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LEARNING WHAT MATTERS IN JORDAN

BRIDGING THE LITERACY CRISIS THROUGH A HOLISTIC APPROACH
TO SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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ACRONYMS

MoE	Ministry of Education
NEST	Network for Education Systems Transformation
NCCD	National Center for Curriculum Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QRF	Queen Rania Foundation

ABOUT THIS SERIES

How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?

Education systems worldwide face mounting pressure to prepare children and young people not just for academic success, but for meaningful participation in an increasingly complex world (UNESCO 2023). Growing evidence suggests that to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, children and young people need a broad set of skills including but not limited to literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, socioemotional skills, and civic engagement (Dweck, Walton, and Cohen 2014; Martinez 2022; Rado 2020).

The Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST), a global impact network¹ co-led by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution and ten civil society organizations across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, seeks to understand how education systems can transform

to prioritize a “breadth of skills”—an integrated set of academic, socioemotional, and transversal competencies that enable all children and young people to thrive (Care, Anderson, and Kim 2016; UNESCO n.d.).

Central to our work is a shared exploratory question: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? This question acknowledges that, while ideas about “education systems,” “opportunities,” and “what matters” may differ across contexts, what binds the network is our collective commitment to understanding how education systems can transform to prioritize the development of a breadth of skills in all children and young people. Rather than prescribing universal definitions, NEST embraces locally grounded interpretations that honor the historical, cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of each setting.

1. Impact networks function as living, adaptive systems that comprise people, organizations, and their wider ecosystems. Unlike conventional organizations that follow fixed procedures and linear workflows, these networks are fluid, highly interconnected, and continually evolving. For details about the model of impact networks, see Ehrlichman (2021).

FRAMING OUR INQUIRY: THE FOUR Ps AND THREE Cs AS WORKING FRAMEWORKS

Informed by prior research from CUE, NEST draws on two interconnected frameworks that guide our exploration of education systems' transformation towards skills development. The 4P framework identifies four high-level domains of change in systems transformation: purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; Winthrop, Morris, and Qargha 2023). The 3C framework proposes three catalytic conditions believed to enable and sustain the transformation process: commitment, capacity, and cohesion (CUE 2022).²

We approach these frameworks not as prescriptive models, but as working theories that require interrogation,

adaptation, and potential expansion based on observations in diverse local contexts. Our methodology is deliberately abductive—that is, moving systematically between observation and theoretical inference while remaining open to alternative explanations and framework modifications. This approach reflects NEST's commitment to collaborative inquiry that is iterative, values local knowledge and expertise, and contributes to broader understanding of education systems transformation. We recognize that meaningful change cannot be externally imposed, but must emerge from genuine engagement with local realities, assets, and constraints.

2. For details, see NEST's synthesis report; Olateju and Hui 2025.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The following country-level findings represent an early stage of inquiry in NEST's ongoing exploration of education systems transformation for skills development. Exploratory in nature, the insights emerging from Jordan's unique context are an initial step toward a shared understanding of Jordan's education landscape. While findings of this research may not be directly transferable to other settings, we believe that the patterns, tensions, and possibilities identified in this report can inform broader conversations about how

education systems worldwide might better support all children and young people in developing the skills they need to thrive. As NEST continues its collaborative work across ten countries, subsequent studies strive to deepen these insights and further refine our understanding of what enables sustainable education systems transformation toward a breadth of skills. As such, the following report should not be read as a final statement, but as part of an ongoing, iterative process of learning and discovery that contributes to an emerging field.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? The QRF addressed this question through a qualitative study in Jordan examining the integration of holistic education principles into the country's new Arabic Language curriculum, and assessed systemic conditions supporting or constraining implementation. This exploration addresses Jordan's pressing literacy crisis, where over half of 10-year-olds cannot read and comprehend age-appropriate Arabic texts, while serving a population where more than one-third are displaced from neighboring countries (World Bank 2019).

Three interconnected findings emerge that reveal both the promise and complexity of systemic transformation

Drawing on established frameworks for education system transformation—including the four Ps and three Cs—this study provides analytical depth for understanding transformation challenges in refugee-hosting contexts. The research employed a two-phase mixed-methods approach: curriculum analysis of grades 1, 4, and 7 Arabic materials against the Center for Curriculum Redesign's Four-Dimensional Framework focusing on skills, character, and meta-learning dimensions (Taylor, Black, Slesinski, and Fadel 2021), followed by four focus groups with principals and teachers and six semi-structured key informant interviews with ministry officials and education stakeholders.

Three interconnected findings emerge that reveal both the promise and complexity of systemic transformation. First, **indications of**

genuine commitment exist across system levels—from MoE officials to classroom teachers—toward prioritizing a breadth of skills and holistic learning approaches. Second, **insufficient capacity undermines implementation despite this commitment**. Structural barriers including fragmented teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, content-heavy assessment systems, and resource constraints collectively limit the system's ability to transform the pedagogical core and translate holistic ideals into meaningful classroom practice. Third, and most critically, **systemic incoherence and concentrated power structures create fundamental misalignment** across transformation components. Resource constraints limited local ownership, and the mismatch between holistic principles and Jordan's content-heavy curriculum and related assessments prevent authentic ownership of transformation efforts. Notably, student and family voices remain absent from educational transformation processes, creating misalignment between system goals and learner priorities.

Based on these findings, the study recommends two primary interventions: (1) centering students, families, and community voices by engaging them in defining educational purpose and education system transformation priorities, and (2) aligning the "pedagogical core" via comprehensive curriculum mapping, competency-based assessments, and systematic teaching capacity strengthening to support education system transformation toward a breadth of skills.

These findings contribute to the understanding of education system transformation challenges and opportunities in refugee-hosting contexts, and offer insights for sustaining educational transformation in resource-constrained environments. This research shows that curriculum

reform alone cannot drive systemic change without aligned reconfiguration in assessment systems, teacher preparation, resource allocation, and power structures, while highlighting the importance of student and family involvement in re-envisioning the purpose of education.

