



## A practical path for continuous improvement

BY MICHELLE PLEDGER AND MARI JONES

**C**ontinuous improvement is at the heart of all teaching and learning. Just as we strive to nurture our students' growth and improvement, educators should be continually growing and improving. When we designed the Deeper Learning Hub Fellowship, an initiative to build teachers' capacity in social and emotional learning and culturally responsive-

sustaining pedagogy, we wanted to encourage teachers to engage in intentional and reflective improvement and accountability over time.

However, we didn't want the improvement process to be too complex to implement. For a classroom teacher navigating a plethora of competing commitments, the cognitive lift of learning and integrating continuous improvement tools can feel

overwhelming — especially since the start of the pandemic. We launched the year-long fellowship in August 2020, just five months after the pandemic closed K-12 schools. Our fellows were navigating unprecedented challenges of remote teaching, chronic absenteeism, student disengagement, and constantly shifting policy mandates.

In this context, we knew the need to address social and emotional

learning and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy was urgent. These aspects of teaching are necessary for deeper learning, which encompasses “higher-order thinking skills, learning dispositions, and collaboration skills needed for students to succeed in 21st-century work and civic life” (Deeper Learning Hub, n.d.).

How could we get teachers who were immersed in the challenges of pandemic teaching to engage deeply in continuous improvement? To make the improvement process straightforward and easy for teachers to connect to their urgent needs, we designed a professional learning model grounded in cycles of inquiry and simple processes for reflecting and iterating on practice.

This model incorporates concrete resources with ongoing opportunities for reflection and discussion to support educators as they try out new practices for integrating social and emotional learning and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms. At the center of this approach is a focus on healthy team dynamics, such as establishing relational trust, psychological safety, and shared accountability.

By simplifying the tools of continuous improvement processes and focusing on relationships, we found that it’s possible to do improvement cycles without making the process sound clinical or jargon-y. We learned to do continuous improvement in a way that helps educators develop the dispositions and routines necessary for shifting mindsets and practices and making systemic transformation.

## THE FOCUS OF OUR WORK

The aim of the Deeper Learning

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Hub Fellowship was to increase K-12 teachers’ self-efficacy and collective efficacy in social and emotional learning and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy — essential aspects of high-quality teaching that are not always given sufficient attention. Social and emotional learning encompasses the processes through which children and adults develop awareness and management of emotions, social interactions, executive functioning skills, and well-being, all of which affect academic learning (Payton et al., 2000).

Culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy refers to the ways teachers cultivate an environment that is responsive to the diverse and dynamic young people in the classroom and work to sustain the cultural capital and brilliance that students already possess. Unlike some scholars and practitioners who use either the term culturally responsive teaching or culturally sustaining pedagogy, we combine the terms to reflect the importance of both cultivating responsive practices that are relevant to and representative of students and honoring students’ cultures and assets in sustaining ways that nurture identity.

Our conception of culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy builds on the work of seminal scholars who contend that culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy involves learning about and leveraging the lived experiences of young people by supporting them to nurture cultural competence, navigate critical consciousness, and nourish cognitive capacity development (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Gay, 2000; Paris & Alim, 2017; Pledger, 2022).

Social and emotional learning and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy are more than a curriculum — they are ways of being. Because of this, social and emotional learning and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy involve a mindset shift, and the first step to achieving this is to shift behaviors. Continuous improvement practices provide opportunities to couple behavior change with data that demonstrates the benefits of the change, and this can lead to the mindset shift.

## DEEPER LEARNING HUB FELLOWSHIP

We chose to work with two schools — one elementary and one secondary — with culturally diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. They each addressed a problem of practice relevant to their context using continuous improvement approaches. The elementary school, which focused on social and emotional learning, serves 94% students of color who are all experiencing homelessness. The high school, which focused on culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy, serves 98% students of color, with 82% of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch.

## EXAMPLES OF TRY-COLLECT-REFLECT CYCLES

Below are an elementary teacher's strategies and reflections from a social and emotional learning try-collect-reflect inquiry cycle. During this cycle, the teacher tested the strategy of using explicit instruction to promote language development and emotional awareness to help students better express their emotions.

TRY	COLLECT	REFLECT
<b>What are you going to try?</b>	<b>What data will you collect? By when?</b>	<b>What did you learn?</b>
<p>Bitmoji classroom word wall with emotion words, and a lesson on emotions.</p> <p>Teaching students to name their emotions and understand what they are feeling.</p> <p>Growth mindset lesson series on perseverance, with a specific focus on disappointment. Build on emotions list developed through discussions in our growth mindset curriculum.</p>	<p>Student responses in writing and out loud.</p> <p>Student participation (how well students are able to make personal connections and identify emotions).</p>	<p>More students using specific language to describe feelings (disappointed versus sad).</p> <p>More students willing to participate and share their experiences than before and include their feelings.</p> <p>Lots of student participation, students made personal connections and identified feelings.</p>

Below are strategies and reflections from a high school teacher's inquiry cycle about culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy. During this cycle, the teacher worked on one aspect of being a culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy educator: intentionally providing time for students to connect as humans at the beginning of class before diving into math content.

