

Rethinking Teacher Development Toward Holistic Student Growth

Insights From The Better Future Forum in Singapore (May 2026)

We believe in growing students holistically so they can shape a better future, but what does this mean for how we grow teachers?

This session invited Forum participants into an ongoing global collaborative inquiry on teacher development that has brought together 60+ teacher development organizations, researchers, and practitioners across diverse contexts.

Together, we explored the learning question:
How do we develop teachers differently so they can grow students holistically?

The Big Idea

One cross-cutting insight emerged from this session and our ongoing inquiry:

To grow students differently, we have to develop teachers differently.

“If we want teacher development to enable different outcomes for kids, how do the teacher developers need to experience transformation for themselves? In what ways are they developing teachers to love more, discover more of their purpose & agency, and experience wellbeing?”

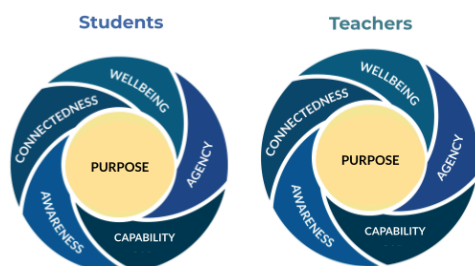
— Soon Seng Chen, CEO of Teach For Malaysia
shared what the session left him thinking about



The core insight is that adults themselves must mirror the same outcomes and model the kind of learning and development we aim for in students

Mirror

The same **outcomes** in adults that we aim for in students



Model

The same **learning and development** in adults and students

Teachers see:

STUDENTS AS LEADERS ...not passive recipients	THEMSELVES AS LEARNERS ...not as the sole source of expertise
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Teacher Developers see...

TEACHERS AS LEADERS ...not passive recipients	THEMSELVES AS LEARNERS ...not as the sole source of expertise
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Case Studies: How Do We Develop Teachers Differently?

Three opening perspectives further pushed the discussion to the next level.



Shaheen Mistri
CEO, Teach For India.

Shaheen provoked us with perhaps the most fundamental question: How do we connect teachers with **purpose**?

"Are teachers anchored in the power of what they do? In their power to change the world?"

She reminded us that teaching helps kids develop the values, mindsets, and skills they need to create a different world.

Shaheen also invited us to consider the **pedagogy of love**, a reminder to center love and joy with students and teachers.



Tequilla Brownie
CEO, The New Teacher Project (TNTP), USA

Tequilla reflected on why **teacher development has had limited impact**, noting TNTP's studies in the U.S. showing \$18,000/teacher spent on professional development, with little to show for it.

She highlighted three reasons for this:

- We skip over helping teachers embrace a broader **purpose**.
- We have been **too individualistic**, so "excellence cannot accumulate."
- Our systems are fragmented and **incoherent**.



Whetuu Natha
Global Institute for Shaping a Better Future, Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Dr. Whetuu Nathan challenged us to hold both love and rigor, creating space for **rigorous learning and unlearning**.

Teachers need to **unlearn deficit-based assumptions** they hold about students. These can sometimes be masked in kindness, which is harmful when it reinforces low expectations for some students.

Rigorous learning begins with a **deep belief in every learner's potential** and their inherent abilities. It requires the right mix of challenge *and* support in how we develop students and teachers.

Insights: Five Principles for Developing Teachers Differently

Beyond the core insight that **how we develop teachers must mirror and model how we develop students**, the group discussion surfaced several other principles that can guide our teacher development efforts:

1. **Anchor in purpose:** Start by engaging teachers in the deeper *why* of their work, and ensure this vision goes beyond a vision statement alone. Actively embed purpose in daily practice through structures and routines such as student vision scales, coaching rubrics, classroom observations, collective reflection rituals, and role-modeling. Shaheen Mistri shared how Teach For India brings purpose into practice through a student vision scale that helps teachers regularly orient themselves toward developing students who can lead change at multiple levels: within themselves, with others, in India, and in the world.
2. **Design for coherence:** Ensure teacher development efforts reinforce one another rather than pull in different directions. This means resisting the tendency to continually add "one more thing" to already stretched teachers. TNTP's latest [Coherence by Design](#) research shows how fragmented approaches to instruction for students undermine learning and widen opportunity gaps. Tequilla Brownie drew a parallel to teacher development: "Why do we think that if we give teachers incoherent professional development, they will arrive at coherent instruction?"

