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Working Papers on Education Policy

Learning and community hubs for the evolving right to education in times of crisis

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Acknowledgements

This working paper arose from several meetings between UNESCO programme specialists in the Section of Education Policy and the principal investigators of the PANEX-Youth project.[1] Through these meetings, the idea of schools as community hubs and the evolving right to education was born.

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This paper is based on a synthesis of evidence collated from several major, international research projects. The PANEX-Youth project was formed of researchers from University College London and the University of Birmingham, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the University of the Free State in South Africa and the University of São Paulo, in Brazil. This large-scale research project (2022-2024) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC - ES/X000761/1), the National Research Foundation (NRF – n°149083), and the Sao Paulo State Research Foundation (FAPESP proc. n. 2021/07399-2 and CNPq proc. n. 309533/2025-2). It aimed to understand how young people adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess the wider impact of such processes of adaptation. Data used in this paper were extracted from the first two stages of this research: a global and national mapping exercise and interviews with key organisations and professionals. The mapping exercise was conducted solely through a desk-based review of academic and policy literature, focusing on publicly-available documents published between June 2022 and April 2023 (435 documents were reviewed, with 365 selected for their relevance). Following the above review, the team conducted interviews with key policymakers and practitioners in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Brazil and South Africa to explore in more detail what had been the key impacts of pandemic-related policy on young people's access to food, education and play/leisure (32 stakeholders were interviewed in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 32 in Brazil and 29 in South Africa).

[1] https://panexyouth.com/

It also sought to examine what policy, programmes or initiatives were developed, and how local places mattered (including home life and household contexts). The team then engaged with young people (aged 12 to 24 years old) in each of the three countries, through interviews and focus groups (a total of over 150 young people were reached). Further details about the research can be found in PANEX-Youth reports: https://panexyouth.com/home-2/resources/.

Evidence from the PANEX-Youth project is supplemented by several other studies led by members of the team who authored this paper: Lauren Andres's research (2023-2024), funded by the British Academy, which examined adaptable cities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of the project focused on community initiatives in Paris, London, New York and Tokyo. Research included the collection of both secondary and primary data, across G7 countries and in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, North America, France and Japan. Paul Moawad's research in Lebanon and along the Lebanese-Syrian borderscape in 2019-2020, focusing on similar themes to the PANEX-Youth project (Moawad, 2026). Qualitative research was undertaken with 108 Syrian refugees (18 years to 75) and 60 members from the host community, as well as stakeholders from multisectoral agencies to understand the impact of encampment on education, food, play and livelihood conditions of refugees. This research particularly informs the example of a school in one informal tented settlement that emerged as a temporary social hub (detailed in section 3.3). Peter Kraftl's research draws on several large-scale qualitative projects from over one hundred educational sites in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Brazil (funded by AHRC, ESRC and FAPESP). This work has examined processes of school building and refurbishment (e.g. den Besten et al., 2008), children and young people's everyday experiences of schools and other learning institutions (Kraftl et al., 2022a, 2022b), and the geographies of alternative and informal learning across a range of contexts and especially in terms of outdoor and environmental education (Kraftl, 2014), as well as the role of education within children and young people's wider experiences of their communities (Christensen et al. 2017).

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Executive summary

The right to education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right, enshrined in various international frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Education serves not only as a mechanism for personal development but also as a means to achieve broader social, economic, and political goals, such as fostering democratic societies, promoting economic growth, and ensuring social cohesion. Despite these affirmations, significant challenges continue to obstruct universal access to education, particularly for marginalized populations. This paper examines how learning and community hubs can play a vital role in addressing these challenges, particularly in crisis situations (typically pandemics, environmental disasters, and conflicts), by complementing traditional education systems and ensuring the fulfilment of broader social rights.

