

Moving Beyond the False Dichotomy Between Academic Mastery and Social-Emotional Development

A Summary of Insights Coming out of a Collective Inquiry at The Better Future Forum in Singapore (May 2026)

To explore and challenge entrenched resistance to holistic student development, participants at the Better Future Forum 2026 “virtually visited” several powerful classrooms, schools, and programs that are successfully integrating academic mastery and social-emotional learning (SEL) with students. Provoked by those inspiring examples, we explored what distinguishes holistic learning environments, and we considered how to challenge and change perspectives around us that are inhibiting the required shift toward education systems that develop students holistically so they can shape a better future for themselves, their communities, and our world.

Defining “The False Dichotomy”

In our quest to ensure all children develop holistically so they can shape a better future, we are encountering a problematic false dichotomy that shows up in two ways across the global education landscape: Some influential people and institutions assume that broadening student outcomes beyond academics necessarily devalues or dilutes students’ core academic mastery. Others assume robust social emotional learning is enough for student success, even in the absence of rigorous academic mastery. And often, academic and beyond-academic outcomes are assumed to be in tension with each other instead of reinforcing each other.

What Happened During This Learning Experience



Dr. Michelle Johansson, a Tongan educator, academic, theatre-maker, mother, grandmother, and Kaiwhakahaere at Māia Centre for Social Justice and Education, served as our facilitator. Dr. Johansson opened the session by asking participants to reflect on their own relationship with the “dichotomy” between social-emotional learning and academic mastery. Most people in the room described their education systems as leaning heavily toward academic mastery, often at the expense of social-emotional learning.

At the same time, most

people in the room believed education systems can and should balance and integrate those two paradigms.

Reflecting her own experience navigating a colonially imposed education model that devalued her own cultural identity and values, Dr. Johansson shared, as one example of holistic education, an Indigenous Excellence

Indigenous Excellence Framework

All children will be equipped to determine their own futures.



All children will be aware of and have access to a wide range of opportunities ... they will be able to dream and plan beyond their current circumstances.



All children will be aware of their academic standing and will have the tools they need to improve it.

Education will enhance the holistic well-being of all children.



Education will value, sustain and strengthen the cultural grounding of all children.

All children will experience belonging, and have a sense of their own roles and responsibilities in their community

Framework reflecting the marriage of those two paradigms. This model has emerged from her engagement with a number of indigenous educators from around the world and will be the focus of an upcoming Global Institute learning experience on “Reshaping Education through Indigenous Ways of Learning and Teaching” offered in August and September 2026.

With Dr. Johansson’s guidance, participants were provoked by four visionary women whose work is challenging the false dichotomy between academy mastery and social-emotional development:

Richa Gupta



Frustrated by the lack of attention to students’ social and emotional health as a public school teacher with Teach For India, Richa founded an organisation, Labhya, that works to weave SEL into public schools. Labhya’s program now reaches 2.5 million children and is on track to reach 10 million in the coming years. Labhya has just completed the world’s largest randomized control trial (70,000 students!) looking at the effect of children’s wellbeing on critical thinking and academic learning.

Spoiler alert: *the effect of wellbeing on critical thinking and academic learning is massive. (See below.)*

Dr. Jasmyn Wright



A 2026 Global Teacher Prize finalist (and Teach For America 2010 corps member), Jasmyn is in her 16th year in the classroom, empowering students with agency, resilience, and mastery. Inspired by her own challenges navigating trauma—and boosted by a video of her classroom that went viral and was turned into an inspiring ad for Gap—Jasmyn’s “I’m Gonna Push Through!” program of daily self-affirmations is now fueling the resilience and perseverance of children (and adults) all around the world.

Damilola Okonkwo



As a young immigrant in the UK, Damilola was swept into a “relentless focus on passing exams to get to the ‘next level,’” often at the expense of her own passion and wellbeing. After a decade in finance, she moved back to Nigeria and founded [Key Academy](#), an innovative school focused on growing voracious self-directed learners. Teachers serve as co-learners and bring in other subject matter experts, mentors, and industry leaders. The school has been named a Top 10 global finalist for the 2025 World’s Best School Prize for Innovation.

Alina Amir



A former analyst with Accenture, Alina taught history with Teach For Malaysia before co-founding [Arus Academy](#). Her school is a community-rooted learning space in the red light district of Kuala Lumpur, serving stateless children excluded from formal schooling. Operating from repurposed spaces and grounded in dignity, joy, and family partnership, the school and its partner programs support holistic education, integrating project-based, real-world learning. Arus Academy students are acing difficult government exams (that they are not officially supposed to take).

