

# Critical Practice Makes Perfect: Classroom Observations of Debate-Inspired Education



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# **Debate-Inspired Classrooms and Resolved Project Evaluation**

**Longitudinal Research on the Impact, Strengths, and Areas of Continued Impact of Boston Debate League Practices Across Diverse Boston Public Schools**

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## **Boston Debate League**

Prepares young people for college, career, and engagement with the world through debate-inspired learning in the classroom and beyond  
<https://www.bostondebate.org/>

## **CERES Institute**

Supporting and evaluating education-based community initiatives and leaders  
<https://ceresinstitute.org/>

## **Diversity & Development Lab (D&D)**

Exploring contexts of academic and socioemotional development among culturally diverse youth  
<https://www.bu.edu/wheelock/profile/michael-medina/>

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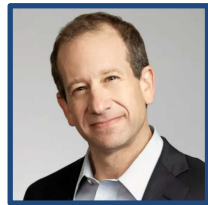
## **Research Team**

The faculty and students who participated in the completion of this evaluation project are incredibly dedicated and passionate about this work. Supporting youth's educational journeys is our livelihood and we consider it a privilege and a priority to be able to do so in both research and practice.

# The Team



[Dr. Michael A. Medina](#) is the Program Director of and an Assistant Professor within the Applied Human Development program at Boston University. His research centers systems and contexts that support student success, and the benefits of ethnic-racial identity development and diversity across social contexts. He draws from growth mindset and positive psychology to highlight the unique strength and potential of diverse youth populations. He heads the Diversity & Development Lab.



[Dr. Jonathan F. Zaff](#) is the Chair of the Department of Applied Psychology at Northeastern University. His research includes youth-focused comprehensive community initiatives, civic engagement, and social and emotional competencies of young people who have left high school without graduating. His projects have focused on the role that multiple relationships in youth's life (a "web of support") and the multiple institutions within which they learn and grow can encourage their academic, vocational, and civic engagement and success.



[Soe Young Lee](#) is a doctoral student in the Applied Human Development program at Boston University. Her research interests lie in positive youth development, critical consciousness, teaching and parenting practices, and ethnic-racial identity development. Following her passion for empowering youths in minority populations, she hopes to identify ways to foster resilience and purpose in young people and help them develop agency and a voice in their community.



[Kyle Broadnax](#) is a master's student in Human Development and Education. His devotion to serving vulnerable youth has led him to serve in roles such as youth support specialist at a residential treatment facility, associate dean of students at a public charter middle school, case manager supporting youth and their families, and program coordinator and manager at a youth-serving nonprofit organization. After graduation, he intends to provide resources, support, and services in support of youth-care workers.

# Executive Summary

## Background

The Boston Debate League (BDL) worked with schools in the Boston area to promote transformative student skill development. Its programs—Debate-Inspired (DI) Classrooms and Resolved—were evaluated for their academic efficacy, benefits, and transferability across schools and subject areas.

## Project Overview

Over the course of approximately one year, BDL partnered with researchers at Boston University to observe students' and teachers' experiences with DI-Classrooms and Resolved. Over three dozen such observations were conducted by Boston University faculty and graduate students, followed by qualitative thematic analysis and summary.

## Expectations

The observation team designed a classroom observation measure used prior to, during, and following all school visits. This tool standardized the team's methodology and allowed team members to capture both logistical information (e.g., class subject matter, grade, attendance, topic) and thematic observations (e.g., student skill exposure and expression, student collective experiences within the classroom, teacher practices, emergent challenges and recommendations).

## Frameworks

Evaluations were structured and analyzed using Positive Youth Development and Socioemotional Learning frameworks. These theories both highlight the importance of a holistic approach to education and student involvement, emphasizing areas such as youth character development, civic involvement, relationship building, and self-management and awareness. Building on existing frameworks, we conceptualized an impact chain that details the sequence of mechanisms through which expected outcomes of DI will occur (see p. 14, Figure 1).

## Themes

Analyses revealed the presence of four consistent themes related to the impact of DI-Classroom and Resolved. Each theme was further discussed by three representative, but not comprehensive, examples. In no particular order, the themes noted were as follows:

- **Debate-Inspired Activities, Materials, & Skills (student- and instructor-centered)**

Themes in this category represent the core activities employed and observed in DI and Resolved. These activities provide students with opportunities to seek out evidence, participate in an organized exchange of ideas, and formulate well-reasoned arguments supported by relevant information. Their presence was

ubiquitous across observations and represented a distinct and productive change from standard educational practice. Examples include:

- a. Scavenger hunts and self-driven learning
- b. Structured/Guided debate, discussion, and clash
- c. Evidence use and argumentation

▪ **Building Climate and Community**

Themes in this category represent the use of communal language, activities, and lesson planning to make classrooms feel more inclusive and welcoming. Shared trust and a sense of belonging appeared to be foundational for the successful implementation of DI and Resolved classrooms. This allowed students to engage and share without fear of judgment and empowered them to assert themselves with confidence. Examples include:

- a. Relationships among and between students and teachers
- b. Student joy and excitement
- c. Student voice, expertise, and sense of presence

▪ **Supportive Teacher Practices**

Themes in this category represent the ways in which DI teachers and Resolved facilitators used BDL methodology to bolster their methods. These educators employed various practices and strategies that not only supported learning of content and academic skills but also built a safe and supportive community that encouraged students' learning. Examples include:

- a. Classroom organization and Routine
- b. Recapping and Signal Posting
- c. Grounding and Deep Learning

▪ **Implementation Challenges**

Themes in this category represent the common challenges that DI and Resolved sessions experienced over the course of the study. While impacted sessions saw interference in the effectiveness of implementation, these were highly buffered by the adaptability of DI practices and the supportive environment and format of Resolved spaces. Examples include:

- a. Student Attendance and Arrival Times
- b. Disruptive Student Behavior
- c. Distractions and Inattention

## **Other Notable Findings**

- Teachers were active and eager participants at every stage of data collection, and openly extolled the benefits of DI practices and activities.
- Teacher experience in terms of years was less impactful than was their familiarity with DI methodology in terms of successful implementation. This suggests a level of universality in terms of the practices' usefulness.
- Students repeatedly mentioned using DI skills in other classrooms, recognized their use across subject areas, and employed them when engaging in non-work-related discussion.



- Students willingly and voluntarily worked outside of school hours to complete DI-related presentations without external encouragement.

## **Recommendations**

1. DI practices pay dividends toward lesson preparation and student engagement in the long term, at the expense of comparatively minor coaching time in the short term. Teachers can be made aware of this ramping up process resources such as visual aids and teacher testimonials at the front end of involvement.
2. BDL contains a plethora of resources for teachers to use and explore. Once mastered, these materials can effectively shape a teacher's approach to entire content areas and terms. These resources can be made even more accessible using a robust cataloging system - one that sorts materials by appropriate grade level, proficiencies, skills targeted, and preceding and proceeding exercises.
3. Improvisation is a necessary and oft-practiced skill. DI-related resources do well to provide teachers with numerous options at the outset of lesson planning that allow them to tailor their sessions for their expected needs. This process could be aided by updating existing resources with suggestions on how to alter them on the fly, such as when class sizes are smaller than expected or when some students require the activity to be more or less challenging.
4. Both DI Classrooms and Resolved spaces offer incredible insights into potential future avenues of student-centered education; the former offers novelty and challenge to content learning, while the latter introduces spontaneous and remarkable opportunities for vulnerability and deep learning. Having students who can experience both, or teachers who may witness the benefits of both spaces, will only serve to amplify their benefits.
5. The presence of a DI Classroom or a Resolved cohort in a school offers a unique opportunity to shape the learning climate beyond just these instructional areas. If BDL worked to create a teacher support network, either within individual schools or across participating schools, the best practices and coaching expertise these educators receive could compound upon itself over time in new and flourishing ways.
6. Observers collected approximately 30 themes, including various student and teacher behaviors, outputs, benefits, and patterns, across the three dozen observations. The primary ones detailed here, and the ways in which they intertwine with one another alongside teachers' unique styles and personalities, are each intrinsically valuable to DI spaces. We outline individual strengths and recommendations of each throughout the evaluation report.

## How to Use This Evaluation Report

This report will focus on a collaboration between the CERES Institute, the Diversity & Development (D&D) Lab, and the Boston Debate League (BDL) on a program evaluation effort across multiple Boston Public Schools. The joint Boston University-based teams examined the progress of two of BDL's signature programs: Debate-Inspired (DI) Classrooms and Resolved.

BDL leaders and coaches can use this report to receive an overview of observations of a variety of classrooms implementing DI practices. It will describe the methodologies used in the project's data collection and analysis, followed by a list of detailed themes observers noted in DI classes and Resolved sessions. Each theme will be further outlined to include connections to teachers and BDL administrators directly, and each section of the report will conclude with information on additional resources and candid thoughts from the observers.

School administrators, counselors, teachers, and community advocates can use this report to better understand the educational development of students within Boston Public Schools. Administrators and educators in schools can use these findings to support grant applications to fund programs that increase students' exposure to critical practices, promote the use of DI practices, and encourage additional collaborations with BDL in the name of continued educational breakthroughs.

## Guiding Questions

This study seeks to gain insight into how Debate-Inspired Classrooms and Resolved supports the following areas:

**Students' transformative skills.** The Debate-Inspired Teacher Framework envisions DI and Resolved classrooms to foster students' transformative skills in three areas: evidence-based argumentation, students' self-efficacy, and critical discourse within communities.

- The development of evidence-based argumentation skills entails the ability to build an argument, as well as evaluate, question, and respond to the argument considering multiple perspectives.
- The second area of focus regards supporting students' self-efficacy by emphasizing opportunities for student empowerment, student engagement, student voice, and student discourse.
- The focus on critical discourse in community includes the joint (by teacher and student) building of a learning environment of trust and connection and supported by this sense of community, the students' capacity to actively engage in critical discourse (e.g., converse, discover connections between content and lived experiences, and assertively respond to opposing ideas).

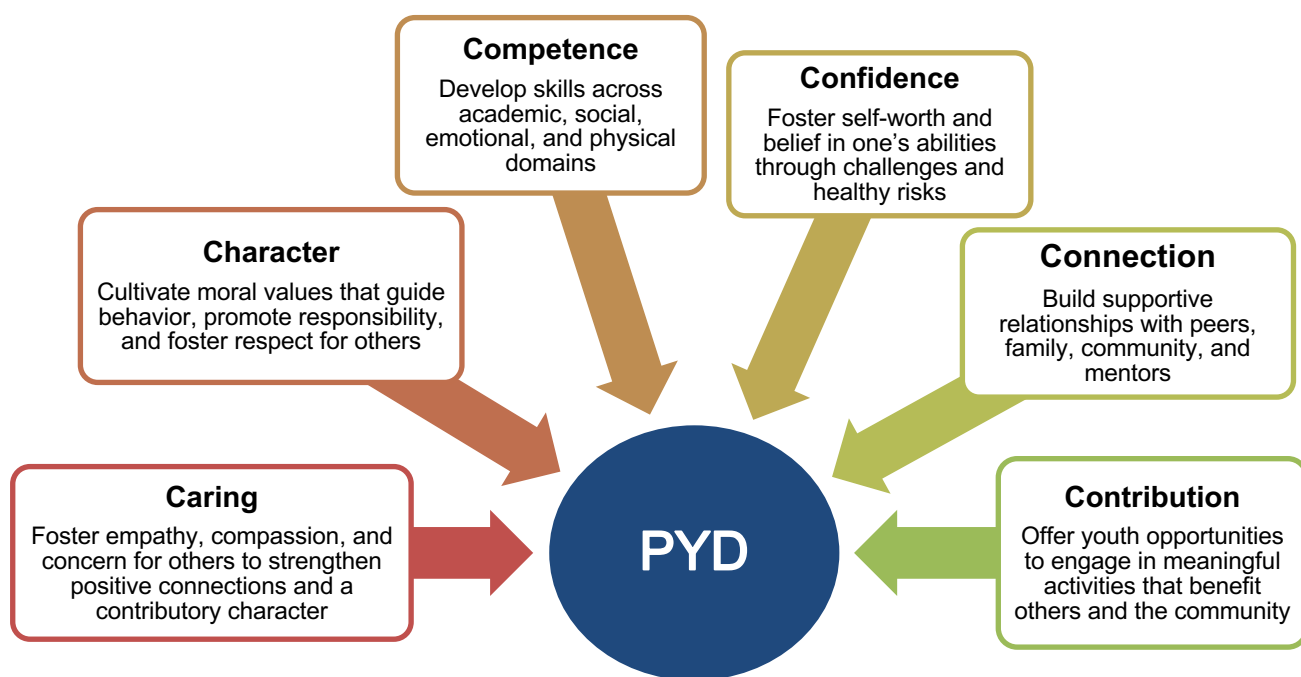
**Students' collective experiences within classrooms.** In consideration of the goals outlined in the DI framework, it is important to understand how the classes are being experienced by students in the Debate-inspired and Resolved classrooms. Specifically, this study tries to answer questions regarding classroom climate (e.g., Do students behave in a way that supports others, or do they show signs of trust and comfort?) and student-engaged activities (e.g., What activities are students engaging with?).

**Teacher practices that lead to engaging, empowering student experiences.** The Debate-Inspired design, in both DI classrooms and Resolved, is essentially driven by the teachers and their practices. This study focuses on how teachers implement DI activities to support understanding of content (e.g., How do teachers scaffold learning of content?), developing evidence-based argumentation skills (e.g., What opportunities do teachers provide students to apply skills?), and building community (e.g., In what ways do teachers contribute to fostering students' sense of belonging?).