Challenges to the universality of the right to education

Despite numerous legal instruments aimed at protecting the right to education, access remains inconsistent due to financial, geographical, and social barriers. The cost of education, even when nominally free, remains prohibitive in many regions, particularly when considering additional expenses such as transportation, school supplies, and uniforms. Vulnerable populations, including girls, children with disabilities, and those living in remote or conflict-affected areas, face even greater challenges in accessing quality education.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and deepened these disparities. The abrupt transition to remote learning and countries' lack of preparedness to deliver education programmes digitally or through other means (e.g. radio, TV, etc.) left many students without access to essential educational resources due to limited access to technology and stable internet connections. Schools, which often serve as critical community support structures providing meals, health services, and social engagement, struggled to adapt to the disruptions, leaving many children without crucial support systems. Studies indicate that over one billion children in low- and middle-income countries missed at least a year of in-person schooling, exacerbating learning gaps and social inequalities.

The role of learning and community hubs

To address these challenges, learning and community hubs have emerged as alternative educational structures that extend beyond traditional school settings. Historically, schools have served as hubs providing more than just education; they have facilitated access to food, healthcare, social support and recreational activities. However, crises such as pandemics, environmental disasters, and conflicts demonstrate the need for additional, more flexible structures that can ensure continuity in learning and essential services.

Learning and community hubs—whether school-based or independently operated—offer localized, adaptable solutions that cater to the specific needs of different populations. Examples of these physical hubs may include schools, community or religious centres, health centres or social hubs.

Often, beyond their primary or stated role, they integrate multiple services, ranging from education and childcare to healthcare and vocational training, and foster community engagement and social inclusion. Their effectiveness lies on their ability to leverage local resources, engage multiple stakeholders, and provide targeted interventions that traditional school systems may not always be equipped to offer. While being physical structures, their role may also expand to include more relational and virtual roles, such as social relationships, support and knowledge provision. Further details about the roles and key principles that can define learning and community hubs are provided in the next section.

Key principles for effective learning and community hubs

This paper draws upon an inductive analytical process which arose through collating extensive international research programmes, as detailed in the appendix section. These studies were carried out before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, hence reflecting a range of ongoing challenges and processes, but also unprecedented disruptions and crises. While having distinct scopes, objectives and funders, all of the studies share four components: inclusion of children and young people's practices and needs in the research objectives; a focus on socio-economic vulnerabilities and marginalised groups; an interest in small- and large-scale adaptations and responses in contexts of compound crisis; and, attention to people's access to key rights, needs and services (including education).

Based on research and case studies, five core principles define successful learning and community hubs:

1. **Delivering diverse lifelong learning opportunities**. Hubs must provide lifelong learning opportunities that encompass traditional literacy, digital literacy, and life skills education. Ensuring accessibility and adaptability in learning programs allows individuals from different backgrounds to benefit from education, regardless of age or socioeconomic status.
2. **Addressing primary needs through integrated services**. Learning does not occur in isolation; it is interconnected with the satisfaction of other basic needs, such as food security, healthcare, and psychological well-being. Hubs should incorporate these services, recognizing that a child's ability to learn is directly influenced by their physical and emotional health.
3. **Fostering community integration and participation**. Hubs should act as physical places of gathering that encourage engagement, empowerment, and civic participation within and beyond the hub. They should provide platforms for different social groups to interact, exchange knowledge, and collaborate on community-driven initiatives, ensuring inclusivity and social cohesion.
4. **Encouraging multi-sector collaboration**. Effective hubs require partnerships between governments, non-governmental organizations, private sector stakeholders, and local communities. By fostering these collaborations, hubs can ensure sustainable funding, shared expertise, and improved service delivery.
5. **Establishing robust evaluation and accountability mechanisms**. To measure impact and ensure long-term success, hubs must incorporate rigorous assessment frameworks that track

learning outcomes, service utilization, and community engagement. Transparent monitoring mechanisms allow for continuous improvements and scalability of successful models.

Support for policy and practice

Contemporary education systems are grappling with pressing issues like poor learning outcomes, poor levels of learner retention and progression, school violence and discrimination, heavy workloads for educators, declining student mental health, and teacher burnout and attrition (UNESCO, 2016, 2022). The global education crisis (United Nations, 2023) necessitates systemic transformation that includes the widespread implementation and institutional support for learning and community hubs. The UNESCO Global Happy Schools Framework (UNESCO, 2024) provides a valuable model for integrating these hubs into national education policies. The framework focuses on four pillars—People, Process, Place, and Principles—that guide the development of inclusive, holistic learning environments. The Happy Schools framework is specifically designed for local contextualization and adaptation. To support school communities to implement the Happy Schools framework, UNESCO's Education Microplanning Toolkit is designed to support education planning at the local level. The Toolkit emphasizes four main aspects of planning and change: increasing access, improving learning outcomes, enhancing community participation and supporting open and informed decision making.

