

Challenging the False Dichotomy: An Evidence Synthesis



Foreword

Education systems should strive for the holistic development of students given the evidence available.

This new report, *Challenging the False Dichotomy: An Evidence Synthesis*, builds a strong case for decision makers and key stakeholders around the world to enhance and maintain political will towards holistic skills development within education systems. Through this work, we hope to clear misconceptions that a trade-off exists between holistic and academic outcomes. We also sought to highlight the evidence that holistic approaches in education are fundamental not only in academic success, but more so in helping students develop and maintain positive relationships, and become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Most importantly, we aim to show through this report some practical ways that are workable and effective.

The report was overseen and prepared by Porticus, with inputs from the LEGO Foundation and Jacobs Foundation, alongside contributions from key partners and stakeholders across the global education sector. To access the full report, including all evidence references, please contact e.omalley@porticus.com



Key Findings

Effective holistic approaches within education systems lead to improved academic, health, income, employment, societal and well-being outcomes. Their impacts are lasting, and their effectiveness spans high- to low-income countries. Such approaches make for smart financial investments, and they have led consistently to improved long-term life outcomes.

The broad evidence base is decisive across age ranges, social economic levels, and national boundaries that children and youth are more likely to succeed if they develop holistic skills that help them more readily respond to the demands of life.

Evidence is robust, consistent, and increasingly representative of diverse contexts. These approaches can address the global education challenges that we face by instilling in children the power to overcome multiple adversities, which can drive destructive outcomes and have a cumulative effect across generations.

A holistic approach is a powerful buffer to adversities that a child faces throughout their development. Prioritising it within education systems can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects for the child, society, and the economy. This results in children who are well-equipped for life and more able to meet both the opportunities and the challenges they face at home, at school, and in the world at large.

Globally, we are at a critical juncture when it comes to the role and power of education. Driving this urgency is the need to address the global learning crisis, learning loss, a re-escalation of the number of out-of-school children, and worsening mental health amongst children. The anticipated impacts of climate change and the increase in displaced populations add further to the considerable challenges faced across systems. These threats highlight the criticality of instilling key holistic skills in children, given that they help them adapt, overcome, and thrive during uncertain times, as well as make the case that such skills sit alongside academic skills when it comes to vital outcomes.

Despite this, the wider institutionalisation of holistic practices in education systems remains the exception rather than the rule. This, in part, can be attributed to the misperception that a trade-off exists between supporting academic development versus holistic development. A disproportional focus on literacy and numeracy remains across national education levels. While there is a clear and urgent need to address the effects of learning loss, recognising the inter-relationship between academic, social, emotional, and cognitive development is fundamental to overcoming that loss.

Outcomes

In searching for a common ground in areas of critical concern for key stakeholders, four patterns of outcomes emerged.

- **Increasing academic achievement:** Across contexts, age ranges, and subjects, a holistic approach to learning, benefits and improves academic performance. Academic and holistic skills are intertwined and teachable, strengths and weaknesses in one area foster or hinder development in the other. We know that education systems can transform in ways that are equally attentive to students' academic and holistic development, and that this does not compromise academic rigour but strengthens it. What happens in one domain influences what happens in others. For example, emotions, such as anger or joy, can trigger or block learning. Contrary to the belief that academic and cognitive functions are separate from emotional and social functions, research in neuroscience and the behavioural sciences provides evidence that these functions are interrelated.

- **Overcoming adversity:** Prioritising and cultivating holistic skills and approaches within education systems offers a critical buffer for adversities that a child may face and has farreaching impacts for the child, families, communities, and wider society. It also offers an effective means of addressing the impact of learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, displacement, crises, and climate change. A holistic approach to learning benefits all children and is essential for every child to thrive, but disproportionately benefits children facing adversity; many of whom experience trauma such as abuse, displacement, poverty, and exposure to conflict.

- **Societal consequences:** Outcomes related to health, criminal behaviour, and addiction have been shown to be impacted by key holistic skills. These skills can support overcoming the impact of a toxic stress response that can lead to immediate and long-term negative consequences, such as poor physical and mental health, behaviour issues, and unhealthy relationships, which have wider impacts beyond childhood. Holistic skills also stimulate relationships within the classroom and home environment.

- **Economic benefits:** The cultivation of holistic skills outweighs investment in what has been for decades the status quo of a system based primarily on academic skills. Social costs, employability, productivity, active citizenship, income levels, and reduced health and criminal justice costs can be attributed to the development of key holistic skills in children, which will compound their benefit when they become adults.

Conclusion

While a sizeable proportion of the most rigorous evidence comes from the US and Europe, an increasing number of studies come from Africa and the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America. The diversity of examples of success stories at school, district, and national levels are growing steadily. As is the increasing recognition that these skills and approaches, along with appropriate measures for them, are critical elements of modern education systems. The evidence base also points to enabling conditions for holistic approaches to thrive, based on patterns of success within the wider environment and systems infrastructure.

There remain important evidence gaps and unknowns, and for the case to be made even stronger, these need to be addressed, particularly to better understand the constraints that prevents wider scalability. These include a better understanding of the impact of holistic approaches during adolescence; an increase in evidence from low-income countries; more deeply considering the damage caused by the large number of taxonomies; a better understanding of the relationship between a holistic approach and long-term life outcomes; and further analysis of the impact of misaligned and narrow accountability mechanisms.

A holistic approach to learning is not a magic bullet, it is complex and takes prioritisation and commitment from all levels of a system, but the evidence is clear that it can, when effectively applied, benefit society in extraordinary ways.

