase* of the BDI lesson, teachers facilitate students' efforts to connect their initial/topical background knowledge with the curricular concepts and language of the lesson. Teachers build upon the language, lived experiences, and insights from their learning community (amassed in the activation phase) to make the content relevant to students' lives. Students also collaborate, especially through BDI strategies, to construct new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) and to confirm/disconfirm their original ideas and predictions about the lesson.

The *affirmation phase* of the lesson offers intentional and sometimes structured opportunities for students to summarize content learning, realize associated language acquisition, celebrate their successes, and demonstrate their knowledge and experiences through writing, as appropriate. BDI strategies (Herrera et al., 2017) offer teachers and learners prototypes for teaching and learning that begin with the heart, build upon students' assets, connect new learning to existing knowledge, and target retention of standards-based learning through affirmation.

Throughout the activation, connection, and affirmation phases of the BDI lesson, the teacher monitors students' engagement, strategy-focused interactions, social and academic language, lesson products, and learning outcomes (Herrera, 2016). Wherever possible, the teacher recognizes students' biography-based and/or lesson-driven contributions, as evidenced by their writing and discussion-based contributions. The goal is to continue to activate students' biographies; facilitate connections to lesson purposes and outcomes; and affirm assets, knowledge-building, and vocabulary development. BDI lessons are intended to foster capacities to care for self and others (build community), construct a culture that values diversity (e.g., bilingualism) and celebrates it among students, remind students that collaboration and cooperation are keys to learning, and foster personal and academic relationships.

Ultimately, BDI actively encourages teaching strategies and techniques that reflect the findings of the research conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE; Tharp & Dalton, 2007; Yamauchi, Im, & Mark, 2013) and the five associated characteristics of high-quality culturally

responsive instruction for CLD and other students, irrespective of home culture, first language, and/or ethnicity. These five characteristics are (a) *contextualization*, building upon the experiences and knowledge students already bring to the lesson; (b) *language and literacy development*, advancing students' language capacities (L1 and L2) via content-focused activities and connections; (c) *instructional conversations*, closed- and open-loop opportunities for subject/lesson-focused dialogue; (d) *joint productive activity*, collaborative student efforts to solve a problem or develop a product; and (e) *challenging activities*, cognitively complex, lesson-directed challenges that encourage higher order thinking skills among students.

Fundamentally the *contextualization* standard of CREDE urges school educators to more intentionally, recurrently, and proactively explore students' biographies of socialization, knowledge, and experience over time (Tharp & Dalton, 2007). Associated research has indicated that such actions better apprise those educators of the frequently overlooked assets that CLD and other students bring to content learning, English language and literacy development, and critical/higher order thinking about what is learned and applied (e.g., Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012; Murry et al., 2014; Murry et al., 2017).

BDI is especially applicable for the growing population of CLD students, for at least two reasons. First, CLD students and their families or caregivers are often isolated from the mainstream because of their color, limited English proficiency, immigration status, or poverty. BDI encourages teachers to explore and students to share, for example, their wealth of cultural experiences, emergent bilingualism, challenges they have endured and the resulting resiliency skills they have developed, and the funds of knowledge their families share with them. Second, CLD students benefit from BDI because it offers distinctly contextualized or adaptable strategies, techniques, and materials that teachers can maximize, despite relatively limited initial familiarity with or knowledge about students' differences. Therefore teachers from dominant cultural and linguistic backgrounds (i.e., White, monolingual English speakers) are supported to utilize promising instructional practices (Doherty, Hilberg, Epaloose, & Tharp, 2002; Tharp & Dalton, 2007).