# Theoretical Frameworks

Observations of DI-classrooms and Resolved sessions were rich with practices that support well-established educational theories. Two of the most prominent such theories, **Positive Youth Development** and **Socioemotional Learning**, are detailed below. Please also refer to the appendix for more information about other concepts, theories, and references that may be useful!

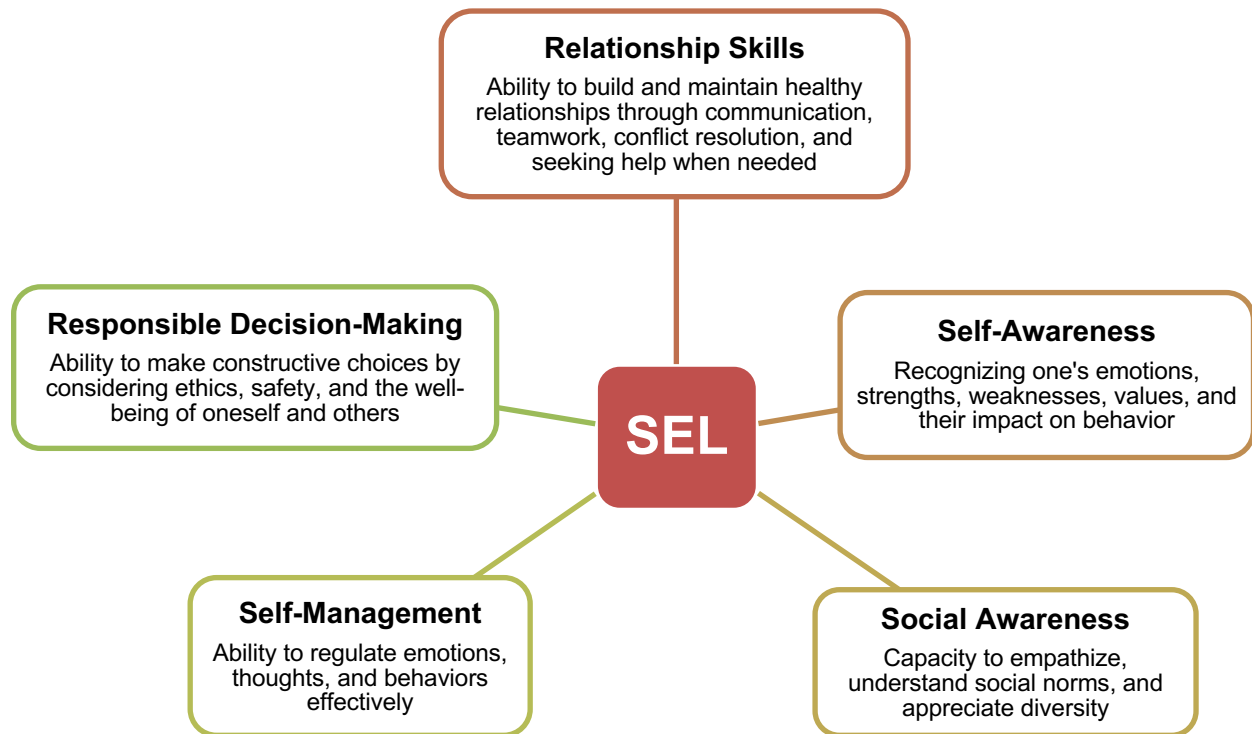
**Positive Youth Development (PYD)** refers to an educational framework that emphasizes learners' strengths, individuality, and contributions to their education. PYD deviates from learning methods that focus on youth's risks or deficits, and instead argues that every learner contributes to their own educational journey and the journey of their peers. It aims to foster healthy, productive spaces by encouraging the development of stable mentorships, strong community bonds, and giving young people chances to articulate their newfound skills in ways that benefit others. The theory is based upon the concept of six fundamental attributes:



Through the intentional presence of these factors, schools and classrooms may not only be spaces of content knowledge, but of personal growth and exploration. PYD empowers students to build upon their strengths while also acknowledging their areas of future growth, all while reminding them that their contributions matter.

Recommended reference: Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Murry, V. M., Smith, E. P., Bowers, E. P., Geldhof, G. J., & Buckingham, M. H. (2021). Positive youth development in 2020: Theory, research, programs, and the promotion of social justice. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 31(4), 1114-1134.

**Socioemotional Learning (SEL)** is another complementary educational framework. However, whereas PYD emphasizes the role of individual skill-building, SEL focuses on the ways in which education can help youth manage their emotions and relationships. SEL argues that emotional intelligence is as critical for a student's educational success as is their academic performance, and that the two work in tandem to provide young learners with a sense of safety and preparedness for the future outside of schools. SEL is typically described in terms of 5 core competencies:

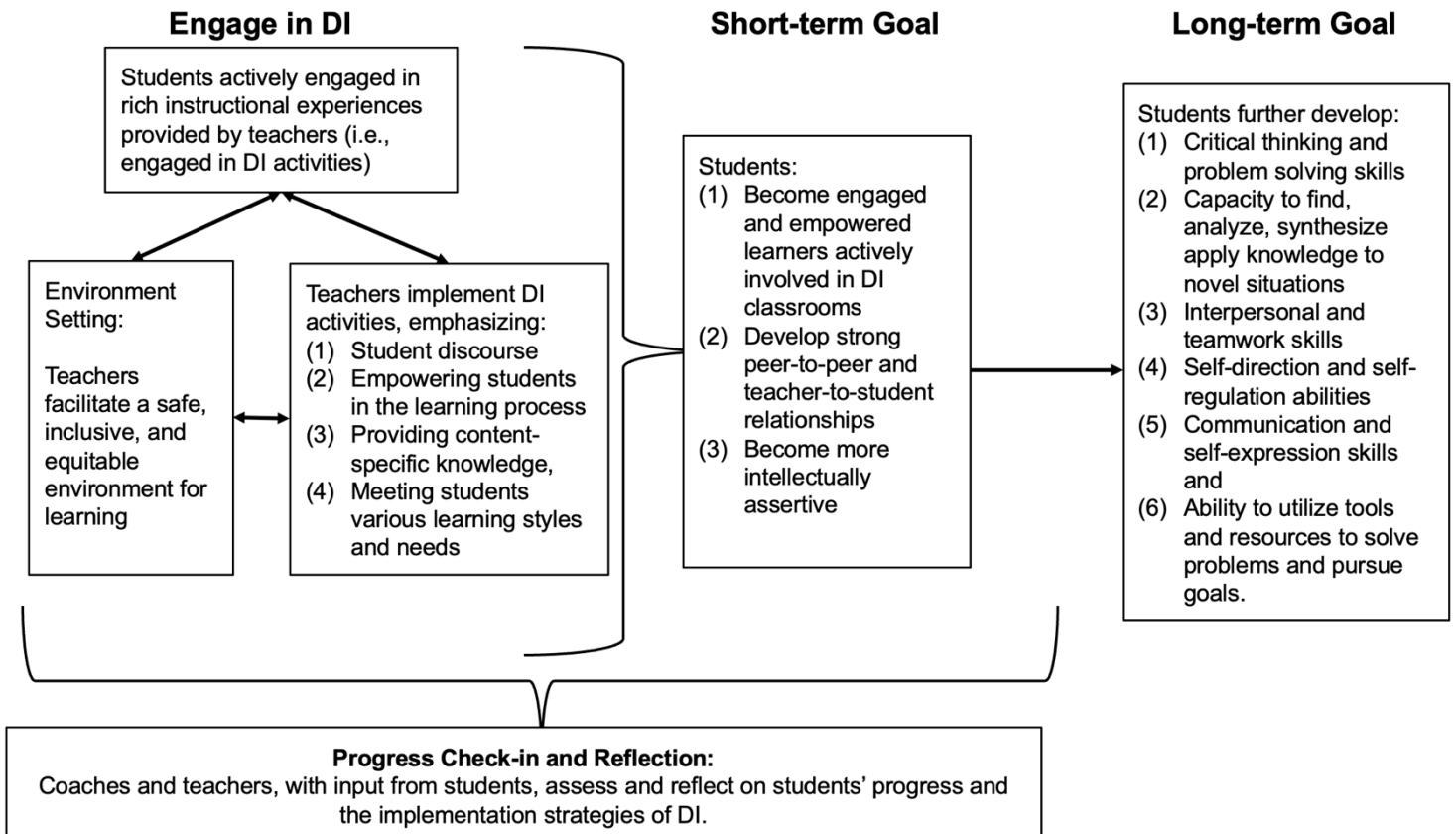


By implementing SEL in the classroom, educators can help students cultivate essential life skills, leading to improved relationships, emotional health, and overall well-being. This is traditionally done through teacher modeling and intentionally creating supportive yet challenging environments. In other words, the hallmarks of a DI-classroom.

Recommended reference: Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*, 82(1), 405-432.

# Impact Chain Model

The established empirical frameworks outlined above helped us better understand how DI classrooms are facilitated, and the mechanisms that lead to their success. We applied these frameworks in a conceptual impact chain model that details the sequence of mechanisms that DI classroom curriculum effects that, in turn, results in long-term positive outcomes.



**Figure 1.** *Impact Chain Model of DI Classroom Engagement*

# Methodology

## Overview

As part of the longitudinal study on the impact of Debate-Inspired practices in Boston Public Schools, a qualitative study was conducted in collaboration with research teams based in Boston University. This joint team of faculty and graduate students made a series of real-time in-person school visits over the period of six months, as well as multiple consultations with the BDL, from November 2023 to May 2024. In total, observations of 12 classes, 24 Resolved sessions, and 3 coaching sessions were made in collaboration with 5 teachers across 4 Boston-area schools.

## Procedures

Introductions between the participating teachers and research team members were made through BDL staff. Teachers who consented to project inclusion provided possible observation times, specifically for sessions in which they anticipated including DI-related activities and practices. Resolved sessions were held multiple times weekly and observers received an open invitation to attend and observe.

Observations were completed using a customized qualitative tool: the BU Combined Classroom Observation Measure (see Appendix). This tool was a qualitative form to be completed in segments immediately before, during, and after observations and captured quantitative and qualitative elements of each DI-class or Resolved session. Items of this form related to the team member's observations of teacher and student experiences across multiple areas, including argumentation and perspective-taking, community-building and communication, student agency and leadership, classroom efficacy and growth opportunities, and teacher practices and resources.

Each observation was done by at least one member of the research team attending the class or session in person. To be as unobtrusive as possible, observers arrived and settled in 10 minutes before each session and positioned themselves either to the side or back of the classroom.

## Participants

Observations occurred across multiple locations. Four Boston-area schools—one middle school and three high schools—were involved in DI-classroom observations. Of the seven teachers who were originally contacted about participating, five teachers agreed and provided available dates across the observation period. The DI-classrooms ranged in size, subject, and grade level. The classes taught a combination of 7th, 9th, 10th, and 12th grade Spanish Humanities, Science (Forensics, Honors Chemistry), History (Special Ed & ESL), and Math, and the number of students per classroom ranged from approximately 3 to 26.

Three Boston-area schools—one middle school and two high schools—were involved in Resolve session observations. These sessions were led by a staggered team of three facilitators. Resolved cohorts consisted of approximately 6-15 Black and/or Latino male students, with grade levels ranging from 6 to 12. Content matter highlighted relevant social issues (e.g., the racial wealth gap), and students were

expected to deliver public team capstone presentations on this topic at the end of the year. All schools involved in the study typically served student populations that were at least 85% students of color and came from families with low income.

## **Analyses**

The observation data was analyzed using primarily thematic analysis. Open coding was used in the initial analysis process. Two coders independently coded the data guided by the Debate-Inspired Teacher Framework and core Resolved principles, highlighting any notable examples of what teachers and students experienced in the DI classrooms and Resolved sessions. Axial coding was then used to categorize and combine codes to identify subthemes. The research team came together to further develop higher-level themes and discuss any discrepancies or disagreements, which uncovered a series of themes for further discussion. These themes, discussed in detail below, relate to teaching practices and student experiences of DI-classrooms and Resolved sessions. This process was directly informed by BDL mission materials, Positive Youth Development and Socioemotional Learning frameworks, and team members' personal expertise.



# Themes

Despite observing dozens of unique classroom periods, teacher coaching meetings, and Resolved sessions, the evaluation team found a remarkable consensus in the themes that rose to the surface. In sum, four major themes occurred and re-occurred throughout data collection—themes which we believe summarize the areas of greatest impact and relevance in the implementation of Debate-Inspired Practices across schools and classrooms:



In the following sections, we will summarize each theme, as well as provide three examples of that theme that may represent meaningful areas of improvement and growth, both for teachers and BDL practitioners. We will consider the perspective of these examples across both DI-classrooms and Resolved sessions. Finally, we will conclude each theme section with a personal message from one or more members of the evaluation team, offering a final perspective or thought on the topic for readers' consideration.

## **Debate-Inspired Activities, Materials, & Skills: *What DI Practices Look Like***

A cornerstone of Debate-Inspired classrooms is the inclusion of unique, thoughtful, and intentionally planned activities. This work can be considered many things—gamified assignments; critical thinking exercises; student-centered learning; scaffolded lessons. Regardless of their types and titles, DI-activities shaped every classroom observation, and, by extension, the relationships built, and skills developed within.