Conclusion

Learning and community hubs represent a critical response to the ongoing challenges in education accessibility and equity. By addressing educational disparities, integrating essential services, and fostering community engagement, these hubs provide a holistic solution that extends beyond conventional schooling. As education systems worldwide continue to face disruptions, investing in these hubs offers a pathway toward more resilient, inclusive, and equitable education for all. Implementing these principles through structured policies and global collaboration will ensure that the evolving right to education remains a reality for future generations.

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem: The purported universality of the right to education is challenged in times of crisis

Education is not only a fundamental human right as conceived of in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), but also a catalyst for realizing other human rights, as highlighted in General Comment 13 by the United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR, 1999). UNESCO (2019) emphasizes that education should be leveraged to promote economic growth, foster democratic and peaceful societies, and encourage participation in decision-making processes. It is increasingly recognized as a sound and fruitful investment for states with practical benefits extending beyond academic learning, as it encompasses aspects such as health education, recreation, play and cultural awareness. Thus, education emerges as a multifaceted tool for individual empowerment, societal progress, and global development. This holistic perspective aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), acknowledging the interrelatedness of the right to education with other children's rights, including access to health care, food, play and leisure.

Despite the purported universality of the right to education and numerous legal instruments added to ensure that the rights of marginalised groups are protected (Fredman, 2021), with all countries in the world having ratified at least one treaty, certain aspects of the right to education access and availability for all are being challenged globally, with legal frameworks effectively not being fully enforced resulting in many children being forced out of education (UNESCO, 2025). Major barriers to universal access remain, which include the prohibitive cost of public education for governments and the ability to provide education to the most vulnerable and marginalised (including in some contexts girls, children with disabilities, children living in remote areas or migrant children) (UNESCO, 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, education systems underwent significant upheaval, exposing and further exacerbating existing disparities in educational access. Particularly impactful were the challenges faced by children and young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds across all countries. One of the crucial lessons of the global pandemic, in line with what was already observed in numerous post-crisis contexts (typically conflicts), is that ensuring the universal right to education cannot solely rely on the efforts of individual nation states. Amid the crisis, many national and local governments failed to sustain equal and quality education during COVID-19 (see Andres et al., 2025) with intersectional burdens upon vulnerable and marginalized learners. These burdens manifested in various forms, including inadequate access to essential devices like laptops or computers, unreliable internet connectivity, challenging learning environments, diminished opportunities for social interaction, and the inability of schools and educators to transition effectively to online platforms. The consequences were staggering, with an estimated 1 billion children in low- and middle-income countries missing out on at least one year of in-person schooling (Schady et al., 2023).

COVID-19 illuminated the urgent need for coordinated international efforts to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, have access to the right to quality education, especially in times of disruption and/or crises ranging from further pandemics to environmental disasters and conflicts. This phenomenon echoed the sentiments expressed by the International Commission on the Futures of Education, which called for a new 'social contract' for education (UNESCO, 2021), and resonated in discussions during the United Nations Transforming Education Summit in September 2022, where the United Nations Secretary-General called on the international community to respond to the twin crises of equity and relevance and to reshape education for a post-pandemic world (United Nations, 2023).

1.2. Aim of this paper: Examining the role of learning and community hubs for the evolving right to education

To address the above challenges, the UNESCO Initiative on the Evolving Right to Education (2021-2025) investigates how the right to education could be further reinforced in the international normative framework to meet evolving needs of societies. Through the political push in the education field, instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic and consolidated at the United Nations Transforming Education Summit, the need to build back better and more resilient systems was recognised. New demands, such as technological changes, job and skills mismatch, and increasing political tensions, are being placed on education, which must be built upon a foundation of robust infrastructure, pedagogies, teachers and materials to fulfil its principal aims. A holistic view of education, with an explicit focus on lifelong learning, equity, inclusion, quality and learning outcomes requires a system-wide approach.