BDI has been the focus of prior research investigating, for example, differences in teachers' use of theory- and research-driven practices when applying a BDI strategy versus when they are not (MacDonald et al., 2013; Pérez, Holmes, Miller, & Fanning, 2012). Recent research has also explored connections between BDI implementation and teacher growth in practical (evidence-based) readiness for CLD students and families (Murry, Holmes, & Kavimandan, 2020). Others have investigated the sustainability of teacher growth resulting from BDI-based professional development (PD) coursework (Penner-Williams, Diaz, & Worthen, 2019). A growing body of work has explored teacher perspectives on the benefits of BDI for students in diverse classroom learning communities (e.g., Holmes, Kavimandan, & Herrera, 2018). This study further illuminates teachers' perspectives on BDI implementation in urban elementary school settings.

Methodology

This research was conducted as a qualitative, phenomenological case study of teachers' perspectives on the pedagogical maximization of the assets that CLD and other students bring to learning/acquisition in highly diverse classrooms via the BDI method. Given this context, researchers were especially interested in the following research questions: What are teachers' perspectives regarding (a) the pedagogical maximization of CLD and other students' assets in situ, (b) the BDI method of differentiated instruction for highly diverse classrooms, and (c) the efficacy of the BDI method in the complex, low-socioeconomic-status (SES), and urban context of the research? A qualitative and phenomenological design is appropriate when the findings of the study will surround descriptions and interpretations arising from discovery, analysis, and insight on the outcomes of an instructional phenomenon (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Site and Participants of the Study

This study took place within four low-SES, urban schools of a midwestern school district that serves more than 50,000 students. Students in the district were 35% Hispanic, 32% Caucasian, 20% African American, 5% Asian, and 8% multiracial. Approximately 23% of students were ELLs, and 14% of students had disabilities. Roughly 77% of students were considered low SES. At the time of the study, the district was underperforming academically, with numerous schools qualifying for support and improvement based on state-level performance standards. To bolster teachers' capacity for effective instruction, the district contracted to receive BDI PD at the four schools. Although teachers were required to attend the BDI PD provided, the administrators allowed teachers the individual autonomy to determine the manner and degree to which they applied the method in their classrooms.

A total of 97 teachers across four schools participated in the BDI PD and larger longitudinal study. The participants of the study described in this article were 24 grade-level teachers from across four schools. Participants were selected based on their demonstrated commitment and consistency in application efforts surrounding BDI, as evidenced during PD-session and in-classroom observations. Eighty-six percent of participants were Caucasian, 8% were Hispanic, and 6% were African American. Levels of teaching experience varied from 1 to 22 years, and 30% had more than 10 years of experience. Seventy-three percent of these educators were socialized within 100 miles of their current school district.

Across the four participating elementary schools, teachers received on average 10 sessions of PD in BDI. These sessions included two whole-school PD sessions as well as biweekly grade-level sessions that supported more nuanced understanding and application of BDI. In turn, these sessions yielded, on average, 20 contact hours of professional learning per teacher. Consistent with the notion of BDI as a theory-driven method of pedagogy for diverse and complex student

populations (Herrera, 2016), PD sessions variously emphasized critical concepts including, but not limited to, habits of mind in teaching, dimensions of the CLD student biography, contextual processes, the activation phase of BDI, background knowledge, the connection phase, situational processes, socioacademic processes, revoicing, affirmation, and critical reflection on praxis.

Although literacy development during English language arts was the primary subject-area focus for teachers' BDI applications, participants were encouraged to use the crosscutting strategies and practices in other content areas as well. Participants engaged in site-specific discussions about their applications of BDI across the academic year. Individual mentoring activities, such as observation debriefings, coteaching, and demonstration lessons, were utilized as needed to support theory-into-practice applications.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this case study were collected via participant observation in situ and with mid-intervention semistructured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted by PD facilitators across the 2018–2019 academic year. Insights gleaned fueled individual mentoring of participants as the teachers applied their learning in classroom practice. To gain a more in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, the interviews were conducted mid-year (December through February). Interview questions related to perceived strengths of the classroom learning community that could be built upon through BDI, challenges encountered when implementing BDI, personal goals related to implementation, and desired next steps for PD facilitators as they tailored BDI PD to best respond to teachers' evolving needs.