### **Overall Strengths**

- DI-activities are intentionally designed, providing students with structured and flexible skills
- DI-activities are diverse in style and modality, introducing useful novelty and fun across content areas
- DI-activities are convenient and timesaving, acting as reliable tools for teachers at every level

### **Suggestions for Growth**

- Providing teachers with a more robust catalog of materials—accessible via QR codes, videos, and fillable PDF templates:
- Include content examples, scaffolding guidance, and usage timing throughout the school year
- Highlight potential pitfalls and how to avoid them

## Scavenger Hunts and Self-Driven Learning

Self-driven learning places the impetus on students to craft their own narratives. These opportunities are often rare within traditional classrooms, so their inclusion within DI-practices fosters a unique sense of collaboration, problem-solving, and self-efficacy (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, & Dechants, 2018). These tasks are the rare variety in which content meets creativity and can, when implemented successfully, show students that the two can become interchangeable.



### *In Classrooms*

Students engaged in scavenger hunts and other self-directed activities multiple times throughout the observation period. They navigated worksheets for pieces of text to support a theme; they walked through hallways for examples of arguments taped to walls; they chose among lists of topics which they wished to later argue in favor for as they related to a contentious topic. For teachers of all levels, these practices served as part of a larger lesson, meant to provide some novelty and develop student autonomy.

Counterintuitively, despite their focus on free movement and choice, the most successful examples occurred when teachers provided clear guide rails before and during the activity—the goal, the time limit, the content or areas that were within bounds, and the point at which students would know the activity was done. These teachers reiterated the instructions and used substantive examples before allowing students to begin.

#### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Pair off students  
to promote  
connection and  
social efficacy.

We recommend scaffolding into this activity. Self-direction is often challenging, often involving multiple elements of student movement, teamwork, note-taking, on-the-fly decision-making, and the high potential distractions and disruptions. By building to this activity later in a term, it allows students to practice these skills individually before encountering them at once.

Further, teachers should consider leaning into their novelty. By foreshadowing that a scavenger hunt is coming up later in the lesson or term, students may look forward to it. Similarly, making the scavenger hunt items visible but obscured throughout the class space (e.g., colorful poster board on walls that are covered with construction paper; gift bags and boxes in the corner of the room below cryptic signs) may further elicit curiosity, attention, and extrinsic motivation.

Experienced teachers may consider leveraging other students' expertise and voice during these activities. Once students have mastered these tasks, they may serve as useful guides for their peers, either by positioning them at scavenger hunt stations, having certain students be the "stops" that their peers need to visit to gather pieces of information, or simply as co-instructors at their group tables.

BDL coaches can aid teachers in this effort by considering the timing of this activity during the school year. The idea is classic, and the implementation can be fun

and dynamic, but it requires substantial trust and control over the classroom on the part of the teacher to pull off. It is aspirational and an activity that could be led into by simpler evidence-based exercises and classroom management tools, such as an FAQ or guides on how an instructor regains student focus and attention after potential disruptions to their routine.

### ***In Resolved***

Self-directed learning is simultaneously extremely valuable in Resolved spaces and unfortunately sparse. On the one hand, Resolved provides a unique opportunity for students to expand on ideas through personal connections that they may not be able to in content classrooms. We saw this frequently; students constantly and intuitively related the subject matter to their personal lives, experiences and interests. Facilitators capitalized on this, playing devil's advocate regularly to engage students in perspective-taking and critical reflection.

On the other hand, the content and agenda of these sessions are typically highly structured for the sake of facilitating theme-related conversations. While this had the benefit of keeping students on track over the course of a semester, it also limited students' chances to engage in extended periods of self-directed behaviors. When, for example, students struggled to find personal relevance in topics like the racial wage gap, personal assets, and debts, they at times would resort to simply memorizing the material rather than personally expanding upon it. Or, worse still, disengage. This put the facilitator in the position of needing to re-engage students in material rather than letting the students drive the conversation.

Facilitators do well to build in landing points in the lesson - moments that are intentionally dwelled and expanded upon before moving on. This process might be improved by allowing students to decide what those points are. When a student presents an interesting query or challenge, rather than engaging in clash or debate on that topic, consider occasionally using that as an opportunity to encourage the class to engage in self-directed learning on that point. Brainstorming the point, researching it together, discussing how the group could find the truth behind that point - it may seem like this is stalling the conversation, but it could also encourage others to share their own thoughts in the hopes of taking a similarly deep dive into their own beliefs.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Work with  
students to  
design tasks or  
stations for their  
classmates!

## Structured/Guided Debate, Discussion, and Clash



If self-directed learning provides elements of choice and autonomy, structured classroom clashes provide much needed structure and voice. It can be challenging for students to articulate their view and respond to opposing arguments, particularly when they feel pressured or as though they've been put on the spot. Such feelings of inadequacy can spiral into negative beliefs around competence, esteem, or belonging (Perry & Lavins-Merillat, 2018). Instead, structured dialogues serve the triple purpose of testing valued DI-practices, creating a sense of collaboration and healthy competition, and providing teachers with a potential multi-session itinerary.

### ***In Classrooms***

DI-activities are much more than debate, but if it's in the name, we must do it right! Whether it takes up a brief exchange between students, a full class period, or serves as a full-term assignment, a thoughtfully created dialogue or clash can be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivating.

All teachers, in our observations, used planned debates and clashes in their lessons. Some of the absolute highlights of our observations included a planned debate in an experienced teacher's classroom and its multiple days of preparation. Witnessing students discuss ideas, prepare their talking points and strategies as a team, and then receive feedback, applause, and ultimately personal satisfaction was the ideal intersection of content knowledge, skill building, and community development at once. Unfortunately, such planned debates were observed relatively sparingly. Understandable, given their time and resource demands. Instead, most observed moments of extended clash occurred spontaneously.

Newer teachers tended to end these impromptu clashes relatively quickly, either by siding with one student (e.g., "Student A, Student B is correct.") or by redirecting student attention to the original topic (e.g., "Student A & Student B, we're not talking about that now."). Alternatively, *experienced teachers* tended to roll with these moments, bringing them center stage and, during every observed example, adding other students to the conversation to take sides, provide evidence, and support existing claims through personal experience. We recommend the latter; leaning into spontaneous moments of clash and using them as opportunities to build rapport and provide students the reward of small but publicly acknowledged "victors," be it of the debate as a whole or of the reasoning they provided, regardless of the outcome.

We further recommend providing opportunities for lower stakes, shorter debates. Larger debate goals that involve multiple days or weeks of preparation are valuable and aspirational. As are shorter, "flash" debates that permit students to practice DI-related

### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Have students roleplay  
debate Do's and Don'ts  
for the class.

skills without the fear of long-term burn out or feelings of unpreparedness. Envision a multi-step worksheet, for example, where groups of students decide together the solution to multiple choice questions. If at any point two groups disagree on an answer, an impromptu debate occurs where groups publicly justify their answer, with the remaining groups (under the teacher's guidance) acting as the judges.

BDL coaches may use examples like this and other short, medium, and long-term debate templates to encourage teachers to demystify the debate process for students. Such resources would make long-term debates, such as one attended and judged by BDL team members during the observation period, both less intimidating and better integrated into students' regular routine. However, there are steps besides just debate length that can potentially improve their impact (see In Resolved below).

### ***In Resolved***

Resolved students ended their year with a public, collaborative, and much advertised final presentation. As one might expect, these presentations required time, effort, and energy—from instructors and students alike. However, the collaborative and trusting community within these spaces provided a level of intrinsic motivation that is impressive and enviable. For example, three weeks out from their presentations, one Resolved cohort earned gym time to play basketball for the last part of the session. Despite one student's vocal excitement and both facilitators agreeing to the break, multiple students interjected. They argued, ultimately successfully, that they were not prepared for their presentation and that the showcase should take precedence.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Require students to  
bring in external  
resources during  
debates.

We recommend supplementing content and research sessions with structured debates about elements of their end-of-year presentation. Perhaps fishbowl activities (i.e., some students sit within a circle debating a topic while others outside the circle judge, take notes, or may be “tagged in” for assistance), round tables (i.e., selected “experts” on a topic discuss the topic for the entire room, while others ask them questions), or devil's advocate activities all prepare students for different elements of their final presentation without added pressure.

## Evidence Use and Argumentation

The difference between an unproductive dispute and a productive debate often comes down to the use of evidence and academic argumentation. Cognitively, adolescence is marked by tension between their developing reasoning skills and intensified feelings of social attachment and emotional awareness (Casey, Getz, & Galvan, 2008). Lessons that teach students how to effectively research, evaluate, and disseminate evidence not only strengthens their rationality but may also instill a sense of persuasiveness and independent thought. Being able to parse truth from falsehood, particularly in the face of false information, competing viewpoints, or peer pressure, not only has lifelong value, but is also personally empowering.



### *In Classrooms*

All teachers did well to implement evidence-based activities frequently. Unsurprising, as mastering the skill of finding, selecting, and ultimately sharing evidence toward one's argument is foundational for so many other DI-related skills. This repetition helped these spaces to exude a sense of structure and predictability, both highly useful for students attempting to expand their understanding of more complex topics. What was surprising, however, was the variety of ways teachers implemented these activities. While they came naturally in History and the Humanities, they were also expertly used in Math and Science classrooms to dismantle problems into their component parts, compare and expand chemistry equations, and explain and identify intentional errors in math proofs.

However, since simply finding evidence was rarely the end goal of any individual activity, these assignments often appeared overwhelming for students. In other words, evidence-based activities may make it especially easy for teachers to focus on the end goal and leave students who may not fully understand the individual components feeling confused and detached. We recommend teachers approach these assignments in a stepwise manner, such that each individual component is described, given an example, and rewarded for its completion. While the lesson's end goal may be to complete the module, the activity itself could have multiple intermittent goals, each one scaffolded onto the next.

### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Provide a "cheat" sheet defining terms like evidence, opinion, theory, and fact.

Experienced teachers also looked to evidence-finding activities to support their lessons. Some tactful examples of this practice involved instructors asking students for a claim, and subsequently asking other students to provide evidence for and/or against this claim using their own work. When this practice is repeated and normalized, it serves the dual purpose of placing students in the role of instructor and reminding them that they may be called upon at any time. We recommend going further in this respect by incorporating peer-review elements in their activities, having peers provide feedback on each other's work and themselves acting more as the mediator of the process. Paired with this may be lessons specifically on source evaluation, where rather than providing students with a source to be examined for evidence, they instead offer students multiple sources of information which students are then asked to judge for accuracy or bias.

BDL coaching may have an opportunity to integrate the process of finding and providing evidentiary support even deeper into DI-spaces. Specifically, while the practice is inherently a component of activities like debates, scavenger hunts, essay writing, and text reviews, these practices are almost entirely used deductively in classrooms. Students are provided with an end goal or conclusion statement and then instructed to create, find, or research supportive evidence. Using evidence gathering inductively—providing students with a group of claims and asking them to come up with a possible end goal that fits these claims—would both reinforce students' understanding of the process and allow students who may struggle with parsing larger pieces of information the opportunity to do so at a more intentional pace.

Based on our observation, struggling to identify flaws in arguments occurred across subject areas, suggesting a need for more generalized skill-building tools on constructing logical arguments, finding common fallacies, and distinguishing between the strength of different pieces of evidence. By offering teachers with specific resources on these skills, they could be implemented independent of the activity at hand. For potential partnerships, many libraries and universities offer useful resources and workshops on this topic.

### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Have students explain how to know when a source of evidence is trustworthy, incomplete, or biased.

### ***In Resolved***

The Resolved Capstone presentations were an exceptional example of students thoughtfully using evidenced-based argumentation. Students had worked throughout the term to answer three guiding questions: 1. What is the racial wealth income gap, 2. How does it affect me and/or my community, and 3. What can be done about it? In each group's roughly 12-minute presentation time, they used graphs, imagery, anecdotes, and statistics to support their claims and positions. The young speakers drew from their research and preparation to articulate to their audience clearly and concisely what solutions they proposed, including arguments in favor of or against Universal Basic Income, baby bonds, and holistic community support.

While it was evident during the presentations that the Resolved students gained competencies in communication and confidence throughout the term, few moments exemplified this as much as the impromptu closing Q&A. Students not only addressed



questions from the audience, but also from one another, as groups arguing in favor of different solutions clashed with one another. It was an excellent demonstration of personal investment in the work each team had completed, and one we recommend being built into future Resolved planning.

Specifically, Resolved groups are currently siloed in their respective schools. Unfortunately, this makes any potential intrinsic motivation they may feel toward performing well, or outperforming others, during the capstone purely hypothetical. Interspersing their training with examples of work being done by other cohorts—whether written examples or recorded videos—or practice debates attended by peers or other BDL team members provide an extrinsic bit of pressure and motivation.

**For More Information:**

**Edutopia:** Online hub of resources, templates, and activities related to popular educational topics.

<https://www.edutopia.org/>



## **Closing Thoughts**

“I have worked in, alongside, and for many schools throughout my training and profession. They are incredible places, filled with the most dedicated and creative professionals I have ever encountered. I have no doubt that students within our educational system are largely in thoughtful, well-intentioned hands. Unfortunately, I am not as optimistic about their resources.

Schools manage. Teachers get by. Administrators find a way. When the work is as complex, unpredictable, demanding, and critical as education, there is no alternative. Students must be supported. They must rise, and it takes more than a village to help them do so. However, intentions can only go so far. When schools, on balance, historically and consistently receive less funding, resources, support, and recognition than they require to provide their desired level of impact, students suffer.