In response to the above challenges, the **main aim** of this working paper is to outline how – especially in times of crisis – learning and community hubs can help meet the evolving right to education in different contexts around the world. Its secondary aim is to provide a set of principles that characterise those hubs, and how they align with the wider framework of UNESCO's (2024) Global Happy Schools Framework, which provides a model for integrating these hubs into national education policies. The Happy Schools Framework was selected for study because it focuses on the school as a community, which includes parents and other local actors that are important to the school. Importantly, this framework's specific objective is to improve learning processes and outcomes (in contrast to other school frameworks which focus on nutrition, health, or social services).

The multiple challenges that learners face in times of crisis require interventions from other sectors as well as education. Such intersectoral and coordinated approaches involves a whole-of-government approach. In a context of ongoing disruptions, increasing global and local socio-economic inequalities, reflecting the nature of multiple crises, just as the right to education is indispensable for the fulfilment of other rights, it is also intrinsically interdependent with the protection of other rights and needs. It is crucial to identify and reflect where and by whom education, and related rights and services, are and can be provided. Historically, schools have played a key role in acting as 'hubs'. However not all schools have the means, resources and engagement to provide such support and services. Moments of disruption and crisis have led to innovative

responses and the emergence of 'more-than' school hubs, often organised by community-based groups.

As per the principles outlined in the Executive Summary of this paper, our **definition of hubs** is of physical sites that offer localized, adaptable solutions that cater to the specific needs of different populations. Examples of these physical hubs may include schools, community or religious centres, health centres or social hubs (we use the term '**learning and community hubs**' as shorthand to describe these sites). Often, beyond their primary or stated role, they integrate multiple services, ranging from education and childcare to healthcare and vocational training, and foster community engagement and social inclusion. Their effectiveness is based on their ability to leverage local resources, engage multiple stakeholders, and provide targeted interventions that traditional school systems may not always be equipped to offer. While being physical structures, their role may also expand to include more relational and virtual roles, such as social relationships, support and knowledge provision.

The goal of this paper is to examine the role of both schools and community-focused centres (such as religious, community or social centres) in providing local, grass-roots support for access to education, food, and wellbeing. Hence, we unpack how hubs can and should be used as pillars to serve the delivery of education, childcare, health and wellbeing, as well as community integration, empowerment and citizen participation. Doing so allows us to support the call to transform and reimagine education, learning spaces, and the purposes of education while acknowledging the interdependent nature of leaning as interdependent with other needs (e.g. nutrition and wellbeing) and occurring throughout life (both life-wide and lifelong).

1.3. Paper structure

The paper is structured in line with our inductive methodology, described in section 2. We start by discussing how schools, historically, have always operated as hubs, expanding their duties beyond formal education. We then reflect on how service provision was disrupted during COVID-19, highlighting how alternative and innovative responses allowed the delivery of services and meeting of key rights. This then takes us to engaging with what are the key components of learning and community hubs, how and why they should be at the core of the future directions for the evolving right to education and what challenges are to be accounted for. The paper concludes by outlining key principles for learning and community hubs, and how UNESCO's (2024) Global Happy Schools Framework can support their implementation in diverse global contexts. In each section we use illustrative examples and vignettes that are used as case studies. It is important to stress that they are not being elevated as good (or best) practices.

2. Research methodology

This paper draws upon an inductive analytical review process which arose through collating extensive research programmes across the globe as detailed in the appendix section. These studies and programmes were carried out before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, hence reflecting a range of ongoing challenges and processes, but also unprecedented disruptions and crises. While having distinct scopes, objectives and funders, all of the studies share four components: an inclusion of children and young people's practices and needs in the research objectives; a focus on socio-economic vulnerabilities and marginalised groups; an interest in small- and large-scale adaptations and responses in contexts of compound crisis; and, attention to people's access to key rights, needs and services (including education).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review of the studies included the following. Attention in reviewing secondary data and selecting case studies was given to "adaptation techniques", "digital divide", "vulnerable and disadvantaged young children", "Free School Meals (FSM)", "food insecurity", "physical activities and sports", "play and leisure", "community-led initiatives", "schools and teachers", "food banks and charities", "nutrition", "young people's perception and trust", "government lockdown policies", "government and communities", "government and charities", "funding", "informal and formal approaches", "socio-economic implications", "policy coordination", "accessibility and mobility", "remote learning and Virtual learning environment (VLE)", "active travel", "young people's employment", "economic inactivity", "learning inequalities", "children's behaviour and mental wellbeing", "poor households", "Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) population", "home space and learning", "loneliness and isolation of young children" and "creative play". We included case studies which were developed over the past 10 years and still going on. We excluded studies which tended to focus on very technical aspects of education and children's development.