Coding according to the constant comparative method (Kolb, 2012) was used to explore the data. Initial coding occurred according to the etic perspective, using the BDI method as the theoretical framework. For example, teachers' perspectives shared through interviews were analyzed according to the four dimensions of the student biography and in view of the three phases of lesson delivery. For instance, codes at this level of analysis included "native language" (reflective of the linguistic dimension), "critical thinking" (reflective of the cognitive dimension), "BK3" (reflective of three background knowledge systems activated in the activation phase), and "peer connections" (reflective of student collaboration in the connection phase). This level of analysis set the stage for subsequent analyses from the emic perspective, which enabled the emergence of participant voice organized progressively according to codes (e.g., "engagement," "teacher excitement"), categories, and themes.

The truth value of the research was targeted through careful attention to trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was established through member checking and the triangulation of findings and interpretations from multiple sources of data. Dependability was targeted via peer examination and debriefing (Anney, 2014). Through the use of thick description

(a systematic effort to document the nature, context, findings, and interpretations of the research), the researchers also sought to bolster transferability.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this phenomenological study offer new insights into elementary teachers' perspectives and outcomes with the method in the contexts of four complex, inner-city, low-SES schools. Insights about participants' implementations of BDI, as well as their postinstructional perspectives and outcomes, are embodied in three recurrent themes of teacher discourse. Final coding from the emic perspective was utilized to identify each of these themes, in the form of participants' actual vernacular. These themes of teacher voice may be thus described as (a) *Everyone brings something to the table* for differentiated learning and literacy development, (b) *I'd like to go a bit deeper* in my own capacity building for diversity, and (c) *I'm with you—I'm engaged*. For each theme, this section presents the recurrent findings through teacher discourse. Accompanying discussion woven throughout contextualizes these findings by describing how the theme relates to, elaborates upon, or departs from the current state of knowledge about asset-based methods of pedagogy for highly diverse and complex classrooms.

Everyone Brings Something to the Table

The excerpts highlighted in this section were selected from teachers' interview discourse regarding PD on the foundational theory and on-site implementation of BDI in highly diverse and complex classrooms. Rationales behind teachers' positions regarding BDI are demonstrably linked to associated strategies maximized by BDI, for example, the DOTS (determine, observe, talk, and summarize) chart and lesson phases that teachers considered pivotal to content learning and English literacy development. The first example of teacher voice is one participant's response to an interview prompt requesting that she rate the utility of the BDI method to her teaching practice on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*). Her response is but one of a predominance from participating teachers who found the method effectual to their teaching:

> With BDI, I would say probably a 10 because I think that it really allows for every student . . . it doesn't matter if they are special ed, if they have speech issues or if they are a trauma student . . . with trauma at home or even at school. I believe everyone has something to bring to the table if they can . . . they can bring to a discussion at least. I would say a 10, it [BDI] is really great. (EG020819TPS)

For this educator, BDI was a highly effective method for her CLD students, and her words reflect that she found BDI useful for supporting students who bring added areas of diversity as well (e.g., SPED, ACE). In noting that students can, at minimum, share their assets as part of a classroom discussion, this participant alludes to the priority given to dialogue and peer collaboration in BDI classrooms.
The following teacher's response highlights the perceived value that BDI

strategies have for educators' efforts to differentiate instruction for students across a wide range of abilities:

> DOTS Chart . . . that was one of my favorites . . . because every single person can have something on their chart, it doesn't matter if you're enrichment or special ed, which I think is huge because I am sure the enrichment kids could have their DOTS Chart filled with things that they know already, but that's not what is super important . . . it's that can you make those connections to help you with what we are learning about and can you use the information to take it to the next step, like to write about it or to compare and contrast or do something else with it. (EG020819TPS)

As was the case with many participating educators, strategies like the DOTS Chart provided opportunities for students to document their holistic assets. The DOTS Chart, which prompts students to determine (D), observe (O), talk (T), and summarize (S) their content and language learning, encourages higher order thinking about the lesson topic as students are guided to elaborate upon their knowledge of concepts and vocabulary and make connections to English vocabulary words, especially crosscutting words and more specialized academic vocabulary (i.e., primarily Tier 2 and Tier 3 words; Calderon, 2007), including cognates where applicable.