EDUCATION IN JORDAN: CONTEXT & CONDITIONS

Jordan has achieved high rates of educational access for refugee populations but still faces profound learning quality challenges. Today, the Jordanian education system serves over 11 million residents, with more than one-third displaced from neighboring countries, including approximately 1.4 million from Syria (Salameh 2025). With an estimated 500,000 to one million Iraqi refugees, 32,000 Yemeni refugees, and 3,000 Sudanese refugees, Jordan ranks fifth globally for hosting the most refugees relative to its national population (UNHCR 2024). According to the UNHCR, the Syrian refugee crisis is the largest and most complex refugee situation in recent times and providing all Syrians with access to a quality education remains a challenge (Morrice, Salem, Al Nahi, and Delprato 2020). This demographic complexity—combined with a highly centralized education system, resource constraints, limited school infrastructure, and low levels of learning—have put significant strain on the Jordanian education system, affecting both the quality and accessibility of education (Selenica 2025).

The influx of Syrian refugees has led to systemic challenges, including an expansion of double-shift schooling as well as overcrowded classrooms, especially in urban areas. This is among the range of quality challenges confronting Jordan's education system. One problem that predates the influx of refugees is the Arabic literacy crisis (Nusair and Palmer 2023). In Jordan, 52% of 10-year-olds are unable to read and comprehend a short, age-appropriate piece of text, according to data from international assessments (World Bank 2019). This appears to negatively affect the education trajectory of many students as struggling readers in early grades often do not overcome reading difficulties as they progress in grade level (Stanovich 1986; Bigozzi, Tarchi, Vagnoli, Valente, and Pinto 2017; Ricketts, Sperring, and Nation 2014). This leads many struggling readers (especially Syrians and other students from marginalized backgrounds) to fall behind their peers academically, fail to earn a secondary school qualification, or simply drop out of school before reaching grade 12.



The labor market is also bleak; youth unemployment remains a challenge despite efforts to improve vocational training and educational links with the private sector (Lenner and Turner 2019).

The interconnectedness of literacy and broader skills

What role does a wide breadth of skills play in the development of literacy skills?

What role does a wide breadth of skills play in the development of literacy skills? Addressing this question was critical to clarifying the relationship between literacy skills, which the National Literacy Strategy shows are a priority for the Jordanian government, and a breadth of skills, which are seen as separate—particularly when related to donor-funded socioemotional learning for schools hosting refugees.

Foundational literacy skills and breadth of skills are interconnected and support the development of one another. Multiple avenues of research highlight that the development of students' social and emotional skills supports that of cognitive skills like literacy and math. Notably, Pressley (2002) argues that a “balanced approach” incorporating both skills-based teaching (focusing on e.g., phonics, comprehension strategies, word recognition) and holistic teaching (focusing on e.g., reading authentic literature, responding to the text through writing, drawing on life experience to interpret meaning) in teaching primary school literacy was most effective

(Bowers and Bowers 2019; Pressley 2002). This blended approach—now common in the U.S. and known as the Science of Reading—considers not only the cognitive factors affecting a child's reading ability, but also the relevant social and environmental factors (Alvermann 2003; Long, MacBlain, and MacBlain 2007) (see box 2).

Research indicates that social and emotional skills can develop at the same rate as cognitive skills like numeracy and literacy. According to the OECD's (2015) longitudinal analysis of Korean students, children who exhibit strong social and emotional skills (i.e., responsibility, self-esteem, and a sense of control) at age 14 are more likely to have improved grades and test scores at 15. In fact, the data suggests that these social and emotional skills have a greater impact on future academic success than cognitive skills alone. While cognitive skills at age 14 can also predict academic success at 15, the causal relationship is weaker and said success may come more slowly. Essentially, children who have a strong belief in themselves and feel responsible—both socioemotional skills—are more likely to excel academically than those who simply have higher cognitive abilities. Notably, while research suggests social and emotional skills developed previously play an important role in cognitive skills development, the inverse is not true; previously developed cognitive skills tend to play only a modest role in shaping future socioemotional skills.

BOX 1: EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING A BREADTH OF SKILLS WITH, THROUGH, AND ALONGSIDE LITERACY (RAPHAEL, BOGNER, PRESSLEY, SHELL, AND MASTERS 2001)

Making library, home-school, and cross-curricular connections to content taught

Encouraging cooperative learning and discouraging competition

Encouraging autonomy and choice among students

Encouraging creative and independent thinking by students

The literature highlights the positive impacts that helping students develop socioemotional skills can have on their learning of foundational skills like literacy. Although early investment is crucial for developing cognitive skills, social and emotional skills can be significantly enhanced between early childhood and early adolescence. However, OECD (2015) highlights the need for more longitudinal data on skills, learning contexts, and outcomes across countries.

Jordan's reform context

In response to the literacy and refugee crises, Jordan has undertaken a number of educational reforms with a focus on curriculum reform. From 2021 to 2022, Jordan's NCCD developed a new standard-based Arabic Language curriculum. The reformed curriculum aimed to improve students' academic performance and readiness for university and work, representing an effort to reshape teaching across the system to promote holistic skills and learning for the future. To specifically

address the literacy crisis, the MoE and other stakeholders developed a National Literacy Strategy (2023-2028) in 2022, which aims to improve literacy rates across the country via strategies involving schools, families, the media, and communities (MoE 2023). The approach calls for training, motivating, and supporting teachers to encourage daily reading habits in students, and ensuring schools develop a positive environment to achieve this goal. Despite multiple reform efforts, the literacy crisis persists, revealing the limitations of piecemeal approaches. Jordan's highly centralized education system creates implementation bottlenecks, where policy changes struggle to reach classroom practice meaningfully (Shirazi 2010). Most critically, reforms have been developed without meaningful input from students and families, creating a fundamental disconnect between the education system's goals and the needs of those most impacted by it. In addition, teachers' professional development is fragmented and fails to build coherent pedagogical capacity, while assessment systems continue to emphasize rote memorization despite curriculum reforms promoting critical thinking (Abuhmaid 2011).