Project outcomes were brought together as part of the discussions conducted between the authorial team. During 2022-2023, the team engaged in a programme of seminars and meetings which aimed to discuss the insights from their respective work, specifically lessons drawn out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those studies revealed adaptations around education and related service provision and specifically how actors and organisations from within (usually, schools) and outside the formal education system (often, community-based organisations) 'stepped in' to supplement or fill gaps in terms of the right to education (and associated rights and services) – through what we have termed 'hubs'. From an analytical perspective, we questioned the purpose of different kinds of hubs, specifically what their primary and secondary functions were, their core actions and activities (and how they evolved and expanded during times of crises, and particularly the COVID-19 pandemic), their institutional and governance arrangements and the funding that is associated with the everyday and long-term management of these places.

The term “hubs” was identified for its appropriateness to engage with issues of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of education (known as the 4As framework, see. Tomaševski, 2001.) and other human rights as well as the emerging trend to include accountability, as a 5th A. The original 4As framework on the right to education, which is the most common analytical framework used for interpreting and understanding the normative content of the right to education, is based on these four core dimensions of education. In recent years, there has been an evolution towards adding accountability as a fifth dimension, so that it is referred to as the 5As framework.

The term “learning” followed UNESCO’s pillars of learning: *learning to know*, *learning to do*, *learning to live together*, and *learning to be* (Delors, 1989; UNESCO, 2022a). Sobe (2023) recently reworked those principles within a commons framing and suggested a more contemporary interpretation, accounting for the latest considerations ushered by the pandemic and the context of fragility, precarity and uncertainty that societies are in. He argues that these should be revisited as following: *Learning to study, inquire and co-construct together*, seeing educators through constructivist pedagogical approaches and towards viewing their students as learning communities; *Learning to collectively mobilize*, ensuring that learning goes beyond practice in the workplace and enables collective action and empowerment; *Learning to live in a common world*, emphasizing the importance of education with common living and shared experience; and, *Learning to attend and care*, moving beyond the individual and insisting on the relational nature of being and caring for each other. We embraced this interpretation, and this was combined with the five ‘A’s framework acknowledged above.

3. Schools as traditional hubs for service provision

Hubs for service provision have historically been constructed around schools. Hence, this is our starting point in examining what learning and community hubs are and could be. In many geographical contexts, schools have acted as sites at which the basic needs of children – especially vulnerable children – can be addressed with wider impact and benefits for their facilities and communities. This concerns access to education but also food, play and leisure as well as basic healthcare services (e.g. vaccinations).

For decades, schools have been the place where disadvantaged children can be provided with often their only nutritious meal of the day. School health and nutrition policies and programmes are a practical and affordable way to support learners’ well-being and development, globally, when in place (UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP, 2023). School feeding programs are common around the world and with massive relevance in middle and low-income countries. In 2021, of 192 registered countries, 117 had such programs, with Europe and Asia having the most ‘comprehensive’ (covering four key aspects: nutrition; cultural value of food; food safety; participation of agro-families) (Cupertino et al., 2021). Based on constitutional principles of nutrition and basic education, South Africa for example has an active school feeding scheme in low-resource areas providing a daily meal for about 9 million learners. In 2020, it was estimated that 8 out of 10 individuals (i.e. 11.9 million learners) aged 5-24 attended a school where food was given as part of the national feeding scheme;

the highest proportion of learners were the 5-9 (79.3%) and the 20-24 (83.7%) age groups (Stats SA, 2022: 16).

