

# Integrating Whole Child Development (WCD) into Teacher and School-Leader Training: Perspectives From Across the World

-  **Rita Heller Crespo**, Intern, Utrecht University, the Netherlands  
 rita.heller@alumni.programaexe.org
-  **Maria van der Harst**, Researcher, Utrecht University, the Netherlands  
 a.m.r.vanderharst1@uu.nl
-  **Joost de Laat**, Professor of Economics, Utrecht University, the Netherlands  
 j.j.delaat@uu.nl
-  **Paul Schöpfer**, Junior Researcher, Utrecht University, the Netherlands  
 p.schopfer@uu.nl
-  **Diederik van Iwaarden**, International Partnership Advisor, Utrecht University, the Netherlands  
 d.c.f.vaniwaarden@uu.nl
-  **Maya Menon**, Founder Director, The Teacher Foundation, India  
 mayamenon@teacherfoundation.org
-  **Robbie Dean**, Director – Research, Evaluation and Network Learning, Teach for All, US  
 robbie.dean@teachforall.org
-  **Luz Avruj**, Institutional Relations and Networks Coordinator, CLAYSS (Centro Latinoamericano de Aprendizaje y Servicio Solidario), Argentina  
 luzavruj@clayss.org.ar
-  **Marco Snoek**, Lecturer – Learning and Innovation, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
 m.snoek@hva.nl
-  **Renata Montechiare**, Academic Coordinator - Culture and Education, FLACSO, Brazil  
 renatamontechiare@flacso.org.br
-  **Gretchen Livesey**, Director – Partner Impact, The Center for Whole-Child Education, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University US  
 gretchen.livesey@asu.edu
-  **Jane Nantayi Sebuyungo**, Senior Manager- Design and Program Readiness, STIR Education, Uganda  
 jsebuyungo@stireducation.org
-  **Lola Velarde**, Director - Development, European Foundation Society and Education (EFSE), Spain  
 lolavelarde@sociedadeducacion.org
-  **Miguel Ángel Sancho Gargallo**, President, European Foundation Society and Education (EFSE), Spain  
 masancho@sociedadeducacion.org
-  **Toby Horrocks**, Dean – Learning Design, Ambition Institute, England  
 toby.horrocks@ambition.org.uk
-  **Prateesh Prasad**, Delivery Lead – Project Sampoorna, Sattva Consulting, India  
 prateesh.prasad@sattva.co.in
-  **Bjorn Wansink**, Associate Professor, Utrecht University, the Netherlands (Corresponding author)  
 b.g.j.wansink@uu.nl

## Summary

A Whole Child Development (WCD) approach considers foundational learning as being child-centred and multi-dimensional, emphasising a variety of interconnected and context-dependent skills, competencies, and values for a child to thrive. Drawn from discussions with 10 education organisations from across the globe, this article explores how education systems can support teachers and school leaders to take a WCD approach.

## Keywords

Holistic education  
Holistic student development  
Teacher training  
Whole child development (WCD)

The existence of large inequalities in children’s learning outcomes, both within and across countries, is well established and has been exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> For example, the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel—a leading body of international policymakers and scientists—argues that “the pandemic offers a rare opportunity to rethink and reset education provision, so children across all identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and circumstances can learn and thrive” (Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2022, p. 11).

However, there are ongoing debates about what foundational learning comprises and should aim for. One prominent understanding focuses primarily on [numeracy and literacy as key universal skills](#) (Beharry, 2021). Another approach diverges from this narrow understanding of foundational learning and instead emphasises the multidimensionality of learning and the context specificity of what skills and competencies best enable students to learn and optimally prepare them for life and citizenship. This understanding also highlights the interconnectedness of a child’s academic, social, emotional, physical, moral, and civic development (Schaub et al., 2017). Such holistic approaches are not new, and the roots of this school of thought can be found in the works of Rousseau, Parker, and Montessori (Miller, 1997). In this paper, we refer to these holistic approaches to learning as whole child development (WCD).

A WCD approach recognises that all children, but in particular those growing up in adversity, need a range of knowledge, skills, and experiences in order to benefit from education across contexts and to reach their potential in life. Core capabilities that are part of [WCD approaches](#) include the development of values, academic knowledge, life skills, and social and emotional learning. WCD approaches support academic success but also raise students’ personal satisfaction and growth and empower students to build positive relations and become lifelong learners and [active and engaged citizens](#) within society.