Although there is a significant challenge with Arabic literacy learning in Jordan, prior literature suggests mutually reinforcing interdependencies between literacy and a wider suite of skills. In the Brookings Institution report “Skills for a Changing World: Advancing Quality Learning for Vibrant Societies,” the term **“breadth of skills”** is defined as a holistic range of competencies that go beyond traditional academic content to include interpersonal, intrapersonal, and higher-order cognitive skills (Winthrop and McGivney 2016). These skills encompass not only literacy, numeracy, and science but also critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, self-regulation, and digital literacy. The report emphasizes that these skills are “interconnected” and “mutually reinforcing,” noting that “content is not learnable if communication skills are not in place,” and that “critical thinking operates on content, not in a vacuum” (Ibid, p.14). The report highlights, however, that many presume a tension between teaching subject content and other skills like self-regulation or problem solving despite the interdependencies between them. Thus, while literacy skills are part of a “breadth of skills,” this research looked specifically at Jordan’s literacy curriculum and how other cognitive, social, and emotional skills were integrated into this national priority area.

As such, rather than incremental reform, the challenges this context presents necessitate a broader, system-wide approach to promote a more equitable, accessible, and higher quality education for all students in Jordan, including the refugee population. To this end, the Jordan MoE’s Education Strategic Plan (2018-2025) aimed to improve teaching quality, increase access to education, expand vocational training, enhance student outcomes, achieve universal kindergarten access, and support inclusion (MoE 2023). This created both the bedrock and timely opportunity to consider education system transformation. As researchers and practitioners continue exploring ways for Jordan to leverage this comprehensive vision to drive coordinated transformation, this study assesses the degree to which holistic education aims and pedagogies have been integrated into Jordan’s new Arabic Language curriculum, and how the conditions of the current education system either support or constrain such holistic principles.



METHODOLOGY (SAMPLING, DATA COLLECTION, AND DATA ANALYSIS)

QRF, as part of NEST and with the support of the Brookings Institution, embarked on a network-wide study to explore a research question that NEST members co-created: *How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what truly matters?* To contribute to answering this question, our inquiry in Jordan focused on three country-

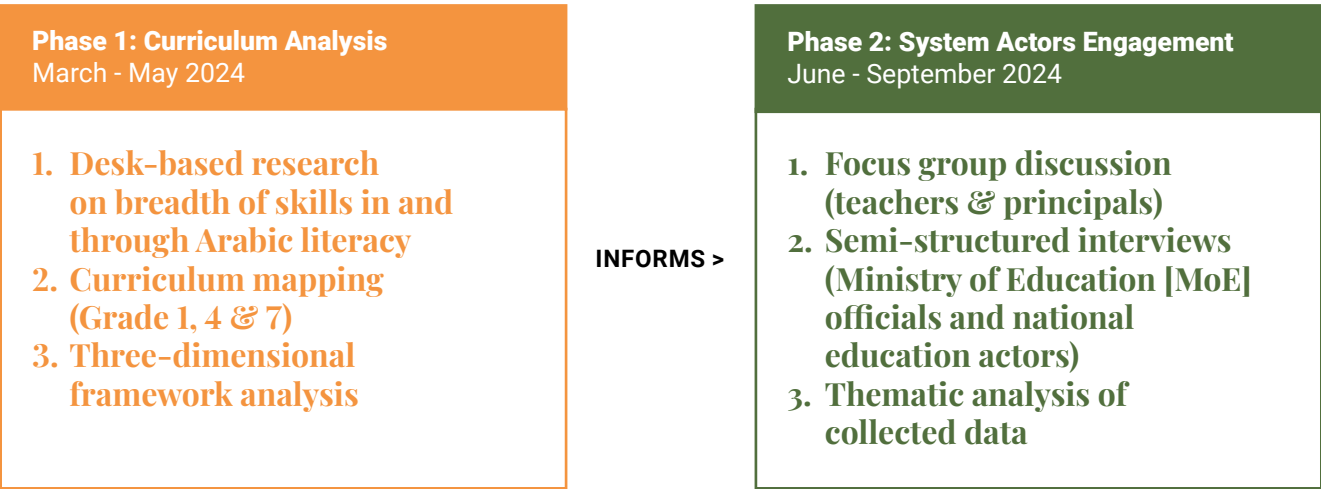
level sub-questions (see box 2). Our study sought to understand how adequately Jordanian children, especially refugees, are provided with learning opportunities designed to help them develop literacy and a wider breadth of skills.

The study was divided into two phases, with the first informing the design of the second (see figure 1).

BOX 2: QUESTIONS GUIDING NEST’S RESEARCH IN JORDAN

- 1. What role does a wide breadth of skills play in the development of literacy skills?
- 2. To what extent are a breadth of skills embedded in Jordan’s new Arabic literacy curriculum?
- 3. What conditions enable or constrain the teaching and development of a breadth of skills among children?

FIGURE 1: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW



Source: Authors’ depiction of methodology

In Phase 1, the QRF first conducted desk-based research to assess links between students' literacy skills and development of a wider breadth of skills. It then commissioned an Arabic language expert to assess how well holistic pedagogies and a breadth of skills were embedded in Jordan's new Arabic Language curriculum. To this end, the Arabic Language curriculum

(specifically the curriculum framework, syllabi, textbooks, teacher guides, and assessment tools) for grades 1, 4, and 7 were analyzed and mapped onto the Center for Curriculum Redesign's Four-Dimensional Framework in an Excel workbook, with a focus on three dimensions: skills, character, and meta-learning (Center for Curriculum Design 2024) (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: CURRICULUM ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK: SKILLS, CHARACTER, AND META-LEARNING DIMENSIONS

DOMAIN	COMPETENCIES
SKILLS (how we use what we know)	1. Critical Thinking 2. Creativity 3. Communication 4. Collaboration
CHARACTER (how we behave and engage in the world)	1. Curiosity 2. Courage 3. Resilience 4. Ethics
META-LEARNING (learning how to learn)	1. Meta-cognition 2. Meta-emotion 3. Self-awareness 4. Adaptability

Source: Center for Curriculum Redesign (n.d.)