School feeding programs not only support children's dietary requirements, but their inclusion in education and wider society, with a range of generally long-lasting positive outcomes, including: intake of energy; enrolment at school; and, attendance (Jomaa et al., 2011). In a world of changing food systems and transitional diets with more calories and micronutrient deficiencies, school feeding programs are also important for implementing policies and practices towards better nutritional choices, reducing the joining risks of obesity and malnutrition through public health communication (Swinburn et al., 2019, UNESCO and LSHTM, 2025). Their positive outcomes on cognition and academic achievements as well as social benefits, such as improving friendships, school engagement and behaviour (Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2019; Jose et al., 2020) are often highlighted but however less clear (Jomaa, 2011; Kraftl et al., 2022a).

For many years, schools have also been the privileged place for health services and constitute a core priority for the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021). This includes vaccinations, support for mental health and help in case of abuse and violence. As noted by UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP (2023, p.34), there is "a growing focus on the potential of the school system to promote health and well-being, with a shift to more comprehensive, integrated approaches to School Health and Nutrition and increased recognition that learners' health and well-being should be a core mission of education".

In many countries, a significant number of vaccinations are delivered at school. WHO consider that the school setting offers an effective platform for reaching children and adolescents with vaccination services (e.g. tetanus-diphtheria, polio, measles but also yearly flu vaccinations), as well as an opportunity to catch up children who may not have received all age-appropriate vaccines as well as provide them with latest vaccinations (e.g. human papillomavirus (HPV), meningococcal). Schools, as in Africa, are frequently used to offer primary healthcare and vaccinations for mothers and babies too; they are used as well to reach young people and teachers for HIV prevention, reproductive health and sex education (Arnquist & Weintraub, 2011) as well as for promoting healthy lifestyles. The Lovelife initiative and their Groundbreakers[2] Programme in South Africa, which tackles self-esteem, violence, empowerment, poverty, and unemployment, is an important example (Peltzer & Chirinda, 2013).

Schools also provide services that fulfil children and young people's right to play, leisure, rest and recreation (as per Article 31 of the CRC) even if access to these can significantly differ from one country to another. Typically, in Brazil for instance, public investment in play equipment in schools has been very limited: only 40% of preschool buildings have playgrounds, 33% have open playgrounds and 24% have green areas (Instituto Alana 2020). Globally there have been many attempts to keep schools open out of school hours as to allow children and other community members (including adults) to continue learning and playing (in some cases through opening up sporting facilities for (paid-for) participation). In Paris (France), for instance, the "oasis playground" initiative (*cours oasis*) aims to transform school playgrounds into greener and more

[2] See https://lovelife.org.za/, last accessed 30th January 2024.

climate resilient places while creating new open spaces (out of school times) for local communities to use for leisure and relaxation. In the U, this kind of provision was for several years formalised through the notion of 'Extended Services' (i.e. 'extension' beyond the central educational remit of a school) (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). In the United States of America, 'Full-Service Community' Schools emphasise partnership delivery with other providers so that schools become a place for play, leisure, health and care (Adams, 2020).

To deliver education, play, leisure, rest and recreation, for all, differently, attempts to change the roles of schools were made. In Seoul, the Republic of Korea, the Seoul Plan 2030 emphasised the achievement of "education communities", defined by integrating schools with public (education) facilities such as youth centres, community centres, libraries and museums (Kim and Han, 2023). Between 2000 and 2010, the government of Seoul funded an initiative that turned schools into vibrant places for sporting and community activities (Kim and Han, 2012). Through this initiative, school fences and walls were demolished and "school parks" were created, with different recreational facilities accessible to the local community (Kim and Han, 2023). However, the local government had to revise this initiative and introduce security measures following several incidences of sexual harassment and abuse of school children during school hours.