3. **Grow collective, not just individual, capacity:** Move beyond isolated learning toward structures that foster collective learning and peer support. Fernando Reimers, professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, reflected on football and surgical teams, inviting us to rethink teaching not only as an individual pursuit, but as a collective one. As one participant asked: “Are we developing teachers as individual “hero” leaders, or to work collectively and see the wisdom and support around them?”
4. **Bridge the technical and adaptive:** Support teachers to develop the technical skills they need to learn *and* the mindsets or assumptions they need to unlearn. One leader from Peru reflected on swinging too far toward technical or adaptive development at different points in their journey, reminding us that we need to intentionally integrate both. We also heard that learning and unlearning call for different approaches: technical skills can be strengthened through repeated practice-based learning, while adaptive shifts often require experiential learning that challenges deeply held assumptions. Across both the technical and adaptive, we heard a call for learning that is more practical, relevant and rooted in context. As one participant shared: “We need community experience more than theoretical education.”
5. **Bring back joy into the profession:** Create conditions where teachers experience love, connection, humor, and possibility alongside challenge. Reflecting on the teachers who shaped his own life, Anurag Kundu, a government official in India, reminded us that a sense of humor can be such a gift when working in complex environments. He also challenged us to move beyond deficit-based narratives such as “teaching is hard” and instead reclaim teaching as an inspiring and deeply meaningful vocation.

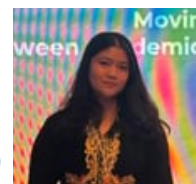
Closing Reflections



“Systems often remain hierarchical, compliance-driven, and fragmented. The deeper question then is: to what extent are educators genuinely co-authors of the transformation they are expected to deliver.”

— Akongo Rose Stella PhD, Africa Center for Social Emotional Learning (AxSEL)

“As a student, I believe that teachers shouldn’t be seen as a walking encyclopedia! It’ll be much better if teachers co-learn with students together for a better learning experience.”



— Porthea Bawing Ului Any, Student Leader, Malaysia

Looking Ahead

The discussion surfaced several questions and tensions for further exploration. We will continue to explore these as part of the Global Institute's ongoing collaborative inquiry on teacher development.

- How can we **move beyond purpose as a vision statement** and ensure it is lived daily, shaping every interaction, decision, system, and aspect of culture?
- How do we **balance mastery and agency**, helping teachers develop critical capabilities, such as the ability to teach foundational literacy and numeracy, while avoiding approaches so prescriptive that they undermine teacher and student agency and autonomy?
- How do we **bridge technical and adaptive** development in practice, rather than overemphasizing technical skill development alone?
- How do we **treat teachers as co-learners**, and invite them to work through these challenges with us, just as we ask them to treat students as co-learners?
- How do we **model the right balance of challenge and support** in how we develop teachers, creating the safety necessary for learning while consistently centering high expectations?
- What does this mean for our **coaching models** and for calibrating directive versus facilitative support across different stages of teachers' developmental journeys?
- How do we **design coherent systems** that consider the whole picture of what we ask teachers to do, enabling teachers to experience the same **wellbeing** we ask them to model for students?
- How might we **leverage AI to reshape teacher development**, enabling more real-time, evider informed feedback, expanded opportunities for practice, and personalized coaching?

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 as part of the **Collaborative Inquiry on Teacher Development**, please reach out to radha.ruparell@teachforall.org.

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