Grades 1, 4, and 7 were selected for analysis as these were the first curricula to be developed and released in the MoE-NCCD-phased approach to curriculum reform. To avoid redundancy and facilitate the review process within time constraints, two units from each grade level in the student book and the workbook were analyzed. The units were chosen based on their varying topics and types of texts to ensure the representation of different themes and literary styles, including informational and narrative texts.

In Phase 2, the QRF conducted focus groups with teachers and principals (and semi-structured interviews with national policymakers and education stakeholders) to gain national and local perspectives on curriculum implementation, systemic enablers, and barriers to effectively promoting a breadth of skills in classrooms. In June and July 2024, researchers conducted four focus groups of six to eight randomly selected school principals and Arabic Language teachers.

Focus group participants were also asked about social and emotional learning. These refer mainly to skills in navigating relationships, regulating emotions, and solving problems effectively.

Participants were asked their general perspective on how well five breadth of skills concepts were integrated into the school curriculum: creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and socioemotional learning. The first four are commonly cited as the core soft skills needed to be competitive and competent in today's workforce and were solicited based on prior frameworks like the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, as well as on Jordanian national policy documents (Ohio State University 2016). In its report, *Transformative Competencies for 2030*, the OECD further highlighted the importance of these skills, stating that "Creating new value [referring to a person's ability to innovate and act entrepreneurially] requires critical thinking and creativity in finding different approaches to

solving problems, and collaboration with others to find solutions to complex problems."(OECD 2019, 5).

Focus group participants were also asked about social and emotional learning. These refer mainly to skills in navigating relationships, regulating emotions, and solving problems effectively. These are especially prioritized in Jordan's refugee hosting communities where trauma and tension are more prevalent in schools (Khamis 2019).

In August and September 2024, the QRF conducted six semi-structured interviews with Jordan's MoE officials and national education stakeholders on challenges to implementing holistic education practices in Jordan. All transcripts were then thematically analyzed.



FINDINGS

By analyzing Jordan's new Arabic curriculum and multiple stakeholders' perspectives, this study identified three key findings about the conditions, challenges, and opportunities for education

system transformation toward holistic learning (see box 3). These are organized using the three Cs, which we position as the catalytic conditions necessary to enable transformation across the four Ps.

BOX 3: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Indications of genuine commitment exist throughout Jordan's education system—from MoE officials and leading NGO representatives to principals and Arabic teachers—to prioritizing a breadth of skills and providing children an education that enriches their learning beyond academic disciplines.

Nevertheless, commitment can be strengthened or weakened by a system's capacity. In Jordan, **insufficient capacity and systemic barriers** undermine teachers' abilities to transform practice. Structural constraints including inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching resources, fragmented teacher training, overcrowded classrooms, and assessment systems that prioritize content over skills. These limit the ability to transform the pedagogical core into one that supports the meaningful translation of breadth of skills education ideals into classroom practice.

Lack of systemic cohesion, along with concentrated power structures, creates fundamental misalignment across transformational components. Most critically, the absence of student and family voices in transformational processes reflects broader power imbalances within Jordan's education system. This, along with disconnected curricula and assessment systems, creates a fragmented system that prevents authentic ownership of system transformation and undermines the sustainability, relevance, and authenticity of transformation efforts.

The following sections delve deeper into these three critical findings, arguing that education system transformation toward breadth of skills is particularly important in the

Jordanian context as the country imagines a more inclusive and equitable education system that accounts for the needs of its sizable refugee population.

Jordan's commitment to fostering a breadth of skills through Arabic literacy—A complex landscape of support and resistance

Prior evidence for the connection between literacy and broader skills resonates with the experiences and evolving understanding of Jordanian education stakeholders.

Findings reveal indications of genuine commitment throughout Jordan's education system to prioritizing a breadth of skills and providing children an education that enriches their learning beyond academic disciplines. This shared vision for holistic education, along with examples of dedicated resources and programming initiatives, represent a critical foundation for transformation efforts.

Prior evidence for the connection between literacy and broader skills resonates with the experiences and evolving understanding of Jordanian education stakeholders. Participants of this study demonstrated a sense of growing recognition and a practical understanding that mirrors the theoretical frameworks discussed above: Effective education must address both cognitive and socioemotional development simultaneously. A representative from a national NGO in Jordan discussed its commitment to redirecting its goals and resources to support students more holistically:

“Initially, [our NGO's] main aim was to improve the physical learning environment to allow students to feel comfortable in school, so they could focus on learning. Later, our programming focused on students and teachers to improve their mindsets as students lacked interest in attending

schools. So after school clubs were introduced to bridge the gap between students and schools and instill more interest in attending. This alternative learning environment helps to enhance positive thinking, skills, and build connection among themselves, with teachers, and the local community. These clubs address [students'] varied interests like math, art, science, sports, self-development. For example, a club called Club “A” focuses on self-expression and identity while other clubs teach about human rights, creative writing, STEM, and creative works. These activities are based on principles of SEL [social-emotional learning].”

Additionally, the director of the MoE Directorate of Policies for Professional Development for Teachers highlighted its investment of resources. This included significant investment in certification programs to support teachers in fostering holistic learning and teaching a breadth of skills, with funding prioritized for host schools serving refugee students:

“The directorate designs, implements, and monitors the required trainings for teachers across their career path from start to retirement...Though the directorate does not have a formal definition of holistic education or holistic skills, we are currently implementing a professional development program in collaboration with Queen Rania Teacher Academy (QRTA) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) that tackles the holistic education concept through a leadership diploma certification that trains teachers on certain topics. It is an integrated program at the school level that targets the principal, counselor, and teacher to

At the school-level, principals and teachers generally agreed that the new Arabic curriculum promoted critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication through a range of classroom activities.

enhance and build a comprehensive educational environment and psychological support [for students]... in times of crises and emergencies.”