There is an emerging momentum for WCD approaches and a wider recognition of the value of holistic education, with an increasing number of countries incorporating WCD components into education policy and curricula (Cantor et al., 2021; Porticus & ACER 2020; Slade & Griffith, 2013). This momentum is underscored by the March 2022 report “Reimagining Education,” written by the International Science and Evidence Based Education (ISEE) Assessment, a group of more than 250 experts and scientists from a range of disciplines, which calls on education systems to “Re-organise curricula, pedagogies, and learning assessments toward a whole-brain learner-centric, socially inclusive education for human flourishing that emphasises interconnectedness instead of isolation between cognition, metacognition, and social-emotional learning” (Duraiappah et al., 2022, p. 4).

Yet, despite increased awareness, the current education systems in which teachers and students find themselves often do not provide the time, space, and resources to focus on and support WCD. Moreover, the aftermath of the pandemic has also given rise to a rush to ‘catch up on learning deficiencies’ in traditional subjects, such as math and literacy (Beharry, 2021). This paper presents a case-based view across various country contexts on the integration of WCD in teacher and school leader training. The insights presented below are based on discussions facilitated by the Utrecht University Team with 10 member organisations of a Global Learning Community (GLC)<sup>2</sup> for WCD. An overview of the organisations can be found in Table 1 (in Annex).

### **Integrating WCD into Education Systems Through Teacher and School Leader Training—What Does It Entail?**

GLC members emphasise three broad aspects:

1. A co-defined, personalised, experiential approach to teacher- and school leader training.
2. Building a broader school environment that is supportive of WCD.
3. Facilitating holistic learning with and for the broader community.

#### **A Co-defined, Personalised, Experiential Approach to Teacher/School Leader Training**

All 10 discussants highlighted that their teacher- and school-leader training approaches contrast with conventional training methods by seeking to provide teachers and school leaders with an opportunity to co-define a contextualised vision for WCD, including student outcomes. In other words, what is foundational for students is contextually and collectively decided and may thus vary to some extent across settings.

To achieve this, the organisations highlighted that their training approach includes personalised, experiential elements with ample room for reflection. The value of an experiential approach to teacher training is consistent with an extensive body of literature highlighting how an experiential approach is a particularly powerful way for teachers to acquire a deeper understanding of what a WCD approach looks like in practice (see also Lewis & Williams, 1994; *Journal of Experiential Education*). As highlighted by the Teacher Foundation in India, teachers themselves may have no experience with this approach to learning. Therefore, the Teacher Foundation aims to build a generation of teachers who have this frame of reference through a first-hand experience of what student-centred learning comprises. Their approach offers training, in-class observations, co-teaching, coaching, mentoring, and specified moments for feedback.

Training for WCD teaching and leadership was also characterised as personalised and reflexive. Teach For All

(Global) emphasised, for instance, the connections with a professional’s own identity, motivations, and WCD. Their training methodology acknowledges this and makes space to discuss what an education system would look like if it prioritises WCD and what possible tensions may arise when engaging in such types of leadership or teaching practices on a personal and professional level before definitions and frameworks are introduced.

In a similar way, reflexivity is an important strand of the approach of Sattva in India to ensure that all children are reached and included in education. Reflexivity requires awareness of the social inequalities and exclusion that constitute the social realities of some students and intentional efforts to overcome stereotypical biases teachers may have towards children from disadvantaged communities. Although these training approaches are demanding in terms of both time and effort and require a strong commitment among teachers and school leaders, several discussions emphasised that education professionals also benefit on a personal level from the learning experience through increases in their wellbeing and or (regained) motivation.

What the experiences of GLC members seem to confirm is the finding that a motivated, warm, and healthy educator is foundational to learning. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic and following governmental requests, STiR Education Uganda broadcast a radio programme to keep students engaged during the lockdown and to support teachers in addressing the socio-emotional needs of students.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, they learned that the broadcast was helping teachers cope with their own struggles during the pandemic. Especially in times of crisis, it turns out that a holistic approach to education and taking into account the social-emotional learning of students and teachers is foundational for wellbeing and learning (Yorke et al., 2021). Some organisations coined the term ‘Whole Teacher Development’ to draw attention to deliberate efforts to achieve beneficial outcomes for both educators and students. The European Foundation Society and Education (EFSE) in Spain found that such approaches can even contribute to addressing schools’ challenges with high staff turnover.

