

Learnings from Culturally Sustaining Classroom Across the Globe

The Global Learning Lab hosts online courses where educators and teacher developers learn from strong classrooms around the world and from each other. We call these courses global classroom learning loops. Recently, over 120 participants from four continents participated in a learning loop about culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP).

CSP is an approach to teaching that aims to integrate and foster - to sustain - students' cultural backgrounds in schools (Django Paris, 2012). Participants of the learning loop explored literature on CSP and a range of classroom videos that are sustaining students' cultural backgrounds. Here were just a few of their collectively generated observations - and the videos that prompted these insights - about what distinguishes successful classrooms that embrace students' culture as a core part of the classroom experience. You'll notice that many of these items are simply markers of good teaching.

Students' experiences and cultural backgrounds are valued

[Jesus Insilada](#) is a 2018 Varkey Teacher Prize finalist. He is a teacher and school leader on the Panay Island in the Philippines. Notice how he integrates aspects of students' culture and tradition to teach mathematical concepts which results in dramatic increases in school attendance. These efforts are successful because his students have a frame of reference for what they are learning. He is helping them learn by building on prior knowledge, which is just good teaching. It's worth noting that he doesn't fall into the trap of using culture superficially in his classrooms, which is a common pitfall of teachers new to culturally sustaining pedagogy and practice.

[Kia Aroha](#) school in New Zealand is designed for Māori and Pasifika students and families. It is intentionally designed not to be a white, mainstream school. Everything from the mission statement to the physical space to the curriculum are designed to recognize and affirm the identity of students. Their experiences and knowledge are valued and drawn upon to prompt new learning. Māori history and culture are taught. Students also learn to critically examine and successfully navigate mainstream, white society in New Zealand as part of their curriculum.

Collective action

Notice how [Maggie MacDonnell](#), the 2017 Varkey Global Teacher Prize winner, partners with students, families, and community members to support students' holistic growth and well-being. In this remote community in northern Canada, everyone has a role in supporting students' growth, mental health, economic future, and artistic and self-expression.

Watch how [Pooja Chopra](#) (Teach For India) cultivates deep bonds with her students' mothers. She sees their potential, supports them to improve their own lives, and works collaboratively to help them be strong, proud advocates for their children.

Teachers are aware of their own cultural frames of reference and critically analyze the problems impacting their students' lives

This insight was affirmed by Dr. Zaretta Hammond's work featured in [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#). Teachers in culturally sustaining classrooms consider their own identities and cultural frames of reference, especially if they are from the majority or dominant cultures in their countries. Additionally, teachers also critically examine the root cause of the problems students & their communities face. For example, we see teachers identify “the problem” as “structural oppression” or “a history of colonization & cultural genocide” versus gaps in reading and math outcomes. They know one is a symptom and the others are root causes. And if they don't know the root cause based on their own experiences, they proactively seek out that information from texts and by listening to those who experience the problem firsthand. [Esther Rakete](#) of Teach First-New Zealand says it best [here](#) and [here](#).

Teachers take actions to cultivate student development and learning

“Rigor” is a pillar of culturally sustaining pedagogy. As a result, participants in the courses observed strong teacher actions. For example, many noted that teachers provided clear instruction and cultivated high-quality, inclusive learning environments for all their students. For example, teachers used culturally relevant rituals (such as meditation or chants), which they identified with students and families (not for them) to begin and/or end their days or lessons. Teachers also designed objective-driven lesson plans, and used a variety of activities that matched the learning objectives. The learning activities often reflected how their students tended to process and apply new knowledge, such as through small group discussions, journaling, or real-world project-based learning. Those learning activities often varied and provided choice within them, leading to increased student autonomy. Participants observed teachers who provided clear explanations of new content, and asked students open-ended questions to help build their critical thinking skills, as we see Pooja in Delhi do [here](#). Often, those questions took into account students' existing knowledge, and built on it. Cultural sustaining practitioners, it turns out, are just good teachers.

Learners develop self-love

Participants in the learning loops considered how teachers sometimes perpetuate cycles of students themselves and their communities – and how to disrupt those cycles. Participants noticed that across all classrooms observed, students were developing a deep love of self and community. Watch [Wisdom Amouzou](#) (Teach For America) and his students in Denver, Colorado in the US develop self-love and love of their community together – and the power, voice, and confidence students achieve as a result.