In addition, the MoE representative highlighted their work with QRTA, IREX, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to establish Pre-Service Teacher Education in Jordan (PRESTIJ). This diploma-awarding program, launched in 2019 and funded by USAID, equips aspiring teachers with skills like interactive teaching methods, classroom management, and inclusive education practices before they enter the classroom. Currently, such pre-service training is not the norm among teachers in grades 4 and above as the only qualification required is a bachelor's degree in the subject area in which one teaches. Offered at four public universities (University of Jordan, Yarmouk University, Mu'tah University, and Hashemite University), PRESTIJ aims to raise the quality of teaching and learning in Jordan, including the fostering of a breadth of skills among students. According IREX's lead PRESTIJ representative:

“ [There are] three components to PRESTIJ: subject didactics, pedagogy, and practicum. The program components work on increasing passion, and motivation, address learning environment, assessment practices, how teacher pedagogical knowledge is applied in the classroom, etc. all of which have collaboration, creativity, problem solving and critical thinking underpinning them.... IREX includes all of these skills in their programming, so they are all equally prioritized. Teachers, as part of their practicum, spend 20 weeks teaching in a school and are exposed to

holistic learning approaches such as critical thinking. So generally speaking, the PRESTIJ program incorporates holistic learning... [and] ensures that they [pre-service teachers] don't just receive training but also practical classroom experience where they can apply interactive and skill-based learning methods.”

The IREX representative also noted that the focus skills beyond academics is relatively new, stating that, “Fifteen years ago, breadth of skills wasn't a focus for the MoE and schools..., and gradually the support for the integration of more holistic approaches [has been built].” Now, she added, PRESTIJ ensures that a breadth of skills (e.g., critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving), are “integrated and embedded across all modules” and “student teachers graduate [from PRESTIJ] knowing how to teach and foster these skills.” However, the pre-service program's impact is limited and will take time as only four cohorts have graduated from PRESTIJ—approximately 5,000 teachers out of a total teacher workforce of roughly 100,000.

At the school-level, principals and teachers generally agreed that the new Arabic curriculum promoted critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication through a range of classroom activities, though others felt that socioemotional learning was “not clearly defined,” nor clearly supported in the new curriculum. Teachers and principals expressed support for teaching a breadth of skills and gave examples of the initiatives they implemented to this end. One teacher noted that her school “fosters critical thinking through debates and essay

competitions,” giving students “practice in analyzing information, constructing logical arguments, and articulating their ideas clearly.” Other teachers and principals said they give students opportunities to engage in learning experiences outside the classroom via parliamentary-style councils, community service projects, and theater productions—all of which show a commitment to students’ development of a breadth of skills.

These insights highlight that commitment is present throughout the system, but not uniform. At the classroom level, for example, capacity constraints may create resistance. Teacher buy-in is a critical factor for the success of breadth of skills, and while some educators embrace student-centered approaches, others view them as burdensome. As one MoE interviewee noted, “Some teachers resist skill-based instruction because they see it as time-consuming. However, when they witness student engagement improve, their attitudes begin to shift.”

Stakeholders suggested that linking holistic pedagogy with career incentives and performance evaluations could motivate greater adoption. This reveals that commitment is not simply present or absent, but is shaped by systemic capacity to support implementation. The intertwined relationship between actors’ commitment and the structural conditions that enable or constrain their capacity to act on it are further explored below.

Structural and systemic barriers constrain teachers’ capacity to transform practice

Though there is a commitment to incorporate holistic learning into Jordan’s literacy curriculum, systems transformation efforts are still inhibited by structural and system factors. When positioned as not simply implementers of curriculum, but as critical leaders and co-designers of educational transformation, teachers can drive meaningful, lasting shifts in school systems (Salzburg Global, 2021). But teachers in this study noted that their capacity to embed holistic learning approaches in the classroom was undermined by structural constraints like contradictory guidance, disjointed preparation, insufficient infrastructure, and knowledge-heavy evaluation systems.



Jordan's new Arabic curriculum reflects a comprehensive educational approach focused on developing well-rounded individuals.

CONTRADICTORY GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Curriculum analysis revealed significant inconsistencies across Jordan's curriculum resources, yielding contradictory guidance that undermines teachers' ability to implement holistic learning approaches effectively. While different components of the curriculum system promote overlapping goals, they have conflicting directions on how to achieve them.

For example, Jordan's new Arabic curriculum, as analyzed via the General Curriculum Framework, reflects a comprehensive educational approach focused on developing well-rounded individuals. It emphasizes personality development, critical thinking, creativity in students' learning, and core values like respect, communication, and openness. These guiding principles are reflected in the range of competencies promoted within the curriculum units. Teacher guides also offer valuable flexibility on whether to use individual, pair, or group work during learning activities. This allows for practicing communication and collaboration skills while fostering character and metacognitive sub-competencies (e.g., drawing on team strengths, being adaptive, and understanding others' perspectives). Play-based learning is also promoted to encourage communication, collaboration, and curiosity.

However, significant gaps and contradictions undermine this foundation for holistic education. In Jordan, Arabic textbooks are the primary guiding document for classroom activities and learning, and mostly promote individual learning

despite the framework's emphasis on holistic development. This includes pedagogical approaches like holistic language learning, differentiated instruction, reading techniques (e.g., the Five Finger Strategy, SQ3R and the Self-Questioning Strategy). Most activities that don't involve speaking are designed as individual tasks, overlooking valuable opportunities for cooperative learning. The problem is compounded by teacher guidance, a contradictory mix of pedagogical approaches yielding scattered ideas and reducing overall effectiveness. Along with the curriculum, it fails to incorporate other important approaches that often promote a range of skills, like project- and problem-based learning (Zakaria, Maat, and Khalid 2019). Although the curriculum document lists learning portfolios as an assessment tool, there was no evidence of this approach in the textbooks, wasting a valuable opportunity for holistic learning (Doğan, Yıldırım, and Batdı 2024). The QRF's analytical review of textbook learning activities found that, while many aspects of the advocated competencies were present, many were not (see Annex, Table B for a summary of these findings).