#### **Building a Broader School Environment Supportive of WCD**

Three elements stood out in terms of building a school environment that is supportive of WCD. The first is the creation of new types of collegial networking among teachers, leaders, and officials at all levels, ranging from peer-to-peer support among teachers to cooperative learning between school leaders, etc. (Luyten, 2019). Similarly, research points out that strong support structures are essential, and transformative processes in education depend on, for example, school leaders and teachers encouraging and supporting each other and celebrating small achievements on the way towards larger goals (Boylan et al., 2023).

A closely related second element constitutes a move away from authoritative, top-down leadership styles focused, for example, on control over teaching practices, and towards responsive, distributed leadership, which enables, supports, and rewards the implementation of good teaching practices into everyday classroom experiences for children (Harris, 2013). Such dynamics extend to the way teachers are encouraged to engage with students in such a way that students can become active agents in their own learning journeys.

A final element emphasised is the need to organise (redesign) the school environment to become more equitable (supporting the development of all children) and to become grounded in state-of-the-art science about how children learn and develop. To facilitate this, Turnaround for Children has developed a [toolbox](#) that comprises a range of resources for science-based and equity-focused redesign processes to build whole-child schools.

### **Facilitating Holistic Learning With and For the Broader Community**

A child's learning (or, in fact, any individual's learning) is not confined to the physical or temporal space of the school or the classroom. In the accounts of the discussions with organisations, the need to facilitate both within and outside of school learning is emphasised. This means that what counts as foundational to learning should be negotiated with the school and the broader community. One way of enabling this is to ensure that education is embedded within the community and is of benefit to the socio-cultural realities of the community that the school is part of. For instance, the Latin American Centre for Solidarity Service-Learning (CLAYSS) promotes an approach where students solve challenges in their communities while also applying content learned in school. Students make connections between learning and lived realities by actively engaging in real-life projects. In doing so, they are not just learning for a future career but already acquiring a sense of what it is to be a change agent.

Establishing a link between the school and the community requires ways to connect educators, parents, community members, and students to facilitate continuous learning and fuel the agency of all involved. FLACSO Brazil, working with educators on the Brazilian Amazon, shares that such bonds naturally exist in Indigenous communities. With their ways of living, livelihoods, and the lands they live on directly under threat, the teaching is not separated from the challenges the communities face. Moreover, local schools go through considerable efforts to reconcile and combine the curriculum of Brazilian urban schools with teachings about the history and socio-cultural knowledge of the communities themselves (Potyguara & Montechiare, 2023, in this volume).

### **Transforming Our Education Through WCD**

As captured by the experiences of 10 organisations working within a variety of contexts on the advancement of WCD teaching practices and pedagogy, there is considerable overlap in the overarching values and vision of holistic education and WCD pedagogy, but the on-the-ground implementation and application is highly varied and contextualised. From the perspective provided, the local context in which students are situated is highly important, which means that what is foundational can differ for each context and child. Therefore, the central question is not only what foundational skills are universally important across contexts but also how we can design education systems that respond to foundational needs specific to the child within a specific societal context “so children across all identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and circumstances can learn and thrive” (Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2022, p. 11).

The discussions with GLC members also show how WCD approaches have the potential to transform education by making learning relevant within the local context, preparing learners for life after school, and nurturing the agency of all stakeholders involved to ultimately build learning environments that support the development of all learners.

These are much-needed elements to address challenges in learning and contribute to the attainment of SDG 4 (UN Sustainable Development Goal 4), especially for those children who are most at risk of being left behind.

#### **Endnotes**

1. For further information see: OECD (2021), *The State of Global Education: 18 Months into the Pandemic*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Retrieved from <https://cdn.theewf.org/uploads/pdf/OECD-State-of-Education-report.pdf>
2. The GLC is supported by Porticus, a philanthropy, and facilitated and convened by Utrecht University.
3. For information of the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 school closures on adolescents and youth, see: <https://participationpool.eu/resource/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-mental-health-of-adolescents-and-youth/>