Many programs and initiatives have attempted to correct this issue. Countless, perhaps, each with their own solutions to the dual concerns of not overburdening educators while simultaneously asking them to learn a new system of instruction. The Boston Debate League, and its Debate Inspired Classrooms and Resolved, is the first group that made me think it possible. Their coaching offers targeted guidance where teachers need it most. Their activities frame lessons in a structured, comprehensive manner. Their mission is aspirational while remaining realistic. Even beyond this report and this work, I will continue to advocate for the BDL approach, because it makes sense.”

- Michael Medina

## **Building Climate & Community: *What DI Practices Feel Like***

Take a moment and reflect on your childhood. Did you have a teacher, staff, faculty member, or some other non-parental adult figure whose influence positively sticks out in your memory? If so, I would be willing to bet that you cannot recall everything they said or taught you. Instead, you do most likely remember a time or two that they made you feel loved, supported, encouraged, or even empowered. One cannot underestimate the importance, value or power of building relationships with young people. For one student, the relationship they have with a teacher might mean the difference between them choosing to show up and put the work in to be successful or drop out entirely. Importantly, that relationship did not form overnight. It takes intentionality, time, and effort, but DI-classes are proof positive that the work will eventually pay dividends.

### **Overall Strengths**

- DI-classrooms prioritize communication, encouraging students to be a known presence in the classroom
- DI-classrooms are interpersonal, with teachers presenting themselves as whole and genuine individuals
- DI-classrooms are communal, where the goal is joint improvement and involvement above individual mastery or competition

### **Suggestions for Growth**

- Working with classroom to lean into the flexible, vulnerable, and conceptual nature of Resolved sessions: Pairing activity-based resources with resources on classroom management, socioemotional learning practices, mediating difficult conversations, and responding to classroom conflict in real time



## Relationships

Relationships are foundational to positive youth development (Bowers, Johnson, Warren, Tirrell, & Lerner, 2015). This goes doubly in educational spaces, where feelings of safety, trust, accountability, and connection serve as figurative bridges between a teacher's expectations and a student's motivation. A strong sense of safety and trust allow students to express their ideas and take risks without fear of judgment or ridicule. When students feel valued and respected by their teachers and peers, they are more likely to engage deeply in discussions and hold one another accountable for maintaining constructive dialogue. As teachers and students build these relationships, through experimentation and reassurance, they learn the importance of collaboration, respect, and social awareness.

### ***In Classrooms***

Developing a positive relationship between students and teachers is arguably the most important element of a safe, constructive classroom. DI-practices puts this process at the forefront; feeling comfortable with laying critical practices on top of traditional classroom content requires deep trust. Trust that teachers will challenge students without judgement. Trust that students' personal opinions and suggestions will be encouraged and not stifled. Trust that clash and argumentation in the classroom can be done safely. Most of all, trust that the inquisitions, research, and skill-building happening in the classroom will be worthwhile in the long-term.

All observed teachers emphasized building student trust and rapport. The purpose was clear: students learn better from teachers they like, and teachers are better able to support students they know. This led to universal uses of humor, using students' names when addressing them, recalling personalized details about students when speaking with them, conversing with students before and after class, and offering individual attention to students needing assistance.

Of course, these behaviors were entirely optional and not directly built into DI-related practices. Teachers who leaned into opportunities for students to see themselves in the physical class space had students who were active and eager to make their presence and voice noticeable through participation.

Experienced teachers were able to quickly and deeply create bonds with their students. This was demonstrated clearly by students choosing to spend additional time in their classrooms and speak with them about challenges they were experiencing with other teachers. We recommend leveraging these relationships to further improve classroom climate. Research abounds that suggests that the fastest way to form

### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Use regular ice breakers and "get to know" activities to encourage student bonding. Be sure to participate yourself!

positive bonds throughout a large student network is through other students. Thus, providing highly engaged students with leadership roles within the classroom, such as by serving as peer mentors or within group activities, may perpetuate these relationships further. Simultaneously, offering students methods of providing anonymous feedback may invite otherwise isolated students a chance to have their voices heard.

The BDL team can help formalize relationship building practices in the classroom through their materials. For example, embedded within activity templates can be recommendations on how to invite students of varying engagement levels into the work (e.g., highly engaged students can be invited to serve as out loud readers, leaving time for teachers to provide added attention to less engaged students). Building classroom management and community-focused strategies directly into content resources saves teachers the potential frustration of needing to create behavioral strategies quickly. To further streamline this process, we recommend sorting DI-classroom resources for teachers both by activity type and the community-building suggestions they entail, such that teachers may be able to decide their lessons by whichever metric is most fitting.

### ***In Resolved***

Many of the young men who participated in the Resolved sessions come from vulnerable backgrounds and life circumstances. This often means having to place a greater emphasis on relationship building up front. The Resolved instructors took great care in building relationships with their students. One practice that the instructors incorporated into their routines and structures was providing lunch. The instructors have no way of knowing whether students have food at home, but they can ensure that they won't go home hungry. This gives the group a chance to sit and eat together, and bond.

Another example of how the Resolved instructors developed safety and trust with their youth was by providing necessary support when needed. The culminating capstone event this year was held at a downtown venue. It was impressive and wonderful signaling to students in terms of how important this moment was, but it was also far from their schools. Recognizing this possible barrier, the Resolved instructors

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Plan a monthly individual check-in with each student to discuss personal progress and challenges.

scheduled ride-share transportation for students who had no other way to attend. Additionally, enough food was served for the young men presenting, as well as their families, friends, stakeholders, and community members. Since the Resolved participants were asked to dress more formally, which could have also been a barrier for some students, the instructors also provided polo-style shirts, button-ups, and ties. Proactively removing barriers for students and placing them on the path of success not only

helps to build relationships—it can strengthen them as well. These moments, ones that occur naturally and genuinely outside the classroom, are what separates Resolved from other learning spaces and distinguishes it as a uniquely positive influence on students' lives, and their performances during the capstone event showed just that.



## Voice

One of the hopes of DI-practices is the facilitation of student voice. A seemingly simple premise—providing students with space to share—has incredibly deep roots and requires teachers’ attentive eye (Bahou, 2011). This is because there is a difference between simply speaking and feeling as though one has a say. Any student, when pressed, can provide a response. Voice is the notion that a student *wants* to speak, not because they are required, but because they feel as though their contributions will be valued, encouraged, and seen for what they are: bids for inclusion and

connection. Trust and safety foster voice, which in turn encourages more trust and participation.

### ***In Classrooms***

It seemed in our observations that *teachers* absolutely thrived on student voice. Counter to the traditional idea of education, where teachers are the arbiters of knowledge and students are simply there to memorize and repeat, teachers in DI-classrooms were thrilled to have student input. When the dynamic in the room is dynamic and positive, DI-classrooms often contain more student voice than that of the teacher, with the latter simply guiding the conversation in ways that are productive and increasingly challenging. Unfortunately, for teachers having trouble in the classroom, seeking out student voices often could only take the form of calling on them for answers or repeatedly asking them to participate in the lesson.

We recommend teachers create anonymous feedback mechanisms—such as suggestion boxes or simple paper questionnaires—where students can share their thoughts on what is interesting, or disinteresting, to them in the classroom. Additionally, teachers could hold regular brainstorming sessions where students can propose debate

#### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Design assignments that allow students to respond in a variety of ways (e.g., in writing, verbally, or in groups).

topics, lesson ideas, or classroom rules. Teachers could further implement peer review processes where students provide feedback or constructively evaluate each other’s performances on activities. Each of these approaches empower students, though in ways that may be more comfortable for certain individuals (i.e., anonymously, communally, or among peers).

BDL has brought this topic to the forefront of the discussion of student engagement. Coaching sessions highlight how teachers can encourage participation and attendance, while activities provide multiple modalities for involvement. In all, DI-classrooms are ones in which students may quickly learn that they not only can help to drive the content forward, but also where their presence is both noticed and valued.

Many of these tactics do well to prop up students who may be lagging or give a stage to those students who are inclined to be leaders in the classroom. We recommend tailoring additional activities to support those students who may fall in-

between these extreme ends of the spectrum. For example, many DI-inspired worksheets or games are designed with a specific end goal in mind. In this way, students who complete the activity feel rewarded for their accomplishment, while those who are disengaged often immediately garner the teacher's attention. How can we redesign these practices such that the remainder of students - those who are trying but not yet succeeding - may still feel moments of voice and engagement? We suggest that activities have incremental steps to completion, particularly ones that are open-ended and subjective, so that all participating students have at least some opportunities to contribute to the discussion. Furthermore, these students often simply need reminders on definitions, instructions, or the purpose of the task to move forward; having these visibly posted (e.g., projected on the screen, written on the board, or provided on the worksheet) can remove the added (potentially embarrassing) step of needing to check in with the teacher.

**Highlight:** Nearly every Resolved session involved a student leading a part of the conversation. Trust and safety create a willingness to take risks.

### ***In Resolved***

Student voice helped to build trust in Resolved sessions. Instructors not only encouraged student voice during sessions, but they also empowered the participants by giving them choices, allowing space for disagreement, and letting them make their own decisions. Students felt safe and valued with their peers and the instructors, and subsequently spoke freely and without the fear of judgment. The more they did so, the more proficient they became in the words, their counterpoints, and their use of evidence and examples to justify their points.

During a particular Resolved session, both instructors entered the session with low energy. Instructors appeared to be tired, had little small talk with students as they were arriving, and were beginning the lesson without much attention paid to the students or one another. This was highly uncharacteristic, and the students immediately spoke on the discrepancy. The class told the instructors that they needed to match their energy. They began to hype up the staff by high-fiving them, dancing, making them laugh, and did anything else they could to get the instructors to revert to their usual demeanor. Eventually, the instructors took the feedback and restarted the session with renewed energy.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Work with students to have them lead portions of a lesson or activity - plan this privately to surprise the class and encourage creativity!

This was a remarkable session. Disengaged students may not have felt invested enough to raise this concern. This was a remarkable moment. A lack of trust in the room may have stifled students from feeling safe enough to speak. Trust can be considered a contributing factor in how the youth leaders validated and affirmed the group's assessment of their energy level—and deemed it worthy enough to evoke a change in the way they moved forward.

## Joy

Students learn best in places where they want to be. Alternatively, students do not learn well in boring, unoriginal, and drudging spaces. When they feel actual joy in learning, motivation follows. Curiosity follows. That incredibly valuable intrinsic drive that encourages self-learning becomes clear (Cronqvist, 2024). Fortunately, DI classrooms and practices are innately joyful. Competition, complexity, and camaraderie are at the heart of BDL practice. All that is left is capitalizing on these moments whenever they arise.



### ***In Classrooms***

Greeting students by name; actively listening to personal details about their lives; leaning into hobbies and subjects that excite them; using humor and rewards to maintain engagement - there are many ways to make students feel known. However, transforming that sense of belonging into a sense of joy can be exceedingly challenging in the time-restricted structure of a classroom. However, when done successfully, a joyful classroom instills intrinsic academic motivation and facilitates deeper learning and personal ownership of the learning process.

Teachers we observed understood this process and regularly facilitated joy in their classrooms. Teachers celebrated student achievements, both verbally and through wall displays, or joked with students, who actively reciprocated and included teachers in their own humor. We recommend formalizing these opportunities; teachers can implement recognition systems that highlight individual and group accomplishments, such as “debater of the week” awards or shout-outs during class. They can work with the class to create a reward system that the students would want, and then intentionally hype students up as they approach recognition milestones. They can use music, or movement breaks to intentionally provide students with opportunities to inject their own personality and presence into the curriculum.

Furthermore, during an observed structured debate, students generally displayed an eagerness to present to the invited audience what they had put a lot of effort into preparing. This was despite moments of uncertainty and expressions of embarrassment; these excited students are willing to push through the discomfort for the sake of accomplishment. It was evident through their laughter and determination that students enjoyed the roles they played in their teams, which their teacher modeled and reciprocated by taking part in the presentation themselves. We recommend teachers model such joyful behavior first. Engaging in their own public, often self-deprecating, but also earnest moments of self-expression and playfulness can set the tone for students (so long as respect and routine have already been established).

#### **New to DI / Resolved?**

*Students will match your energy - go big and put yourself out there!*

The very premise of DI-classrooms opens classrooms up for more chances at spontaneous fun and self-expression. BDL and its coaching model reduces teachers’



cognitive load during lessons by giving them tools and strategies to fall back on during moments of uncertainty. Going forward, BDL may consider providing teachers with resources on how to best integrate student interests into the curriculum.

For example, which DI-activities are easiest for integrating student preferences or interesting current events? How might teachers do so in real-time? What DI-activities are similar in terms of difficulty or skillset, such that students could have some choice in which they would like to complete? What are natural stopping points within each activity where teachers may pause the lesson if moments of student voice, engagement, or conversation arise?

**Remember:** Keep students challenged – overcoming learning obstacles cultivates joy.

In addition, BDL could use lessons learned from Resolved sessions and help organize events across classes that emphasize fun and creativity in debate. For example, hosting an annual debate festival where students can showcase their talents in a more relaxed, celebratory environment could contribute to a positive sense of community. Having these events to look forward to also bring chances for success, accomplishment, and praise.

### ***In Resolved***

While we have praised the spontaneity that comes in classroom joy, Resolved often came to these moments through ritual. The instructors, for example, had a special routine for closing out each session. Not too different from a sports-team huddle, the students gathered in a circle and one student is bestowed the power of leading their “breakdown.” Students and instructors put their hands in the center and, at the count of three, simultaneously shout “Resolved!”