Key Insights About What It Takes To Challenge The False Dichotomy

After hearing from these four leaders, Dr. Johansson asked participants to reflect on what patterns we saw in these holistic learning environments. What should we—and everyone—learn from them?

Below, we have synthesized four key themes (from those generative discussions) that we should all spread across the education landscape to accelerate the shift toward education systems that develop students holistically so they can shape a better future:

- (1) **Students must develop both rigorous academic mastery AND social-emotional capacities if they are going to shape a better future for themselves, their communities, and our planet.** Education systems built to provide individual students the knowledge and skills necessary to compete to escape society's problems will only perpetuate rising seas, growing intolerance, authoritarianism, and conflict. The purpose of education must instead be to unleash students' collaborative, creative, critical thinking to see and solve problems together, which requires integrated academic mastery and social-emotional capacities, including wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, and agency.
- (2) **It works! Rigorous academic mastery accelerates when integrated with students' wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, and agency.** While most research on effective teaching over the last several decades has focused exclusively on narrowly defined academic outcomes, emerging research is showing the profound influence of social emotional learning ON student mastery. We should celebrate Richa's massive study and others like it to challenge the false dichotomy.

In fact, a number of participants emphasized that meaningful academic and social-emotional learning depend on each other. Attaining truly rigorous academic mastery depends on students' wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, and agency. And, wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, and agency are best developed through pursuing rigorous academic mastery. We realise the full potential of neither side of the false dichotomy without the other. As one participant suggested, we should think of academic mastery and social-emotional learning as the yin and yang of holistic education.

Participants emphasized that we do, however, need better holistic measurement tools and systems. Assessments for skills and mindsets beyond academics are still not accessible enough. We should all push for AI to help us “see” students' holistic development.

- (3) **Moving beyond the false dichotomy will require systemic change to rehumanise deeply dehumanising education systems.** A number of participants underscored the connection between the science of learning and development and the power of integrating academic and social-emotional learning. As we learn more about how the human brain works and grows, it is more clear than ever that human beings are both rational and emotional. To help us realise our potential, education needs reflect that full profile of being human.

Labhya RCT findings

15 Months

of additional Math learning gains in children.
(+0.25 SD) LAYS

12 Months

of additional Literacy gains in children.
(+0.22 SD)* LAYS

21%

Decrease in Clinical Anxiety in children, equivalent to 15 weeks of talk therapy (-0.3 SD)*

2.25 IQ point

Increase in children through critical thinking (+0.15 SD)



Impact was found strongest in girls and children coming from rural settings

Some participants called out ways that the widespread resistance to integrating academic and beyond-academic student outcomes reflects deep-seeded dynamics of power and privilege that must be interrogated:

- The model of education we have inherited was originally meant exclusively for boys, in a world in which only boys were expected to enter a workforce that demanded certain knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, social-emotional capacities were viewed as lesser, feminine qualities that were unnecessary in schools for boys.
- Ways of teaching and learning in many indigenous cultures were more holistic before a century of imperialism and colonisation scrubbed them away, replacing them with the narrowly focused “factory” model that dominates the education landscape.

Participants in this Better Future Forum session suggested that calling out those historical injustices and biases should be one way we challenge the false dichotomy.

- (4) **Teaching and learning that integrates academic mastery and social-emotional learning would need to be significantly different from—while more enjoyable and fulfilling than—the dominant classroom paradigm.** The four case studies suggest that classrooms and schools successfully integrating holistic student outcomes include more intentional space for reflection and wellness, as well as more student voice, leadership, and peer-to-peer learning. Teachers tend to view themselves as co-learners, and ensure more parent and community involvement. These learning environments also consistently reflect more relevance between what students are learning and students’ lived experiences and realities.

(To further explore what distinguishes transformational classrooms that are developing students holistically, check out [Teaching As Collective Leadership](#))

Participants noted that many teacher development programs focus primarily on technical skills and content pedagogy, with relatively little emphasis on teachers’ wellbeing, connectedness, agency, and awareness. Most teacher development programs are not preparing new teachers to integrate academic mastery and social-emotional learning. Some participants noted that we would have to develop SEL in teachers who did not themselves experience those different ways of learning in their own schools and classrooms—a challenge that would involve “unlearning” deeply internalized assumptions about the purpose of education, the roles of teachers and students, and teaching practices themselves.

Many thanks to all the participants at the **Better Future Forum** who contributed to these insights. Visit the [Better Future Hub](#) to explore more insights and collective learning from *Teach For All’s Global Institute for Shaping a Better Future*.

To share additional insights or join upcoming conversations and learning experiences on this topic, please reach out to steven.farr@teachforall.org.

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