DISJOINTED TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teachers are key leaders of education transformation and, as such, need the skills, support, and resources to enact change in their classrooms. Key informants emphasized the importance of professional development for teachers to effectively foster a breadth of skills among students, but highlighted significant gaps in system support.



One interviewee said, “Our work with pre-service teachers in PRESTIJ ensures that they don’t just receive training but also practical classroom experience where they can apply interactive and skill-based learning methods.” Programs like PRESTIJ and UNICEF’s “Teacher of the Future” aim to integrate competency-based teaching strategies. A representative from UNICEF stated, “We designed ‘Teacher of the Future’ to give educators the tools they need to integrate 21st-century skills into their teaching. Many teachers have found that applying project-based learning techniques has significantly improved student participation.”

Despite such progress, fragmented training opportunities and lack of ongoing support seem to hinder their full implementation. Many teachers, particularly in rural and underserved areas, enter the profession without training in skill-based learning and rely on traditional methods like rote instruction. This gap is particularly apparent in areas like critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Although the MoE has revised teacher induction programs, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in second shift schools and refugee camp schools primarily serving Syrian refugees. Teachers in these schools are hired on temporary contracts and report that they often can’t access the same level of induction and training support as permanent teachers (Rauschenberger, Al Atari, Sarabi, and Sabella 2025). The informants highlighted the value of structured training, hands-on teaching, peer collaboration, and extracurricular activities in fostering a breadth of skills learning in Jordanian schools.

One official noted changing teacher practice was key, saying, “We do not want skills to exist only in documents. The real challenge is ensuring that they are taught in classrooms in a meaningful way.”

UNCLEAR EXPECTATIONS THROUGH ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

Another challenge teachers face is navigating the assessment systems shaping their accountability and institutional choices. While there has been progress in embedding analytical and critical thinking skills into national assessment tools (like the National Test for Education Quality Control), teachers reported that there is no systemic metric for creativity, collaboration, or socioemotional skills. Because teachers are ultimately evaluated against existing frameworks, which prioritize knowledge retention over skills application, their ability to focus on a broader set of skills is constrained. The volume of content teachers must cover was also repeatedly mentioned as a barrier to teaching a breadth of skills. As one principal noted, “The curriculum incorporates creativity; however, the excessive amount of information impacts the teachers’ ability to focus on educational methods and activities in general.” This highlights the misalignment and coherence gap between the curriculum’s and teacher training’s wider goals, and the real classroom conditions: content-focused assessments requiring teachers and students to prioritize disciplinary knowledge almost exclusively.

This is evidenced by the fact that the assessment tools for Arabic literacy rarely assess skills beyond critical thinking (often assessed through (1) identifying, clarifying, and organizing

information; (2) assessing validity and quality of information). As a result, teaching children cognitive and literary skills is promoted more than fostering creativity, communication, collaboration, and social and emotional skills that could enhance their literacy development (Li and Doyle 2020, Lexia Learning 2024).

RESOURCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRAINTS

Physical and material constraints further impede the translation of the breadth of skills vision into practice. In focus groups, teachers and principals consistently identified overcrowded classrooms as the primary barrier to interactive pedagogies like collaborative projects, debates, and hands-on activities. Participants also highlighted the cruciality of playgrounds, laboratories, and educational resources in engaging students, fostering the development of a range of skills, and enabling experiential learning and hands-on activities. However, many schools in Jordan lack these spaces and materials.

Instead, socioemotional learning and other skills are mainly promoted through NGO-run **extracurricular activities** when funding is available. Key informants highlighted that NGO-run programs—like Madrasati’s after-school Masahati Clubs and UNICEF’s Learning Bridges—promote extracurricular holistic learning via project work, STEM activities, and creative writing workshops. These clubs also give students opportunities to explore personal identity and learn about collaboration. This indicates that teaching socioemotional learning and related skills requires time and resources that schools do not currently

have, leading to reliance on outside programs to address these gaps and potential equity concerns for students in schools without such partnerships. This points to a shared commitment to teaching a breadth of skills but highlights the system’s inability to implement this vision given past resource constraints.

Last but not least, participants noted that limited access to non-academic subjects (e.g., arts, sports, and vocational skills) restricts opportunities for students to develop diverse skills beyond traditional academic content.

System incoherence and underlying power structures of the Jordanian education system

Finally, participants of the study discussed the fundamental misalignment between educational goals and learner priorities, and the disjointed practices in translating systemic vision into practice. Notably, we saw this misalignment in the systemic exclusion of student and family voices from transformation processes like policy-setting and design. This reflects broader challenges with cohesion, the third critical condition for education system transformation.

EXCLUSION OF YOUTH AND FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

Data suggests that current educational reforms in Jordan have been developed primarily by central government officials and international

Socioemotional learning and other skills are mainly promoted through NGO-run extracurricular activities when funding is available.

Focus group data revealed that students seem to be viewed as mere receivers of curriculum content and obligated participants in classroom learning activities in which they have little genuine interest or choice.

stakeholders with minimal input from the young people and communities they are intended to serve. As a result, the vision for the education system largely reflects the priorities of those with systemic power. These dynamics highlight how even well-intentioned reforms can overlook the perspectives and readiness of those most directly affected—students, families, and teachers—creating gaps between policy vision and classroom reality.

Focus group data revealed that students seem to be viewed as mere receivers of curriculum content and obligated participants in classroom learning activities in which they have little genuine interest or choice. One participant, an IREX representative from the PRESTIJ program, shared, “Students in schools are not used to this progressive form of teaching—role play, singing, and activities are not traditional teaching methods. Even parents sometimes do not understand the value of these activities.” Teachers and principals also noted students often prioritize achieving high grades over developing skills due to academic pressures.