In the words of this teacher, every student can "have something on their chart." Greater equity in the classroom was achieved in participants' classrooms because students were able to take what they brought—whatever those experiences, knowledge, and perspectives were—and apply those to their learning. Accordingly, participants perceived the BDI strategies as leveling the playing field and allowing every student to engage in the lesson.

Other impacts that participating teachers associated with BDI use with CLD and other students are emphasized in the following excerpt. Chief among these are sociopsychological influences on students' agency and the outcomes that may flow from engaged classroom participation:

> I think it [BDI] is a great way for them [students] to share what they know and what they are learning. For example, when a child shares a connection—what they know about something . . . it almost sparks a light bulb in other kids. There's no more idleness or students not sharing because they can borrow ideas. Everybody has knowledge of some sort and something to share. . . . It [BDI] increases confidence because they know it's not just . . . raise your hand and answer . . . [there is] think-pair-share and think time. (EG020819TPS)

For this teacher and many of her colleagues, BDI enabled the realization that CLD students do have something to share—in every lesson. As Vygotsky (1931) once reminded us, "through others, we become ourselves" (p. 105). Students often just need what has been referred to as "a canvas of opportunity" (Herrera, 2016, p. 83). As this teacher described, students served as idea catalysts for one another. By incorporating peer interaction through BDI, participants were able to create conditions that fostered heightened levels of sharing and collaboration. The emphasis shifted

from individual learning to the collective learning of the classroom community (i.e., "they can borrow ideas"). Through intentional, sociocultural interactions focused on content and language, students had authentic opportunities to participate that went beyond the traditional "raise your hand and answer."

I'd Like to Go a Bit Deeper

A second theme in teacher voice arising from this phenomenological research was characterized as "I'd like to go a bit deeper." The passage of teacher discourse that follows demonstrates the power of the BDI method, in the eyes of this teacher, to stretch not only students but also *teachers* toward more robust pedagogy. It is but one excerpt of teacher vernacular that conveyed this perspective:

> We are really good at DOTs. We are really good at the quilt [Vocabulary Quilt—a BDI strategy] and we tend . . . I tend to implement those weekly because we are comfortable, we are good at them and we go with it sometimes because it's easy and so I would like to implement more strategies, specifically using those and bumping up the academics. We use those as our tool and then that kind of gets us thinking to begin with. And then we use it during, and we do a lot of quick write with them but I would like to go a little bit deeper with it. . . . Well, I think of a different strategy, that's just going to have to be me. . . . I'm just going to have to commit to doing a variety [of BDI strategies]. Going deeper. I would like to really be able to do use them as an assessment tool. And then I would really like to be able to somehow incorporate that into math. (SC041119HCB)

The opening of this teacher's discourse indicates that BDI maximization has bolstered capacity building for both students and the teacher at the explicit level (as in "*we* use those as a tool . . . that gets *us* thinking") and implicit level (e.g., "I think of a different strategy, that's just going to have to be me"). In addition to employing a greater number of BDI strategies, this teacher expressed the desire to more fully capitalize on the potential of the strategies by using them in other content areas, such as math, and in more complex ways (e.g., as assessment tools, to "bump up the academics").