You would think that the student chosen to lead the breakdown was given a stack of cash by the way they were so excited and happy to have this responsibility! What to adults may seem as a simple or silly way to close out a session was a point of clear pride and ownership among these young men. After sessions that were particularly heavy, the high energy breakdown at the end of the group helped to remind students that they had support at that moment from everyone in the room. Community, joy, and voice, distilled into a single, shouted word.

Resolved instructors inspired feelings of joy in students not only through thoughtfully crafted activities and structures but by simple check-ins and conversations before and after class. One moment stands out; one day, as students trickled in, two

students talked excitedly over each other to explain to the instructors how to play a new phone game. The instructors were giving devoted attention and asking questions about the game, encouraging the two young men to share more regarding gameplay and different characters. The instructors showed authentic curiosity and genuineness in the students' interests, which set the tone for the rest of the session as new students arrived and matched their level of excitement.

### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Regularly check-in with students about what they are and aren't enjoying in the curricula and class.

On another occasion, the instructors created an inadvertent but uproarious, joy-filled environment at the end of a session. As the instructors recorded footage for the end-of-year capstone event, students burst into laughter watching themselves and their classmates displayed on the screen. This could have been a disheartening moment for the instructors—students not seeming to take their efforts seriously—but instead was incredibly bonding and intimate. This was a moment they had created together, and it represented what they had been doing all year: becoming more than a class. They were a community.

**For More Information:**

**The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):** Institute dedicated to creating more inclusive and supportive classrooms through community partnerships.

<https://casel.org/about-us/>



## Closing Thoughts

“The overarching themes of a climate and community building contribute to the overall enjoyment and engagement of the Resolved program’s participants. Engagement was strongly related to how strong their relationship was with their instructor and how encouraging and supportive the community was for the students. Whether it was students engaging in their work silently and diligently or providing keen or introspective thoughts or feedback during a discussion, the young people displayed commitment to not only participating but holding their fellow peers accountable for their participation levels.”

- Kyle Broadnax

“Any classroom can be a space of learning. Students are used to this. They know what to expect when they enter a school and develop habits and routines that get them through the day. Whether they aim to excel, survive, or simply pass the time, students know how to “school.” It is up to educators—thoughtful, intentional, and genuine—to change these expectations for the better. Part of this occurs through training, and the rest through experience.

Teacher training programs are often highly theoretical spaces. Future generations of instructors and scholars learn about the models of learning and classroom management techniques that have been found most effective and broadly applicable. They memorize these models, do their best to apply them in their teaching, and then report back on their progress and stumbling blocks with their advisors and peers. Testing the efficacy of these learnings is a critical step of these programs, because their usefulness will be immediately called into question once they enter their profession.

That is when teachers truly learn the extent that students know how to “school.” How to navigate classes, and teachers, in ways that often optimize their own preferences, regardless of their teacher’s plans or intentions. This is not a battle between two opposing forces, but rather a space shared by individuals with potentially, but not necessarily, different end goals. This dichotomy takes on many outlooks and appearances, and much has been written about the best ways for both teachers and students to leave these spaces fulfilled. But at their core, each of these systems and suggestions tends to come down to one thing: can you turn your classroom into a community?”

- Michael Medina

## **Supportive Teacher Practices: *How DI Practices Thrive***

Teachers and instructors are only as effective as the skills and practices that they utilize. Infusing the student's lived experience into the curriculum, thoughtful scaffolding of activities, and modeling (among others) were observed techniques that helped to enhance the DI-activity or lesson. A recent Gallop and Walton Family Foundation survey indicated that the youth of Generation Z feel unprepared and disengaged in school. (Inskeep, 2024). The article expresses how young people experienced a sharp decline in nearly every metric surveyed from the previous school year to the current. To illustrate this point further, the NPR story went on to share that there was a 10-point drop in students who felt they learned something interesting while at school. This demonstrates the need for educators to go above and beyond the cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach to presenting lessons and truly make learning meaningful and dare I say—fun for students.

However, it can be short-sighted to believe that the success of the individual student, let alone the entirety of the class, is solely based on delivering meaningful and relevant classwork. Similarly, simply providing teachers with a cadre of coaches and supportive BDL staff or a folder of DI-related resources is sufficient alone to transform an otherwise disengaged classroom. These factors must work together to uplift BDL's transformative approach into a lasting and translatable student success.

### **Overall Strengths**

- DI-practices compliment teacher organization and planning, culminating in more engaging and inclusive classrooms
- DI-practices scaffold over time, easing students into learning at their own pace
- DI-practices are grounded, leading to comprehensive sets of skills that are transferable outside the classroom

### **Suggestions for Growth**

- Promoting avenues for students to express their voice and involvement in more structural ways across classrooms, such as through joint rule setting, lesson planning, and curricula topics, in ways that complement their empowerment within DI-activities and practices
- Creating a network for teacher-to-teacher collaboration across participating DI-classrooms and schools, where educators may share best practices, classroom experiences, and activity modifications while still under the guidance of BDL coaches and educators

## Classroom Organization and Routine

A teacher establishing clear structures and consistent routines within their classrooms is akin to a racecar driver fine tuning their engine or an athlete checking their equipment before a match. Preparation, planning, and repetition helps to keep active spaces safe and predictable, as well as help to prevent distractions and rough edges. This offers students a sense of stability while simultaneously encouraging a dynamic and flexible discourse and debate (Scrivener, 2012). By outlining specific roles, procedures, and timelines for DI-related activities, teachers can streamline their methods and spend more time in the learning portion of the lesson, allowing students to concentrate on content and collaboration, not logistics.



### ***In Classrooms***

All teachers in our study often let their classrooms do some of the heavy lifting of classroom management for them. They posted rules prominently in room, stashed student materials in labeled and easily accessible wall bins and had necessary lesson information and materials already set up before students arrived. Furthermore, these teachers had clearly already established routines for students based on the stage of the lesson (e.g., what students should do when they arrive, when they complete a worksheet, and when it is time for dismissal). Each of these steps give the class a sense of order while simultaneously freeing the teacher's attention for more immediate matters.

#### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Use visual indicators of classroom rules, resources, and stations. Have students help design them!

Difficulty would arise when new elements were introduced to the class. Unfortunately, these elements were sometimes the DI-practices themselves. As teachers were not always able to regularly integrate such practices into their lessons, their novelty would require added teacher attention and introduce potential student confusion. We recommend removing as many non-content distractions from materials as possible. This means using consistent language for terms and student roles across as many DI-related activities as possible, and perhaps including a common index of these terms and instructions across printed materials. The more consistent and uniform materials are made, the more quickly students will understand how to use them and the more new ideas and skills on these materials will stand out. Alternatively, as was observed from teachers in previous waves of data collection, students can be encouraged to create their own strategy journals. The formats of these journals could be

standardized across students but filled in individually whenever they collect new problem-solving strategies, providing them with a quick and reliable resource when tackling new material.

BDL coaches offer invaluable insights in this domain. Their own teaching experiences, and external lens on the classroom, means they often provided strategies that were exactly what was missing in a classroom at that moment. These tips are so valuable, in fact, that we recommend creating a database of them for quick reference by teachers. While many of these tips may seem specialized and idiosyncratic, our observations found teachers across schools and subject matters experiencing startlingly similar challenges. Providing a database on best practices and commonly confronted classroom challenges, alongside the already provided materials and resources, rounds out the types of support a teacher is likely to draw from on a given day.

### ***In Resolved***

Classroom organization isn't just a background feature; it's a tool in the toolbox. The flexibility and communal nature of Resolved sessions demonstrate that masterfully. In one notable example, the instructor's had to pivot from their prepared lesson to what turned out to be a problem-solving session. The instructors were discussing honesty and truth in the context of an incident that occurred where trust had been broken between the students and the Resolved staff. The instructor's decided to shift the seating of the students from rows to a circle (including the study observer).

This simple shift created an intimate and safe space, and one that acknowledged the presence of everyone in the room as an equal and active participant in creating the climate of the space. It is important to note that, during this shared experience, the instructors were incredibly precise when choosing their words. There were no accusations or assumptions—only anecdotes, personal perspectives, and invitations for others to match their own vulnerability. Adjusting the layout and the routine allowed students to not only see themselves in the shared stories, but to also physically see each other in the space: present, real, and alike.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Occasionally adjust seating arrangements and groups to challenge students' social efficacy.

This intersection of space and community resonated for an additional reason. One student who was typically gregarious and extroverted hung his head low during this time, avoiding eye contact and visibly disengaging. This sort of response could be easily hidden during a typical lesson or classroom layout. The Resolved instructors transformed what could have been a standard chastisement into a space of vulnerability and accountability, where introspection could be met with support and connection rather than isolation.

Restorative practices like sitting in circles, being willing to adjust routines to address immediate concerns, and sharing personal stories promote safety and self-ownership - over our stories, our presence, and our responsibilities as learners and facilitators.

## Recapping and Signal Posting



A necessary reality of learning is scaffolding – building lessons up incrementally to allow students opportunities for practice and preparation (Taber, 2018). Both recaps (looking backward to past lessons) and signaling (looking forward to future lessons) reinforce this concept particularly well in DI-classrooms. BDL’s structured and intentional designs help to reduce student uncertainty and stress while slowly introducing increasingly complex concepts. Furthermore, this sort of guidance is broadly applicable; regardless of the subject matter or the instructor’s level of experience, BDL’s series of thoughtfully scaffolded lessons over the course of a term easily pair skill-building with content development at a reasonable pace.

### ***In Classrooms***

Nearly every teacher observed began their lessons with recaps of previous material. This act was usually done in conjunction with a visual aid, such as a chart, outline, or bullet points, highlighting the major themes discussed. Notably, these teachers also usually directly referenced the sort of DI-activity the class completed in the previous class, as a way of reminding students of not only the content knowledge discussed but also the way it was explored. This is a wonderful practice, and a potential opportunity to incorporate student voice and engagement.

We recommend teachers encourage students to perform these recaps. Either by calling on individual students, having students popcorn off each other, or using fill-in-the-blank options, teachers can place students in the role of the instructor to start off each lesson. This practice itself could be signal posted from lesson to lesson by having students end each class by summarizing what was learned in their notes, which they may subsequently read off in the following class. Having a specific summary practice will both highlight the throughline of the material and signal to students the usefulness of clear note taking.

#### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Create a continuous concept map of lesson topics that grows each week and demonstrates students’ progress.

BDL may support teachers in these efforts by creating a digital repository of effective recap strategies and signal posting techniques. As BDL understands the nuances of their DI-related resources, they may also structure them such that they clearly identify what skills lead into each one, as well as what skills naturally develop from their completion. A visualization of this sort of skill tree could be incredibly useful for teachers making long-term plans for the term, as well as a useful feedback tool for students to identify their areas of growth and mastery.

### ***In Resolved***

One of the strengths of Resolved is their latitude to focus on a singular topic over the course of multiple sessions. They are concept- rather than content-focused, meaning the young men within can explore multiple perspectives and nuances on an issue rather than immediately moving on to something new. So, while these sessions also tended to begin with a relevant check-in question that reminded students of their prior meeting, the perspective of these questions varied widely from week to week. Students were asked to respond to these prompts, one at a time, and thus began talking and easing the group into deeper conversation.

We recommend regularly reminding Resolved students of just how much material they have covered from week to week. Because the concepts they discuss tended to remain relatively static over time, the depth of what they have accomplished may have, at times, been lost. This was demonstrated on occasion when students remarked that they discussed the day's topic already or asked why they were talking about a particular idea again. If students were shown a roadmap of the central theme of the term and all the auxiliary areas their discussions have and will explore, they may develop a broader picture of the purpose of not just individual lessons but Resolved as a whole. This activity can itself be signaled at the start of the term; imagine introducing a topic on the first day (e.g., the racial wealth gap) and asking students to share everything they know or believe on the topic. This would provide facilitators with a baseline from which to build for the term, as well as an activity that they can repeat at regular intervals to clearly demonstrate for the group how far their collective knowledge has come.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Encourage students to lead  
opening recaps and end-of-  
class summaries.



## Grounding and Deep Learning

One of BDL's core missions is also, perhaps, its most difficult: translating student experiences from the classroom to the outside world. While all themes discussed thus far help to facilitate this goal, teacher grounding and deep learning practices tackle it head on. By encouraging students to draw on their personal backgrounds and perspectives, teachers have the important and necessary opportunity to create an emotional investment between classroom material and students' identities, self-reflection, and personal goals (e.g., Mathews et al., 2020). An investment that, ideally, encourages them to see the benefits of their learned skills outside of the classroom.



### *In Classrooms*

Deep learning can be subtle or overt. Both were witnessed within DI-classrooms. Subtly, proficient teachers used examples that were based on their students' personal interests or recent classroom discussions. They frequently asked students if they had experienced anything akin to the topics being discussed. They hung demographically representative examples of scholars and leaders around the classroom. Overtly, they chose debate topics that immediately referenced challenges students were facing. They had students write and speak on how they might use the practiced skills to tackle a real-world problem. They asked students directly how they believe the topics they covered might be relevant in the future. In so doing, they made the confines of their rooms and curricula feel much larger, and the purpose of their discussions much grander.

Across content areas and levels of teacher experience, we recommend incorporating avenues for students to track how their school experiences may benefit them in the future. Students' perceptions of educational utility relate strongly to their feelings of academic motivation and belonging, and they depend strongly on their belief that what they are learning presently is preparing them for what they will face later in life. Instituting time for regular reflective journaling or assigning projects that incorporate students' future goals force a level of introspection that may help bridge the gap between schooling and the rest of students' lives.