The centralized nature of Jordan’s education system exacerbates stakeholder disconnection. Policy and planning decisions are routinely made at national levels without critical collaboration with local communities, teachers, students, or families. This top-down approach limits local ownership and creates implementation resistance when classroom realities conflict with policy expectations. For example, data reveals that partnerships between parents and schools remain limited, which may hinder engagement and the development of shared understanding

among families, students, and school staff that could foster change. As one interviewee, a Madrasati representative, stated, “[Schools and parents] are disconnected. There is a need to come up with a mechanism to connect these two and clarify the role of each in activating their roles in helping in student development.”

In sum, these findings illustrate how power imbalances and stakeholder exclusion weaken system cohesion, creating misalignment between policy intentions and stakeholder realities that ultimately constrains the commitment and capacity needed for sustainable transformation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Education system transformation does not occur by only changing one aspect, like the curriculum. Instead, curriculum reform is but one factor in realigning an entire system for a particular educational vision. The core of change is what happens in the classroom. Findings from Jordan reveal the need for an integrated, participatory approach to strengthening the three Cs (CUE 2022) as catalytic conditions for systems transformation, with the four Ps (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022, Winthrop, Morris, and Qargha 2023) offering a helpful framework for moving forward.

The following recommendations, rooted in the findings of the study, focus on greater alignment for transformative change. We propose that by addressing misalignments within the education system, these recommendations will strengthen the enabling conditions of the three Cs, creating the systemic coherence necessary for sustainable transformation.

RECOMMENDATION #1: CENTER YOUTH, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITY VOICES IN RE-ENVISIONING EDUCATION'S PURPOSE AND TRANSFORMATION

The results of the QRF's study highlight the absence of students, and by extension their families, in contributing to the system's vision, or **purpose**, for education and overall transformation. Their voices, along with those of marginalized teachers, are needed to fundamentally shift

teaching and learning in Jordan's classrooms. This point was highlighted in the finding that students often see school as a place where content-learning happens rather than one of learning, peer interaction, and self-development. So, while a broad commitment to a breadth of skills exists, actors seem to be misaligned on "what matters," including student outcome expectations and, ultimately, the purpose of education (Morris and Qargha 2023). Understanding the perspectives of those most intimately impacted by the education system, like students and families, will be key to changing what happens in the classroom.

In addition, although the findings indicated a commitment among national stakeholders and school staff in the study to teaching a breadth of skills, reforms were not made in consultation with students or families, nor were these changes communicated to them. Instead, students appear to be viewed as mere receivers of curriculum content and obligated participants in classroom learning activities in which they have little choice or genuine interest. The views and values of students are necessary components of systems transformation that have not been factored into Jordan's systemic reforms. With greater input from students and families, a more inclusive vision and local ownership of reforms may develop and yield more significant and sustainable changes in classroom teaching practices.

The results of the QRF's study highlight the absence of students, and by extension their families, in contributing to the system's vision, or purpose, for education and overall transformation.

RECOMMENDATION #2: FURTHER ALIGN THE PEDAGOGICAL CORE COMPONENTS FOR GREATER INSTRUCTIONAL COHERENCE

Currently, Jordan's education system faces systemic barriers that constrain teachers' capacity to implement holistic teaching and learning approaches. These barriers span multiple dimensions of the "pedagogical core"—curricula, assessment systems, teacher training, and teaching strategies—as well as structural constraints like time, resources, and professional support (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022). Based on this study's findings, four actionable steps are needed to ensure that change goes beyond curriculum reform alone. Both the curriculum and the support structures around teachers must be strengthened so that educators are equipped to effectively promote holistic learning and foster a breadth of skills in learners.

1. Curriculum mapping and time

allocation: Integrate a greater breadth of skills into the curriculum scope and sequence chart to ensure systemic inclusion and representation. This strategic planning would help incorporate these skills into textbook design and classroom practices. The current curriculum's excessive information volume, repeatedly identified by principals as a barrier to interactive teaching methods, must be addressed to avoid content overload. There must also be sufficient time allocated for teachers to help students develop critical sub-skills, like creativity and collaboration, and ensure critical skills are not overshadowed by traditional academic content.

Policymakers should establish clear guidelines for time allocation that protect space for skill-building activities and prevent the drift back to content-heavy instruction.

2. Enhanced activity design and teacher training:

Further transition from prescriptive activities focused on simple responses to open-ended tasks requiring extended responses supported by textual evidence or other trusted resources. This would encourage higher-order thinking, character growth, and meta-cognitive skill development. This recommendation is also crucial for language skills development and maximizes opportunities to learn the language—not just learn about it. Compared to previous textbooks, the new ones have made significant progress; however, closed questions still outnumber open-ended ones.

To support this transition, the fragmented professional development system identified in this study must be replaced by systemic, career-long learning pathways that build teachers' capacity for holistic pedagogies. Teachers need specific training in facilitating open-ended questioning, managing collaborative group work in overcrowded classrooms, and creating extended response activities. Policymakers should move beyond one-off training sessions by expanding and ensuring the consistent, cross-regional implementation of successful, sustained professional learning programs like PRESTIJ and "Teacher of the Future" that include classroom coaching and peer collaboration opportunities.

3. Incorporating more holistic learning approaches: Introduce problem- and project-based tasks with greater cognitive demands, and incorporate character-related and meta-learning competencies. These approaches offer genuine opportunities to develop cross-cutting skills, promote enjoyment in learning, provide real-world context for developing academic language, and seamlessly foster interdisciplinary connections.

However, implementing these approaches requires addressing resource and infrastructure constraints. The overcrowded classrooms identified by focus group participants as hindrances to collaborative learning need policy intervention. Schools require adequate physical spaces for group work, including laboratories, libraries, and flexible classroom arrangements that support diverse learning activities.

Teachers need access to teaching materials other than textbooks, like manipulatives for hands-on learning, technology for digital literacy development, and project supplies for thorough task completion.

4. Progressive assessment strategies: Develop and align assessments and learning progressions for each sub-competency, thus enabling teachers to track and support students' growth effectively. These should be research-backed assessments that accurately measure competency mastery using tools that reflect the depth and breadth of the skills taught. Policymakers should co-develop assessment tools for each prioritized competency (including creativity, collaboration, and socioemotional skills that are currently unmeasured), involving performance-based tasks that mirror real-world problem-solving rather than rote recall.