TRY	COLLECT	REFLECT
<b>What are you going to try?</b>	<b>What data will you collect? By when?</b>	<b>What did you learn?</b>
<p>Waterfall check-in.</p> <p>Good human check-ins/openers.</p> <p>Mathematician of the day.</p>	<p>Collect students' check-in responses in the chat or unmute students for human check-in opportunities at the beginning of class.</p>	<p>Making conscious effort to use time at the beginning of class to ignite the lesson or do a human check-in really centers and grounds the students in the learning for the day.</p> <p>It's important to be OK with more or less participation depending on the question and topic.</p>

A team of classroom and special education teachers from each school participated in two full-day sessions, two classroom observations, monthly one-on-one coaching, and monthly team meetings where professional learning centered around try-collect-reflect cycles.

These cycles are adapted from the plan-do-study-act cycles of more formal improvement science approaches. They provide a simple, straightforward method for teachers to test change ideas, begin to refine them, and expand their capacity to notice what works for students. We chose to

use the terminology try, collect, and reflect because these words fit into the existing schema of teachers: Teachers are always trying something, collecting data, and reflecting.

The monthly team meeting structure was intentionally designed to provide both care and challenge for

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# IDEAS

each teacher as they became immersed in social and emotional learning or culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy. First, each meeting began with a check-in that gave each teacher the opportunity to share on a personal level before jumping into pedagogy. Team members responded to prompts such, “What does it feel like to be you lately?” or “How have you been practicing self-care this week?”

Second, we engaged in celebrations of learning, during which each teacher shared how they implemented a practice or strategy to improve social and emotional learning or culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy and what they learned during their try-collect-reflect cycle. This layer of loving accountability served as an internal and external motivator for each educator to consistently engage in the work.

Third, we engaged in resource exploration, a segment where we brought a resource related to social and emotional learning or culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy for the team to explore or discuss. The discussion is as important as the resource itself because meaning-making is essential to mindset and behavior change.

Lastly, resource exploration helped generate change ideas that each teacher used to plan their next try-collect-reflect cycle and identified what they wanted to try and what data they would collect (see tables on p. 58).

## CONNECTION AND TRUST

A key part of this improvement process is emotional connection and psychological safety. To employ loving accountability, each individual needs to feel emotionally connected and psychologically safe. We strive to create conditions where people feel a sense of belonging and purpose so they can feel safe to be vulnerable and also push on each other’s practice.

We began to do this during our fellowship launch by focusing on community building to establish

relational trust. We continued this focus on community through our monthly meetings. In addition, one-on-one coaching calls allowed us as coaches to understand the teacher and student experience and develop trusting relationships with our teams.

The community element of the fellowship gave the fellows a space to connect, share, and grapple with other educators hoping to grow in their practice. As psychological safety increased, the fellows reported that the monthly team meetings gave them an opportunity to share and learn from their colleagues in ways that pushed their practice.

One teacher said, “The monthly team meetings supported my growth because I was able to see how other content areas were able to apply the different levels of culturally responsive pedagogy. It was also a safe place to be vulnerable and share my struggles. The best part about the team meetings was the positivity that Michelle brought to the meeting. I felt valued and appreciated as I grew my culturally responsive muscle.”

The focus on supportive, collaborative try-collect-reflect cycles fostered a sense of belonging where team members were able to support one another as they navigated the implementation of culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy and social and emotional learning. At the end of the yearlong fellowship, one veteran teacher was surprised by a significant shift in her teaching after 22 years in the profession, saying, “I had always considered SEL important, but now I see it as an integral part of my teaching. It is no longer a thing I teach; it is how I teach.”

She went from thinking about social and emotional learning as a curriculum to seeing how it is woven throughout her practice. “Whether it be the way we start our mornings, to identifying what we see in characters, to how we interact with one another in the classroom, it is a part of everything,” she said.

## IMPROVEMENT CAN BE SIMPLE

In this fellowship, teachers found value in cycles of improvement, even though we never used those explicit terms. The beauty of continuous improvement is that it can be simple. In this professional learning model, teachers tested their theories about how they might improve student experiences, collected data and observations, reflected on the impact on their students, and made decisions about how to inform their next moves as part of their ongoing work in the classroom, not as an additional responsibility. In practical, everyday ways, they engaged in continuous improvement.

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