**Table 1.** Overview of GLC organisations participating in the discussions

GLC member organisation	Approach to WCD teacher or school leader training	Geographical locations	Link
The Teacher Foundation	Provides group trainings, in-class observations, coaching, and mentoring for teachers and school leaders to become reflective and effective.	India	<a href="https://www.teacherfoundation.org">https://www.teacherfoundation.org</a>
Teach For All	Recruits and develops future leaders to teach in their nations' under-resourced schools and communities.	Global	<a href="https://teachforall.org">https://teachforall.org</a>
Latin American Center for Solidarity Service-Learning (CLAYSS)	Promotes solidarity service-learning: student-led projects integrated with the curriculum that address community issues.	Global	<a href="https://clayss.org/20clayss/index.html">https://clayss.org/20clayss/index.html</a>
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences	Integrates WCD into curricula for pre-service teacher training, promoting agency and collaboration with high schools.	The Netherlands	<a href="https://www.hva.nl/faculteit/fo/contact/opleidingen/opleidingen.htm">https://www.hva.nl/faculteit/fo/contact/opleidingen/opleidingen.htm</a>
FLACSO	Improves the quality of education through lesson plans and pedagogical projects with WCD principles at local and regional levels.	Brazil	<a href="http://flacso.org.br">http://flacso.org.br</a>
Turnaround for Children	Designs whole child courses for teachers and school leaders at the district level using equity by design principles.	United States of America	<a href="https://turnaroundusa.org">https://turnaroundusa.org</a>
STiR Education	Provides data-driven coaching to school leaders and learning improvement cycles to foster intrinsic motivation, autonomy, mastery, and purpose in teachers.	Uganda, India, and Indonesia	<a href="https://stireducation.org">https://stireducation.org</a>
European Foundation Society and Education (EFSE)	Offers WCD training to school leadership teams to rethink and communicate vision, revitalise the education community, refocus the curriculum, and systematically manage the school.	Spain, Dominican Republic	<a href="https://www.sociedadeducacion.org/en/">https://www.sociedadeducacion.org/en/</a>
Ambition Institute	Integrates research-based WCD teacher, school leader, and superintendent training into governmental and non-governmental programs.	United Kingdom	<a href="https://www.ambition.org.uk">https://www.ambition.org.uk</a>
Sattva Consulting	Consults as a backbone organisation for the integration of socio-emotional learning in the curricula and practice of state education.	India	<a href="https://www.sattva.co.in">https://www.sattva.co.in</a>

## References

Beharry, G. (2021, April). The pathway to progress on SDG 4 requires the global education architecture to focus on foundational learning and to hold ourselves accountable for achieving it [Center for Global Development]. Essay 1. <https://pubs.cgdev.org/pathway-to-progress-on-sdg-4/1/index.html>

Boylan, M., Adams, G., Perry, E., & Booth, J. (2023). Re-imagining transformative professional learning for critical teacher professionalism: A conceptual review. *Professional Development in Education*, 1–19.

Cantor, P., Lerner, R., Pittman, K., Chase, P., & Gomperts, N. (2021). *Whole-child development, learning, and thriving: A dynamic systems approach (elements in child development)*. Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108954600

Duraiappah, A.K., Atteveldt, N.M., Buil, J.M., Singh, K. and Wu, R. (2021) *Summary for decision makers, reimagining education: The international science and evidence based education assessment*. New Delhi: UNESCO MGIEP.

Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel. (2022). *Prioritizing learning during COVID-19: The most effective ways to keep children learning during and postpandemic*. [K. Akyeampong, T. Andrabi, A. Banerjee, R. Banerji, S. Dynarski, R. Glennerster, S. Grantham-McGregor, K. Muralidharan, B. Piper, S. Ruto, J. Saavedra, S. Schmelkes, H. Yoshikawa]. Washington D.C., London, Florence: The World Bank, FCDO, and UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti.

Harris, A. (2013). *Distributed school leadership: Developing tomorrow's leaders*. Routledge.

Lewis, L. H., & Williams, C. J. (1994). Experiential learning: Past and present. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1994(62), 5-16.

Luyten, H., & Bazo, M. (2019). Transformational leadership, professional learning communities, teacher learning and learner centred teaching practices: Evidence on their interrelations in Mozambican primary education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 60, 14–31.

Miller, R. (1997). What are schools for? *Holistic Education in American Culture*, 3.

Porticus & Australian Council for Educational Research. (2020). Measuring what matters: Insights on the value of whole child development. Retrieved from <https://www.porticus.com/en/articles/new-policy-research-on-the-value-of-whole-child-development>

Schaub, M., Henck, A., & Baker, D. P. (2017). The globalized “whole child”: Cultural understandings of children and childhood in multilateral aid development policy, 1946–2010. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(2), 298–326.

Slade, S., & Griffith, D. (2013). A whole child approach to student success. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*.

World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, FCDO, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2022, June). The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-global-learning-poverty-2022>

Yorke, L., Rose, P., Bayley, S., Wole, D., & Ramchandani, P. (2021). The importance of students' socio-emotional learning, mental health and wellbeing in the time of COVID-19. *Rise Insights*, 25, 1–11.