BDL is in a unique position of being able to aid in this suggestion. Much of the difficulty of creating a more inclusive classroom is the time and effort it takes to create individualized student assignments. BDL may assist in making such materials, altering existing assignments into templates in which students may substitute their own experiences, preferences, hobbies, or topics of interest. Alternatively, these assignments may identify areas where teachers may substitute existing content with

### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Organize a virtual tour of a relevant and lesson-appropriate location. Plan the activity like a scavenger hunt!

current or local stories that immediately immerse students in terms of their real-world relevance.

An extension of this suggestion leverages BDL's growing community influence. Teachers may benefit greatly from learning of the experiences of their colleagues in other participating classrooms and schools. The program could expand its current coaching infrastructure to create professional learning communities where teachers can share best practices and innovative ideas for fostering deep learning with one another, all while having access to the guidance and resources of BDL coaches and educators.

### ***In Resolved***

Even more so than classrooms, the structure and mission of Resolved allows it to wear its deep learning aspirations on its sleeve. Never was this clearer than during preparation for its capstone event. With the presentation only a few weeks away, one of the instructors shared a story about a time he was speaking publicly and became very nervous. This anecdote served to be a cautionary tale of what can happen when you are not prepared thoroughly as well as an opportunity for students to relate and share their own experiences. One student reluctantly shared a similar story and, before you knew it, each student had shared a personal anecdote about public speaking. The instructors led by example and students then felt comfortable enough to express their own stories and concerns about publicly speaking. This led to a discussion on best practices and tips for speaking in front of people. In this case and many others, the combination of instructor skill and lesson/discussion content and its meaningfulness give way for high and consistent levels of student engagement and real-world relevance.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Encourage students to choose their own lesson topics related to their future goals or current challenges.

#### **For More Information:**

**The National Center for School Engagement:** Policies, trainings, and publications regarding school belonging and utility.

<https://schoolengagement.org/>



## Closing Thoughts

“The successful implementation of a DI classroom (and Resolved) greatly relies on what the teacher can provide: guided activities to scaffold the acquisition of argumentation skills, opportunities for intellectual and personal connections among teacher and students, and passion and energy that can vitalize the room, thereby transferring into students’ engagement, performance, and growth. To some, this task can be a busy one, burdened by responsibility. However, it is important to remember that the DI teacher is not alone; the DI Classrooms instructional coaches, other teachers, and their students are their collaborators.

The DI coaches not only help teachers understand the framework, activities, and material, but also provide continuous feedback and co-strategize solutions to improve DI teachers’ practices. DI teachers can also find support from other teachers. This includes both DI teachers, who can share experiences and ideas directly related to DI activities, and non-DI teachers, who share the same concerns of student engagement, empowerment, and effective learning. Finally, it is easy to think that the teacher is always in the fore and the students follow or are pulled forward, but DI classrooms and Resolved spaces can be unique in that they are assisting the development of powerful thinkers and contributors who can 1. critically understand information and situations and reasonably assert their opinions, 2. knows how to connect with, care for, and emotionally support others, and 3. can formulate solutions to address the needs of their community. Consider them as the future leaders they are. They may need propping up and even handholding at first, but by providing them with opportunities to take ownership of their learning, mistakes, and their classroom, DI teachers may find potential partners who can encourage and challenge their peers to engage with the content and dig in.”

- Soe Young Lee

“These teachers were passionate individuals and masters of what they do, and it was both informative and inspiring to watch. Ironically, the skill of these educators makes properly evaluating the benefits of DI-classrooms and Resolved difficult. Were we witnessing the success of carefully crafted debate-inspired materials or expert facilitation? Were these students participating and engaged by a meticulously crafted lesson or a charismatic and authoritative teacher? Were Resolved sessions eliciting excitement through their unique format or the unique collaborative style of their instructors? Inversely, were unsuccessful lessons the result of a misaligned or overly difficult DI-related task, or of a teacher’s inability to translate it successfully?

One of the benefits of conducting over 30 observations is that we get to address this. Observing one lesson is statistical noise. Observing five reveals patterns. Observing three dozen allows us to say with confidence that debate-inspired methods in the classroom work. Specifically, they complement the skills teachers are bringing to the classroom and the steps they are already taking to create their unique learning spaces.

The beauty of BDL, then, is not its novelty or revolutionary approach. Rather, BDL is acting as a support system. The model bolsters the good, reduces workloads, addresses pain points, and offers alternatives and solutions that would otherwise rob teachers of their much-needed time and attention.”

- Michael Medina

## **Implementation Challenges: *How DI Practices are Hindered***

While the DI-classrooms and Resolved sessions offer inspiring and transformative student possibilities, they still operate within the confines of our educational system. As such, they are inevitably exposed to the same challenges and frustrations that teachers across the nation face in their classrooms. Poor attendance rates; problematic student behaviors; easily accessible distractions—the teachers and facilitators we observed navigated these and other minefields regularly throughout the study. The ways in which BDL, its coaches, and its practices may address and alleviate these hindrances may ultimately determine the program’s effectiveness and longevity.

### **Overall Strengths**

- Educators using DI-practices are experienced with facing classroom challenges, with access to coaches and resources that can support them
- DI-practices teach complex topics in straightforward ways, making it easy for teachers to quickly transition back to their lessons following disruptions
- DI-activities are engaging and diverse, competing more successfully for student attention than traditional teaching methods

### **Suggestions for Growth**

- Offering teachers and instructors guidance on how best to support students with challenges they may experience in other classes
- Organize and restructure activities such that they can be easily adjusted for classrooms of different sizes, specifically in cases of absence or tardiness
- Sharing information about DI-Classrooms and Resolved to non-participating teachers, opening avenues of expansion and collaboration across a students’ school day

## Attendance and Arrival Times

It is difficult to learn when you aren't in the classroom, to say the least.

Attendance and arrival times are crucial in terms of student engagement and the overall effectiveness of DI-related activities (Tonge & Silverman, 2019). Consistent attendance ensures that students can build on their skills progressively and participate fully in collaborative discussions and practice sessions, which punctuality is necessary for both lesson cohesion

and student attentiveness. In addition, establishing a culture of accountability around student presence fosters a sense of responsibility and commitment among students.



### *In Classrooms*

Classrooms varied widely in how much student attendance and arrival times impacted learning. In some cases, attendance never appeared to be an issue at all, with almost every observation being of a full classroom of engaged and joyful students. In others, attendance was not only a concern but perhaps the most prominent point of attention during the lesson. As DI-practices rely so heavily on student voice, participation, and teamwork, a half-empty classroom not only lessens opportunities for learning, it also necessarily hinders the effectiveness of this work.

To their much-earned credit, teachers in our observations handled missing and late students masterfully. Students arriving after the bell were integrated directly into ongoing work, and it was clear that instructors were modifying activities on the fly to accommodate for smaller than anticipated numbers. Unfortunately, we were not able to witness how teachers engaged with missing students, especially habitually missing students, upon their return to the classroom. To that end, we recommend teachers do what they can to understand the root causes of such absences. Private student conferences, parent/family communications, and student questionnaires may be useful in acquiring possible reasons. Understanding the underlying issues—whether they be personal, social, or academic—allows educators to tailor their interventions more effectively.

In the meantime, incentives related to participation and attendance can add a useful layer of extrinsic motivation. “Student of the week” programs or initiatives based around an accumulated in-class point system reward present students. By tying rewards to DI-principles, such as opportunities to choose lesson topics, student groups, or activities, offers the dual benefit of reinforcing student voice and engagement.

### **New to DI / Resolved?**

Create summary sheets for absent students that require them to work with classmates to fill in missing information.

BDL materials are thoughtfully crafted, such that most can be implemented regardless of the number of students present in the classroom. That said, it may be useful to provide teachers with brief instructions on how to quickly adjust DI-activities (particularly group-based activities) for varying numbers. Similarly, just as past recommendations in this report requested a resource sorting system along the lines of skills being tested and activities that would pair well together, we suggest also identifying activities by their recommended number of students so that teachers may quickly find material that fit their usual class size.

### ***In Resolved***

Attendance and arrival times are a unique challenge for Resolved sessions. Once positive relationships were established between instructors and students, it was clear that the participating young men were highly motivated to attend. At the same time, the distinction between these sessions and traditional classes did appear to occasionally decrease students' motivations to attend, remain for the duration, or attend on time. Not all such instances were intentional, however. One significant challenge for at least one Resolve cohort was their early starting time, which was a full hour before school began. This places additional constraints on parents to get their child to school earlier than usual and places some younger students in potentially unsafe situations by navigating public transit by themselves. This represents a significant challenge, as instruction was regularly paused and disrupted as incoming students were either caught up to the remainder of the group or temporarily ignored.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Track attendance patterns across students and classes to identify potential trends.

Whenever possible, having a procedure in place for absent or tardy students would be preferred. We imagine a routine in which students are made aware that printed agendas, which include a summary of the prior session and a timeline of today's major themes, are kept in a

particular classroom location. Students who missed the prior session or arrive late would know to pick up and review these sheets before joining in the discussion, which the instructors tend to do right away for incoming students. Simultaneously, students could be called on to recap the prior lesson or the day's lesson thus far for new arrivals, with this opportunity perhaps being paired with a specific privilege, such as having their choice of the day's lunches.

## Disruptive Student Behavior



DI-classrooms lean heavily on classroom climate to produce effective results. Unsurprisingly, then, disruptive behaviors can hinder not only individual learning but also the collective classroom (Way, 2011). Such behaviors may stem from a variety of factors, including disengagement, lack of understanding, or personal issues, and they can distract peers from participating effectively in discussions and activities. Addressing disruptive

behavior is essential for maintaining a respectful and focused atmosphere, where students feel safe to express their ideas and engage deeply with the material.

### *In Classrooms*

Every observed class contained some form of disruptive student behaviors. This is not only typical but inevitable within classrooms. Observers noticed students interrupting teachers and their peers, leaving the room for extended periods, complaining about the lesson, talking loudly with others, and engaging in other common misbehaviors. Given their typicality, it was unsurprising that most teachers handled these concerns immediately and calmly.

Of note, however, are the techniques experienced teachers used in these moments. Many relied on positive reinforcement, in which students exhibiting desired behaviors were publicly acknowledged and lauded, throughout the class period—even prior to any observed disruptive behaviors. One teacher, for example, used a visible point system to identify students remaining on task, tallying these points at the end of the period for a larger reward. Additionally, these teachers utilized restorative practices above strict punishments in response to interruptions. These approaches included using Socratic questioning and reflection to engage the target student in conversation and introspection about why they were engaging in the behavior rather than referring to the behavior itself.

By facilitating discussions in this way, students were given the opportunity to self-correct and take responsibility for the actions rather than respond defensively.

BDL has a vested interest in tamping down such disruptive classroom behaviors. They very often interrupt the flow of discussion and interfere with the sense of community, safety, and camaraderie teachers work so diligently to establish. One resource that BDL has at their disposal that may be especially helpful is likely one of the easiest to muster: their presence. Students are keenly aware of changes in their classroom space, such as the introduction of BDL guests, the knowledge that a

### **New to DI / Resolved?**

**Do not hesitate to work with BDL coaches and school supports to address persistent issues.**

classroom is being observed, or being informed that the space is being recorded. Having BDL coaches note, in person or virtually, how teachers handle disruptions is an invaluable source of external information and guidance. Alternatively, simply recording classroom sessions and watching them back could be informative for instructors, particularly those with less in-class experience, in terms of factors such as how they are allocating their attention and where and when disruptions tend to occur.

### ***In Resolved***

A major strength of Resolved, particularly those cohorts who also experienced DI-classrooms, was the fact that it ran parallel to students' academic journey. Not quite a class but not quite an extracurricular activity, Resolved sessions could be spaces of educational insight and support without the associated pressure. One area of such insight that instructors touched on was disruptive behaviors in students' other classes.

Using both individual and group check-ins, instructors leveraged their positive relationships with students to garner insights into students' academic performance. These conversations generally centered on creating and adjusting their individual class goals, but in so doing, instructors deftly broached what behaviors and habits the students may be exhibiting that are hindering their success. During one check-in, the instructors helped break down the different categories listed in addition to their content letter grades. Students discussed categories such as their "effort" and "conduct," which the instructors worked with them to define in this context, as well as what they could do to improve in these areas. With guidance from the instructors, students were able to link their academic outcomes to their professed personal life goals, and ultimately articulate why disruptions today may have long-term, unintended consequences.

#### **Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Collaborate with other teachers to create a consistent set of rules across classrooms.



## Distractions and Inattention

When students are distracted—whether by electronic devices, side conversations, or unrelated stimulation—they miss crucial information, fail to participate fully, and may disrupt the flow of dialogue for others (Richtel, 2010). This lack of focus not only undermines individual learning but also affects group dynamics, diminishing the quality of collaborative



argumentation. By addressing distractions and promoting sustained attention, teachers can enhance the overall effectiveness of the learning experience, allowing students to develop their critical thinking and communication skills more fully.

### *In Classrooms*

For teachers of all levels, we recommend incorporating more diverse activities—such as group discussions, debates, and multimedia presentations—to help maintain students’ attention and investment. Attempting to be more interesting than students’ own technology is a losing battle. Instead, use students’ expectation of multi-modal entertainment by using these sorts of methods in the classroom. Thankfully, many DI-related activities are inherently interesting.