Teachers began to more fully understand how BDI strategy use leads to developing habits of mind (e.g., for planning, delivering, and assessing instruction) that are more inclusive, socioconstructivist, communicative, and academically rich. A second teacher's thoughts on *going deeper*, like many others', signaled teachers' critically reflective efforts to better understand the many situational and contextual nuances of BDI versus traditional classroom pedagogy:

> And I think that the BDI strategies help us go deeper within the strengths [student assets]. I think that we . . . I just think about my knowledge as a teacher before using BDI. . . . I guess I understood the importance of bringing in their . . . students' past experiences and bringing in their culture . . . but I don't think I always was hitting it right on the head. I don't think I had the strategies necessary to really . . . successfully go deeper into it. But I think the BDI strategies are helping a lot

> with that. And then, just helping the students make better connections, and I see them able to even communicate more successfully about what they're thinking or how they're feeling. (SS040319NVC)

For teachers like this participant, *going deeper* was about ways to delve more meaningfully into the student biography to better understand, respond to, and leverage student assets. These actions on the part of the teacher are requisites for culturally responsive teaching. Without practical strategies, however, teachers often struggle to turn theory into classroom reality.

Similar to other participants, this educator perceived the strategies as tools for learning and language development. As the teacher remarked, BDI strategies help students build connections between their biographies and the curriculum. They also supported expression beyond academics, such as allowing students to communicate "how they're feeling." This type of student sharing requires a safe, trusting ecology, which is created through the reciprocal actions of the teacher and students.

I'm With You—I'm Engaged

A third theme, characterized as *I'm with you—I'm engaged*, was recurrent in teachers' discourse associated with this phenomenological case study. In numerous classrooms at the four school sites, student engagement with instruction was, according to the participating teachers, not always the norm. During interviews, participants discussed differences in student engagement that they witnessed in response to their BDI implementation efforts. For the following teacher, student engagement (and for that matter, teachers' engagement as well) was often all about "energy":

> I think they [BDI strategies] bring the energy, you know, honestly, you could bring any strategies you want into the classroom, but at the end of the day if you're not excited, and the kids aren't excited, it's gonna fall through. . . . It's not been like they [students] bring the energy, even though like we've been doing close like every week with our new vocabulary, it's different because the words are always different. . . . So, I think that they [students] enjoy bringing their experiences. And they enjoy being able to share about the words that they know or the connections or things like that. . . . I think they enjoy the activities [BDI strategies and techniques]. (JH0313189HCB)

BDI fostered greater excitement for students and for this participant. The students in this teacher's classroom were perceived to find BDI enjoyable because they were consistently able to share about themselves and discuss their ideas and connections to the content. Although the instructional routines of the particular strategies remained the same, they always resulted in unique learning experiences each week because "the words [target vocabulary words] are always different." Students were able to draw upon their experiential and academic inventories of words (as in "they enjoy being able to share about the words that they know"), and they used their extant lexicons and experiences with topic concepts to establish connections to the curriculum.

The phrase "it's not been like they bring the energy" is indicative of the reality that students prior to BDI had not been energized by more traditional vocabulary instruction.

A second teacher's discourse about the impact of BDI in her classroom indicated that CLD and other students were not only energized by the method but better able to advance through curriculum alongside her. Like other teachers whose discourse was associated with this theme, this participant witnessed the value of socioconstructivist student interactions embodied in the strategies and techniques of the method:

> I have noticed whenever you're using BDI and you're connecting it back to something that they care about or something they know about; they are just so much more engaged. They're like "I'm with you." If that makes sense? . . . I feel like so much as people just want the kids to be quiet. If they, like, if you just give them a chance to talk to each other, kids could do so much more growing and learning that way than just listening to the teacher. I don't know about you, but they can be sitting in there and be compliant and not be listening. If you don't connect it to something that they know, they're not going to remember it. (EG020819TPS)

This teacher's comments, particularly her use of the phrase "I'm with you," is telling. On one hand, her discourse is representative of her realization that the content did not need to be watered down; instead, it needed to be reframed to engage students through their biographies and through opportunities for peer interaction. On the other hand, her discourse counters the persistent (but unsupported) perspective in schools that a quiet classroom is a well-managed, effective one. For her, talking and active engagement lead to learning, and this means that meaningful discourse is not always quiet.