Next Steps: These insights will drive the QRF's next phase of work in Jordan in two steps. First, it plans to conduct research on youth voices and work with system actors to meaningfully engage and incorporate youth and families in articulating their vision for how school reforms can better reflect and address their values and aspirations. Then, the QRF would disseminate study results to the NCCD and other relevant stakeholders for consideration in addressing gaps and incoherences in new curriculum components hindering the implementation of holistic teaching and learning of a breadth of skills.



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ANNEXES

Table A: Summary of main findings from the Arabic curriculum

COMPONENT	FINDINGS
General Curriculum Framework	Outlines a comprehensive educational approach focused on developing well-rounded individuals with the necessary skills to thrive in a complex, dynamic world. Emphasizes the importance of integrating personality development, critical thinking, creativity, and core values such as respect, communication, and openness. Stresses the importance of keeping pace with technological advancements and ensuring students can adapt to global changes. Emphasizes language proficiency, problem-solving, research, inquiry, and information technology competencies. Underscores the importance of collaboration and teamwork skills. Emphasizes character development skills including integrity, inquiry, perseverance, respect for self and others + positive communication adaptability, meta-learning skills for lifelong learning and personal growth. Centrally focuses on cognitive and character skills but also stresses the importance of self-awareness and self-regulation.
Common issues and cross-cutting themes	Addresses the importance of health awareness, human rights, environmental issues, and civic responsibility. Focuses on critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, and the use of technology. Emphasizes character development themes such as ethics, respect, responsibility, and citizenship. Highlights themes related to meta-cognition, such as need for continuous learning, adaptability, self-management, and initiative.
Teaching methods guidance	Focuses on the Holistic Approach to Language and emphasizes the development of the four primary language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Highlights skills interdependence, which fosters critical thinking, communication, and creativity. Emphasizes play-based learning to promote communication, collaboration, and curiosity. Does not incorporate other important educational approaches critical to promoting transversal skills, such as project-based and problem-based learning. Combines of a contradictory mix of teaching approaches (Holistic Language Learning, Differentiated Instruction, and reading techniques i.e. Five Finger Strategy, SQ3R, the Self-Questioning Strategy) Allows for flexibility in using individual, pair, or group work at the teacher's discretion.
Assessment guidance	FRAMEWORK GUIDANCE ON ASSESSMENT Prioritizes authentic assessment (over traditional rote memory testing) which evaluates understanding, application, and synthesis of knowledge. Focuses on tasks that simulate real-life scenarios and require problem-solving Emphasizes assessment strategies/tools supporting differentiated instruction and the development of pupils' responsibility, respect for others, and self-awareness. Emphasizes self-assessment strategies and tools that respect individual differences and focus on personal development. TEACHER GUIDANCE ON ASSESSMENT Suggests strategies and tools for assessing learning activities, including holistic tools such as learning portfolios. Promotes some authentic assessment in textbooks through rubrics that support self-assessment in speaking and writing activities, helping pupils assess their progress and guide family support on workbook assignments. Fails to provide any mention of learning portfolio in the textbooks.
Expected learning outcomes	Greater representation of the following competencies (and sub-competencies): Communication (clearly and concisely articulating ideas or messages) Critical Thinking (identifying, clarifying, and organizing information + assessing validity and quality of information) Creativity (developing personal tastes, aesthetics, and style + connecting, reorganizing, and refining ideas into a cohesive whole)
Textbooks	See Table B

Table B: Competencies and sub-competencies present and missing in new Arabic textbooks

DOMAIN	COMPETENCY	SUB-COMPETENCIES FOUND	SUB-COMPETENCIES NOT FOUND
Skills	Critical Thinking	Identifying, clarifying, and organizing information	Weighing the pros and cons of alternative choices Applying sound reasoning to decisionmaking Reflecting critically on one's own reasoning and assumptions
	Communication	Clearly and concisely articulating ideas or messages Communicating with fidelity across distinct modes and mediums Adapting messages according to the audience Asking questions and actively listening	Sharing one's vision and inspiring others
	Creativity	Developing personal tastes, aesthetics, and style Connecting, reorganizing, and refining ideas into a cohesive whole	Being comfortable with risks, uncertainty, and failure Realizing ideas while recognizing constraints
	Collaboration	Taking and sharing responsibility with others	Optimizing team resources and unique skills Navigating and resolving interpersonal conflict Actively supporting and showing compassion for team members
Character	Curiosity	Seeking to understand deeply Surveying opportunities and exploring novel experiences	Seeking different perspectives to broaden understanding Envisioning and prioritizing one's interests and passions
	Resilience	Establishing and maintaining effective habits	Persevering through challenges Building strong social networks Managing stress to maintain performance Motivating oneself through meaning or purpose
	Ethics	Identifying and describing ethical concepts, rights, and responsibilities Making ethical decisions and standing up for the rights of others Understanding and empathizing with the perspectives of others	Recognizing and implementing one's moral code Contributing to the broader group or community

Table C: Reported curriculum strategies for fostering a breadth of skills among students (from focus groups)

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
Interaction & Questioning	Teachers ask open-ended questions such as extracting values from texts, imagining themselves as authors, suggesting story changes, etc.
Competitions	Holding school competitions that stimulate critical thinking such as debates and essay writing contests, both of which help students develop their ability to analyze information, articulate arguments, and think logically. Also organizing competitions to encourage and showcase students' talents.
Creative Activities	Engaging students in creative endeavors such as art, poetry writing, storytelling, filmmaking, and creating educational tools.
School Theater	Utilizing school theaters for staging plays, reciting poetry, and storytelling.
Collaborative Work	Dividing students into groups, assigning leaders, and tasking them to collaborate on specific topics, culminating in presentations to the class.
Essay Topics	Assigning personal essay topics, such as family or homeland, that help students express themselves and develop communication skills.
Leadership	Involving students in parliamentary councils and in community service.

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