#### **New to DI / Resolved?**

**Incorporate intentional breaks during lessons for students to redirect their energy.**

Unfortunately, they do require a level of teacher preparation and familiarity that may hinder teachers from using them as often as they may like. Instead, these materials may be supplemented with some readily available alternatives. For example, using polling apps, videos, or online quiz platforms can create a more dynamic learning experience, prompting students to participate actively rather than passively

listening. Inversely, technical resources abound for calming or redirecting anxious or distracted students, such as guided meditations and breathing apps. These sorts of self-directed behavioral adjustments not only free up teachers’ time and attention, but they also reinforce BDL’s goals of self-directed learning and behavioral self-efficacy.

Additionally, establishing clear routines and signaling systems can help manage student attention during debates. Teachers can use non-verbal cues or visual signals to indicate when students should be attentive, fostering an environment where everyone understands the expectations for participation. By creating a structured environment, students are more likely to remain focused and involved in discussions, minimizing distractions.

BDL can enhance practices related to student distractions and inattention by providing professional development opportunities focused on engagement strategies. Workshops could cover topics such as gamification, active learning techniques, and the use of technology to enhance participation. Furthermore, BDL could expand its resource library to include materials specifically addressing multi-modal iterations of the same assignment. Practice evidence gathering, for example, through multiple avenues—hands-on activities, independent research projects, and collaborative group work—can help teachers cater to diverse student needs and maintain interest. Similarly, a varied approach may also allow students to choose how they want to present their outputs—through speeches, videos, or creative presentations—that may increase their investment in the learning process.

**Experienced with DI / Resolved?**

Have an open discussion with students about the role and distractibility of phones and technology in the classroom.

***In Resolved***

A keystone of Resolved’s success is its innate system of accountability. For example, toward the end of one session, a student arrived at the group looking clearly sad and sullen. His head straight down toward the ground, this young man took a seat on the periphery of the circle to distance himself both physically and emotionally from his peers. This was immediately picked up on by another student, who jokingly said, “What, you don’t like us anymore?” The gloomy student could not help but to let a smile creep onto his face. The rest of the students laughed and encouraged the young man to grab a chair in the circle and to sit with the group. The young man did just that and participated in the remainder of the session with his head held high, thanks to his peers holding him accountable to the circle as well as their positive encouragement.

While accountability is a necessity in any educational setting, it thrives in those in which the community shares a common goal. Resolved advertises this goal from the very first session to the last. What makes this act so effective, however, is the way this goal differs from the other academic spaces these young men face elsewhere. Resolved is not asking its participants to prove anything to the instructors. They do not face scrutiny in the form of letters or grade point averages, but rather something far more personal: the expectations of those who believe in their personal strengths.

**For More Information:**

**Attendance Works:** Resources and consulting on chronic student absence and school avoidance.

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/>



## Closing Thoughts

“We have shared mostly positive experiences and observations so far, but one negative school observation stands out. At one location, the teacher that shares the classroom with the Resolved staff repeatedly noted how wonderful the program is for Black and brown students, touting the impact of the work and the skill of the facilitators. She also would recognize and acknowledge the difficulties of this kind of work. Ironically, at the same time, a different teacher once barged into that same room. That individual interrupted the session and demanded loudly that a young man come with her for testing. The class was immediately stunned, and no one said a word. As the student got up, some other boys began laughing. The teacher snapped back at the group for their laughter, accusing them of not taking their education seriously.

This teacher’s mindset is representative of larger issues. She did not appear to understand nor appreciate the value that Resolved brings for these young men. She also made an ill-advised assumption about the students, one based on impulse and less than two minutes of interaction. This moment resonated within the group—an authority figure and teacher essentially denying the value and worth of the program points towards either a potential unawareness of the program or a lack of concern for it. Assuming low expectations has damaged students of color for far too long and it is imperative to challenge these mind frames when it comes to serving our youth, especially within the space we are trying to convince them is safe.”

- Kyle Broadnax

“This section spoke at length about common concerns in the classroom. These issues, while frustrating and problematic, remain largely within the realm of the school’s control. Unfortunately, research has long documented that groups historically excluded from educational spaces and resources, like girls and youth of color, often face much larger and more systemic educational barriers (e.g., Grossman & Porche, 2014). During their academic journey, they may encounter discrimination (King & Pringle, 2018), microaggressions (Brown et al., 2016), and exclusion from useful opportunities (Rivas-Drake, 2022). Sadly, these experiences have been linked to long-term negative consequences, such as mental health challenges and lower career earnings later in life. Unfortunately, exposing young people to these realities can be a double-edged sword, as the more barriers young people perceive they have, often the worse their academic performance and engagement (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). However, exposure to these realities also help to prepare youth for the possible biases they will face in life, and that they aren’t alone in these experiences. In this way, Resolved is not just a useful educational experiment, it is necessary for preparing students to strive within a system not designed to allow them to do so.”

- Michael Medina

# **Conclusion**

## **A Case for Debate-Inspired Classrooms and Resolved**

This project began with two simple questions: How do debate-inspired practices in classrooms and Resolved promote positive youth experiences, and to what extent do teachers impact this process? Our answers were far more extensive and nuanced than we could have anticipated and outlined a complex web of intersecting strengths and benefits for students, educators, and stakeholders alike. In this report, we attempted to highlight the most prominent of our findings, but there were far more details and moments that BDL's programming facilitated that could not be adequately captured in words.

Instead, the transformative nature of BDL's methods exist in real-time. It lives in the student who feels confident enough to challenge a peer's argument; the instructor who shares a personal story of hardship to encourage others to feel confident in themselves; the young man in Resolved who convinces his friends to work late on their group project; the new teacher who admits their worries in a coaching session. The impact of BDL is not in a statistic on a page, it is in the applause of a crowd witnessing a group of young men shine. And it is desperately needed.

Education in the U.S. is in a dire state. Teaching is a challenging profession at any time, but the numbers of students entering education programs and early professionals choosing the field are both on the decline. The thanklessness of the work has become cliché but no less accurate. Learning to navigate the changing state of student engagement while simultaneously preparing them for unfamiliar economic circumstances is overwhelming work. Initiatives are demanded that no longer just promote higher GPAs or retention rates. What is needed are tools that provide young people skills that are translatable across a shifting and uncertain social landscape.

Thankfully, the Boston Debate League are experts in more than just debate, and their methodologies exist beyond the classroom. Throughout this project, we observed how DI-practices promoted skill mastery that students mentioned using not only in other classes, but also in their real-world relationships. We repeatedly witnessed Resolved sessions turn seemingly obscure and theoretical concepts into applied plans of action for determined young men. BDL prepared educators at every skill level to incorporate opportunities for critical practice, and reflection directly into their content lessons.

After dozens of hours of classroom and Resolved observations across multiple team members, schools, teachers, and content areas, it was impossible to fit all our thoughts into one report. We hope that our observations, suggestions, and accolades demonstrate our excitement for BDL's work and the strides we believe it is already making in improving students' lives.

### **Key Takeaways**

As we built upon the scope of this work, our two introductory questions evolved into three areas of study: BDL's impact on students' transformative skill-building, their collective experiences of community and connection in the classroom, and teacher practices that uplift and empower students. Considering each of these factors, our

evaluators found ample evidence in support of BDL's core claim: its practices, coaching, and methodology lead to more inclusive and productive educational spaces.

Students' skill-building was built into DI-practices at all levels. During pre-lesson coaching sessions, the content being discussed was framed such that exploring it would simultaneously practice a related task. As the content would unfold, so too would students scaffold an additional nuance onto the task, until ultimately both the theme of the class and the practice being used found a new level of mastery. During class time or Resolved sessions, instructors regularly used Socratic questioning and real-world examples to bring students' attention back to the methods being used. To successfully engage in the discussion, students would inevitably find themselves not only using the practices being taught but calling on their peers to do the same as invitations into the dialogue. After lessons, instructors would reflect - either with one another, DI coaches, or even study observers - on the effectiveness of the lesson and what skills may be brought in during a subsequent session to strengthen what students had just developed.

Throughout this process, students' experiences in the classroom were a constant consideration. Instructors structured lessons such that they acted primarily as mediators and facilitators, instead encouraging students to drive the room's progress through their own voice and leadership. When they embraced this responsibility, students would shine, their presence and personality inviting their peers into the discussion. When teachers encountered student hesitance or silence, they responded with thoughtfulness and inviting language. Never once throughout the observation period did a single educator use punitive or discouraging language to adjust a student's behavior. Instead, they inquired as to reasons for the observed hesitance, called upon other students to offer support, reframed their request, or spoke privately with students with encouragement and genuine concern. As a result, a seemingly rare occurrence became remarkably commonplace: students encouraged one another to participate and took on the role of facilitator themselves in shows of confidence, competence, and caring.

These outcomes were bolstered by teacher practices that empowered students. The goals of lessons and Resolved sessions were never to impart a particular belief system or derive a specific output from students. Rather, students were presented with deep, life-relevant, and multifaceted challenges alongside a set of critical tools and practices they could use to address them. The role of the teacher in this space was to ensure students remained grounded in the task, undeterred by difficulty, familiar with the instructions and goals, and connected to the larger questions being asked. BDL's methodology kept the lesson framed as one of incremental growth and communal problem-solving, rather than more traditional norms of rote memorization or individual exceptionalism at the expense of others.

## **Limitations and Lessons Learned**

No study is without its limitations, and much like the students we observed throughout this work, we, too, learned multiple lessons over the course of its completion. First, the inherent limitations of our study team meant that we did not have the capacity to observe as many classrooms and Resolved sessions as we would have hoped. Ideally, we would not have missed a single Resolve session, and our cadre of both team members and teachers would have been larger with additional observation opportunities. That said, we are confident that three dozen total in-school visits were

sufficient to articulate some of the major strengths and unique contributions of BDL's modern methodologies.

Regarding methods, however, we must note the limitations of our own. In some cases, the observation tool we designed for the purpose of this study was not able to fully capture the nuances of classroom interactions. Occasional conversations between students, for example, spanned topics and themes beyond the scope of our evaluation, and some students and teachers mentioned challenges in spaces we were not able to observe. It was inevitable that a qualitative observation schedule like the one used here would need to make certain compromises, and we designed our measure to be as comprehensive as was appropriate for this study. However, it is without a doubt that BDL's impact and influence go even beyond what was documented here.

## **Areas of Future Research and Consideration**

Through DI-frameworks and activities, caring instructors, relationship building, and a strong support system, students were able to walk away this school year with a set of transferable skills that will help them to be successful - not just in school, but also well beyond. We encourage future endeavors in this area to track just how far these transferences go. In what other areas do students find themselves drawing upon the skills and social efficacy they developed in DI-spaces? How have their experiences in these classrooms shaped their perspectives with other teachers, peers, and community members? How have their feelings about education, introspection, and civic action changed since their time here?

In an educational system that often silences young Black and brown students, the Resolved framework deserves additional attention. Having experienced this intentionally culturally-relevant space, are these students more aware of systemic educational challenges? Do they recognize instances of teacher bias, microaggressions, loss of agency, and targeted disciplinary action? Alternatively, do they see elements of Resolved spaces in their other classrooms and community spaces in ways that might improve and enlighten BDL practices? Perhaps most tellingly, do they feel changed by their time in Resolved and would they recommend participation to their peers?

For many young people, adults are the problem. Through adultism, ageism, implicit biases, and assumptions, we often belittle the strength and potential of young scholars. It is no wonder, then, that some students mistrust the educational system and the educators - well-intentioned as they may be - to support them. At the same time, teachers may also struggle to feel as though they are offering a meaningful impact on students' lives. Disengagement, incremental progress, and a lack of large-scale resources might easily deprive teachers of much-needed feelings of accomplishment and worth. By facilitating dialogues with teachers, students, and perhaps groups of both, BDL may be able to garner insights into the specific behaviors and mentalities that promote a safe, productive classroom.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: BU Classroom Observation Measure

### Read before conducting observations:

The following instructions and measures are for use in the Debate-Inspired Classroom and Resolved Evaluation Project. They are not meant for teacher- or student-evaluation purposes. Rather, they are intended to aid observers in recording students' experiences with DI practices and the ways in which DI-inspired classrooms support students' skill-building, community contact, and teacher practices. Observational findings will subsequently be used to improve DI-practices and coaching.

Included in this measure are the following:

**Observational guidelines** – This section includes a list of tasks for observers to complete prior to attending a class session, during the class session, and after their observation is complete. Consider these rules of thumb to follow to ensure observations are simultaneously productive and minimally disruptive to the teacher and learners. Keep in mind, individual observations may vary and observers should use their discretion and best judgment when navigating classrooms and teacher needs.

**An in-class protocol** – These pages list descriptive information about the classroom sessions, to be completed while in the classroom. Items include, but are not limited to, questions concerning the classroom structure, lesson topic, student activities, and the location of the observer. In addition, in 5-minute intervals, observers will summarize the behaviors of the students and teachers. This log is meant to provide a detailed accounting of the class session, as well as be used as a reference when completing the after-class protocols.

**After-class protocols** – This section includes open-ended questions about an observation session, to be completed after the session is complete. These items are intended to provide the observer with the opportunity to give nuanced, example-based information about the class that may either be too detailed to complete in class or required subsequent reflection on the part of the observer. Observers should give as much information as possible to complete the questions and are encouraged to provide additional details if the questions posed are inadequate.

## **Observational Guidelines**

### **To be completed prior to the observation**

Do your best to adhere to these guidelines as much as reasonably possible, with the understanding that classroom dynamics and circumstances may necessitate flexibility.