Other teachers pointed to performance data to illustrate their students' abilities to *stay with* them with regard to content-area achievement and critical outcomes. The following teacher's remarks highlight the sort of student outcome data reported by teachers over the course of their BDI implementation connected to this research:

> I mean he [a student of color] was a double exclamation point on . . . [untoward reports of student outcomes/achievement generated prior to the teacher's participation in BDI] . . . at the end of third grade and he is a one exclamation point now in fourth grade. The growth from what I was looking at was so far from my goal, my original goal . . . [positive, but not what the teacher expected] . . . because my reading scores and my math scores too from the end of third grade . . . were horrendous. I had almost 75% of my class under target in math at the end of third grade. And I now have 35 maybe 40 . . . I don't know . . . something like that and reading was the same way. I had eight kids, nine kids . . . that were a double exclamation point and now I have four. Two of them are SPED, pull out SPED, and one of them is already going through the process of being tested for SPED, and the other one is one that I would try to get the very first day of school tested for SPED but he hasn't been in school long enough. So, all my other kids have moved up . . . out of high risk, but my goal was to move two kids from each category, and it's been way, way more than that. (VC022619EVP)

The student outcomes this teacher witnessed far exceeded her expectations ("The growth from what I was looking at was so far from my goal, my original goal"). In both mathematics and reading, students demonstrated capacities to *stay with* the teacher, the target curricula, and the range of district expectations for learning. Furthermore, such gains were experienced across a range of student groups, including those identified for SPED.

Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological investigation are commensurate with recent and emergent studies that highlight relationships between asset-maximizing pedagogy and positive outcomes for both diverse groups of students and their teachers (e.g., Byrd, 2016; Frye et al., 2010; MacDonald et al., 2013). Three prevalent themes that emerged from this study were characterized as (a) *Everyone brings something to the table*, (b) *I'd like to go a bit deeper*, and (c) *I'm with you—I'm engaged.*

In elementary school contexts of multifaceted student diversity, at least three notable conclusions are suggested by the current research. First, BDI, as an asset-maximizing method of pedagogy, incorporates strategies that enable purposive learning of CLD students. Students are able to activate and maximize the sociocultural, linguistic, cognitive, and academic assets they already bring to strategic learning and literacy development. Additionally, this research suggests that such benefits of BDI extend not only to CLD students but also to those who simultaneously or alternatively are classified with SPED and ACE descriptors.

Second, peer interaction reflective of socioconstructivist practices, which is built into BDI strategies, is pivotal to teachers' capacities to provide culturally responsive instruction. In such classroom settings, students' prior knowledge and experiences serve as a springboard to discussions and collaborative engagement with more challenging content, language, and literacy tasks. Such discussions, in turn, support teachers to better recognize and respond to students' culture-bound ways of knowing, which may or may not align with those of the teacher or the curricula.

Third, the various foundations, strategies, and phases of BDI support synergies in relevance, meaningfulness, and understanding that regularly enable students and their teachers to target grade-level curricula in diversified ways and at a pace not otherwise likely. Once students locate relevance and meaning in curricula through activation, they begin to draw their own connections among their assets in learning (e.g., funds of knowledge), the content to be learned, and the language to be acquired. Furthermore, when such connections are affirmed and used to support the learning of the classroom community, students take greater risks in expression and application of curricula to their daily lives.

Thus the findings of this investigation further validate a socioconstructivist, culturally responsive perspective on teaching and learning to maximize the multidimensional assets and potential of CLD students. They shed light on BDI as an

educational innovation that holds promise for further professional development initiatives with in-service educators, including a more targeted focus on applications to additional content areas. Additional research is needed to more deeply explore connections between teachers' individual socializations and their BDI sense-making processes. The findings also suggest a need for future research on applications of BDI within teacher preparation programs for preservice teachers.

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