#### *Pre-Observation Tasks*

1. Arrive to class 10 minutes early to check in with the teacher and ensure you have all classroom materials and handouts relevant to the lesson.
2. Position yourself in the classroom in an area that is both as unobtrusive as possible and where you can observe the entire lesson.

#### *Observation Tasks*

1. Make sure you continue to observe for the entire lesson (do not leave the classroom during the lesson).
2. Follow and complete the in-class portion of the observation protocol, remaining as unobtrusive as possible.

#### *Post-Observation Tasks*

1. Thank the teacher for allowing you to observe their class (both in-class and after class via email) and return any materials they require.
2. Complete the after-class portion of the observation protocol.



## In-Class Protocol

### To be completed during the observation

*Descriptive information:* Please record the following information immediately prior to and during the class period. Check with the instructor for any items you are unsure of after the class period.

Date:	School:
Observer(s):	Class start & end times:
Instructor:	Subject and grade level:
Class session topic:	# of students:
Class session summary:	DI-related activities (if applicable):

1. Approximately how much time (in mins) did the class spend in:
  1. Start-of-class Introductions:
  2. Content Instructional Time:
  3. Behavioral Instructional Time:
  4. Groups:
  5. Pairs:
  6. Whole Class Discussion:
  7. Whole Class Activity:
  8. End-of-class wrap-up:
  
2. If the lesson involved group or pair work, record the total number of groups/pairs and the number of groups/pairs you were able to directly observe:
  
3. Describe your physical location(s) during the observation, including how much time you spent in each location:

*Class timeline:* In 5-minute intervals throughout class session, summarize the approximate behavior of the instructor and students. The abbreviations below provide a non-exhaustive shorthand for common classroom behaviors. Please provide a brief but detailed written description of each summary alongside the relevant abbreviations (e.g.,

“10:15-10:20 am, FUp/SQ, Instructor responded to student question requesting clarification on the opening activity.”). Emphasis should be placed on instructor practices that appear to invoke or involve DI-related practices, as well as student engagement with and responses to these practices.

Instructor is doing:

- Lec Lecturing (presenting content, deriving results, presenting a problem solution, etc.)
- RtW Real-time writing on board, projector, etc.
- FUp Follow-up/feedback on question or activity to entire class
- PQ Posing question to students (non-rhetorical)
- AnQ Listening to and answering student questions with entire class listening
- MG Moving through class guiding ongoing student work during active learning task
- 1o1 One-on-one discussion with one or a few individuals
- D/V Showing or conducting a demo, experiment, simulation, video, or animation
- Adm Administration (assign homework, return tests, etc.)
- W Waiting (instructor occupied in non-instructional activities)
- O Other - Please specify

Students are doing:

- L Listening to instructor/taking notes, etc.
- Ind Individual thinking/problem solving (i.e., when an instructor explicitly asks students to think about a question/problem on their own)
- WG Working in groups
- OG Other assigned group activity, such as responding to instructor question
- AnQ Student answering a question posed by the instructor with rest of class listening
- SQ Student asks question
- WC Engaged in whole class discussion
- Prd Making a prediction about the outcome of demo, experiment, or problem
- SP Presentation by students
- TQ Test or quiz
- W Waiting (instructor occupied in non-instructional activities)
- O Other - Please specify

*Timeline Log Space:*

## After-Class Protocol

### To be completed immediately after the observation

Complete the following questions following your class observation. This process should be completed as soon as possible, and it may be useful to review the accompanying In-Class responses while doing so. Not every question may be applicable for your observation; if an item is non-applicable, please specify why.

### Argumentation and Perspective-Taking

1. In what ways did students engage or not in **building arguments** (e.g., creating claims; finding relevant evidence; linking evidence to claims)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
2. In what ways did students engage or not in **evaluating arguments** (e.g., critiquing claims or evidence; judging the logic of claims or evidence; gauging the relevance of claims or evidence)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
3. In what ways did students **respond or not to the arguments of others** (e.g., ask relevant questions; attempt to clarify unclear points; address counter arguments)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
4. Can you detail what parts of these processes worked exceptionally well during the lesson?
5. Can you detail what areas for improvement in these processes may exist and your suggestions thereof?
6. Please provide any final notes on this area not previously covered in other questions.

## Community and Communication

1. In what ways did the classroom demonstrate or not **trust and security** (e.g., a sense of belonging, safety, and/or equity)? What was the role of the instructor and/or students in this process?
2. In what ways did the classroom incorporate or not **individual's lived experiences and identities** (e.g., demonstrating prior knowledge; making real-world connections; personalizing questions or answers)? What was the role of the instructor and/or students in this process?
3. In what ways did the classroom build or not a **sense of community** (e.g., using pair and group work; communicating openly across and between teacher and students; collaborating on work or ideas)? What was the role of the instructor and/or students in this process?
4. Can you detail what parts of these processes worked exceptionally well during the lesson?
5. Can you detail what areas for improvement in these processes may exist and your suggestions thereof?
6. Please provide any final notes on this area not previously covered in other questions.

## **Agency and Leadership**

1. In what ways did students demonstrate or not their **agency and independence** (e.g., taking on a leadership role; demonstrating initiative; proposing new ideas or activities)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
  
2. In what ways did the classroom facilitate or not **opportunities for student participation** (e.g., multiple opportunities for involvement; varied modalities of involvement available; seeking out diverse student participation)? What was the role of the instructor and/or students in this process?
  
3. In what ways did the classroom encourage or not **spaces for student voice** (e.g., students discoursing with each other; opportunities for students to take center stage; drawing students' attention to one of their peers)? What was the role of the instructor and/or students in this process?
  
4. Can you detail what parts of these processes worked exceptionally well during the lesson?
  
5. Can you detail what areas for improvement in these processes may exist and your suggestions thereof?
  
6. Please provide any final notes on this area not previously covered in other questions.

## Efficacy and Growth

1. In what ways did students demonstrate or not their **engagement** (e.g., visible interest or excitement; a sense of ownership in the material; on-task and focused behavior)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
2. In what ways did students appear or not **empowered** in the classroom (e.g., confidence in their responses; a sense of efficacy and capability; providing input and answering questions)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
3. In what ways did students demonstrate or not a **growth mindset** during the lesson (e.g., curiosity about the material; seeking opportunities for deeper involvement; responding positively to corrections or clarifications)? What was the role of the instructor and/or other students in this process?
4. Can you detail what parts of these processes worked exceptionally well during the lesson?
5. Can you detail what areas for improvement in these processes may exist and your suggestions thereof?
6. Please provide any final notes on this area not previously covered in other questions.

## Teacher Practices and Resources

In what ways did the teacher effectively or ineffectively use their **resources and space** (e.g., use of technology, handouts, props, and reading materials; use of the classroom space and set-up)?

In what ways did the teacher effectively or ineffectively **communicate to students** (e.g., providing detailed instructions; offering helpful answers and feedback; allowing addressing classroom expectations and guidelines)?

In what ways did the teacher effectively or ineffectively encourage the production of **examples of student learning** (e.g., producing and collecting handouts; requesting student presentations; encouraging student participation and responses)?

Can you detail what parts of these processes worked exceptionally well during the lesson?

Can you detail what areas for improvement in these processes may exist and your suggestions thereof?

Please provide any final notes on this area not previously covered in other questions.

## Final Thoughts on Observation

Given the goals and practices of Boston Debate League, please provide your **overall impression of and comments on the observation**. This may include topics not covered by previous questions, additional clarifications, or suggestions of improvements or particularly effective practices.

## **Appendix B: Relevant Terms and Frameworks**

### **Academic Socialization**

Academic socialization refers to the messages adults convey to youth about schoolwork and its significance for their future (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Schools are based on this premise; teachers take the role of trusted adults who can inform these young people of what they need to know in safe and effective ways. Of course, this socialization can come from other sources, such as parents, coaches, or in this case, Resolved facilitators and educational programs (Gebauer et al., 2020).

Students typically receive messages emphasizing the importance of trying in school and avoiding misbehavior or poor performance (Ross, 2017). Adults can share these messages in many forms, including promoting success in task performance, providing positive role models, offering praise and encouragement, setting high but realistic expectations, and teaching students how to tackle challenges (Schunk & Meece, 2006). We are still learning what kinds of messaging is most effective at supporting students, particularly those of marginalized backgrounds and those who may be otherwise struggling in schools.

### **Academic Utility**

Interest in school does not always come naturally, and not all students experience it to the same degree. Part of this is tied to the extent to which young people believe obtaining an education is worthwhile to them in the long term. In educational research, we often discuss the concept of educational utility—students' beliefs about the significance, value, and utility of education and its usefulness to their future. Studies have found this belief to play a significant role in their motivation and success (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), regardless of how much success a student is achieving in school. The utility value that adolescents place on an educational task, such as taking a math class, is often connected to their personal goals (i.e., graduating from high school) and can motivate them to do well academically (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). By focusing on a student's beliefs about the value of education, rather than the outcome of a particular assignment, research has found that students persist longer, perform better, and are more likely to make long term academic goals (Eccles et al., 2004; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

### **Adolescence**

Adolescence is a unique developmental stage spanning the second decade of life. It is marked by transformative changes in personal and social identities. Throughout middle and late adolescence, youth undergo multiple phases of exploration as they form and commit to a cohesive identity (Meeus et al., 2010). During this time, youth also place an increased emphasis on group membership, interpersonal relationships, and generally fitting in with their peers (Brown & Larson, 2009). As such, schools serve as important developmental contexts where safe, long-term exploration of both group belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017) and identity (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) may be explored. In developmental and educational research, it is also considered a key time for emerging academic perspectives, beliefs, and experiences. These self-perceptions and examinations have powerful implications for long-term educational and career-related



outcomes (Barber et al., 2001), so the types of academic experiences and messaging they receive during this time are critical.

### **Classroom and School Climate**

The ability for schools to foster positive attitudes and respect for diverse students and their needs plays a central role in student success (Green et al., 1988). Positive school climate has been linked to numerous positive adjustment indicators. These include decreased problem behaviors (e.g., bullying, substance use, excessive absenteeism), improved attitudes and relationships with teachers and peers, greater academic engagement and achievement, and improved psychological adjustment (Thapa et al., 2013). A positive school climate, however, does not necessitate a positive classroom climate. Instead, the different spaces students navigate may offer significantly different levels of safety, intrigue, support, or relevance for their lives and futures. Teachers and peers are the primary determinants of a student's classroom experience, so it is useful for educational programming like DI-classrooms and Resolved to consider the impact of both.

### **Critical Consciousness**

One of the strengths of a hands-on, critically minded education system is the hope to promote youth who wish to contribute to the world. Critical consciousness refers to that drive to make change, and it comes in many different forms. Some young people learn to critically reflect on what kinds of changes their school, community, or population may need; others may take critical action through protests, petitions, or demonstrations; others still may pursue higher education or other positions of influence to make systemic change. Across these forms, critical consciousness has been linked to students across ethnic groups and ages experiencing positive academic achievement (e.g., Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Pérez-Gualdrón & Helms, 2017; Seider et al., 2020; Sleeter, 2011). The civic consciousness promoted through DI-practices related directly to these sorts of critical reflection and action. Adolescents are energized change-makers; the Boston Debate League can be the avenue through which such change occurs.

### **Ethnic, Racial, and Cultural Identity**

A central component of personal identity development, particularly among youth of color or those navigating diverse spaces, is ethnic identity. The concept refers to the beliefs, values, and behaviors one relates to their cultural group memberships, and has been positively linked to academic (e.g., achievement, efficacy, motivation), psychological (e.g., depression, self-confidence), and interpersonal (e.g., peer and teacher social efficacy, cross-group friendships) experiences and outcomes (Rivas-Drake, Seaton et al., 2014). Additionally, positive cultural identity beliefs often translate to positive mental health outcomes, such as positive self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms and risk-taking behaviors, and improved social functioning (Rivas-Drake, Syed et al., 2014). It is helpful to keep in mind that students are navigating complex social worlds, particularly around areas of identity and belonging. This introduces nuances that may be difficult to see on the outside, or challenging for students to

articulate, but that may still impact how effective educational practices and culturally-relevant spaces are for students of diverse backgrounds.

### **Teacher Influence**

Schools are influential social and developmental contexts for youth, particularly in terms of shaping their sense of security and well-being. Teacher influence plays a critical role in this process, as educators not only impart academic knowledge but also serve as mentors and role models (Davis, 2003). When teachers demonstrate care, respect, and high expectations, they help students develop confidence and resilience, which are essential for navigating challenges both inside and outside the classroom (Hallinan, 2008). Additionally, teachers who integrate socioemotional learning into their practices contribute to a holistic educational experience, equipping students with the skills needed for effective communication and collaboration in and out of schools (Zaff, Donlan, Jones, & Lin, 2015). Recognizing the impact of teacher influence is vital for school administrators aiming to create a nurturing and empowering school culture that promotes student success.

### **School Belonging**

Students' sense of belonging at school is integral to their educational experiences (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). These feelings of attachment and fit have numerous academic, psychological, and socioemotional benefits for youth (Slaten et al., 2016), and schools typically work fervently to maximize them for their student body. This is intuitive, as the link between feelings of school belonging and positive psychological adjustment in adolescence is well documented (Shochet et al., 2006; 2007). What is less well known, however, are the mechanisms by which teachers may best encourage these feelings in students of diverse backgrounds. In this regard, programs like DI-Classrooms and Resolved, which intentionally place students' interests at the forefront of their planning, are at the cutting edge of existing educational research.

## Appendix C: References

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