Attempts to better link education and play show the need to have a robust plan and strategy of community integration in schools. Although it faced difficulties, the Korean example demonstrates how the evolving right to education is displayed in the role of hubs in providing inter-generational education through social interactions by attempting to build a shared sense of identity, shared memories and a strong sense of place and community belonging (Cresswell, 2014). In some instances, policy-makers have argued that the very presence of a new or refurbished school building may not only have a potentially transformative effect on learners themselves, but on the cohesion and aspirations of an entire community (Kraftl, 2012). Whether or not the provision of services like play is more ad hoc (i.e. simply available out of school hours) or formalised in policy-making, the evidence as to the effectiveness of such approaches for greater levels of inclusion of minoritized and marginalised groups is unclear (de Royston and Madkins, 2020). This is particularly the case in less developed countries, with fewer financial resources, like Brazil (Lecler and Moll, 2012). As section 5 of this paper argues, a key principle for future research and policy-making on learning and community hubs is the development of a robust evaluation process that can – ultimately – identify and share examples of good practice.

Finally, schools are sites of social capital that leverage community development efforts to enhance civic participation (Brownlow, 2013; Nast & Blockland, 2013) and are often at the forefront of promoting a diverse range of activities – including arts, drama and dance – in order to promote cohesion in multicultural contexts (Bennett et al., 2017). It should not, however, be assumed that schools are unproblematic 'solutions' when it comes to promoting social cohesion – they can also be sites of contestation wherein multiculturalism must be negotiated on an ongoing, dynamic, everyday basis (Meetoo, 2020).

Box 1: The 'Jusoor' school – an informal anchor for education and community in times of crisis

The 'Jusoor' school is situated in an informal tented settlement (ITS) in the Beqaa area along the Lebanese-Syrian borderscape (Moawad, 2022). The 'Jusoor' school is an anomaly, not commonly observed in other ITSs in Lebanon, due to the Lebanese government's restrictive measures.
It is built from temporary adaptative materials (including containers) and isn't an official school (i.e. approved by the state). This informal school aids in supporting engagement and dialogues between refugees and host-community members, promote social interactions amongst community members as well as of course provide education and food to children.
Its role as anchor manifests in different ways. First, it arises from the participatory construction process which engaged all stakeholders, including community members and refugees; this led to the creation of an informal social space within the school where everyone can gather. Co-design triggered a sense of ownership and empowerment amongst host-community members and refugees. Secondly, when no classes are taking place, the school becomes a social space for events and training workshops for women (e.g. sewing), food distribution, and a place where community members and refugees come together to pass time and chat. Third, in terms of access to education, the 'Jusoor' school acts as an educational facility for Syrian refugee children who are not enrolled in Lebanese schools. In this capacity, relationships and learning exchanges between refugees of all ages are strengthened. The school brings them together and transforms into a social gathering hub at drop-off and pick-up times. The 'Jusoor' example adequately illustrates the role of schools in times of crisis, and this was further reinforced, but also challenged, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Authors.

The Jusoor School:
an example of participatory and collaboration process between refugees and the host-community.

4. Alternative service provision by learning and community hubs in times of crisis

This section examines how both school and non-school settings and actors can support the right to education (and related rights including access to food, play and leisure) during times of crisis. Here, lessons are to be drawn from the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic. This section highlights how some schools extended their remit to provide access to education and other resources; how schools operated in collaboration with other organisations, and especially community-based initiatives; and how, in some circumstances, the work of other organisations (especially community-based) as hubs supplemented the work of schools.

From February 2020 to April 2022, the global average for school closure was 142 days fully closed and 151 days partially closed. Uganda for example closed schools for 83 weeks (UNESCO, 2021b). In Brazil, over 40 weeks of school were missed (UNESCO, 2021), and UNICEF (2023) estimates South Africa children lost about 46% of school time over these two years. The full closure of schools due to periods of lockdowns had detrimental impacts on young people and their families – both in terms of accessing the right to education and other services. To the goal of ensuring learning continuity during school closures was added other challenges: from ensuring children had ways to continue playing and socialising to safeguarding the dietary requirements of vulnerable young people. In 2020, 39 billion school meals were missed and between 4 to 9 out of 10 in-school meals were not provided to school children (Borkowski et al., 2021). Due to lockdowns and social distancing, play and ways of socialising shifted to being largely home-based and virtual (i.e. online), with significant consequences for those living in more challenging family settings (e.g. overcrowding, no garden, working parents in jobs that could not shift online, lack of access to devices or internet, etc.). Overall, young people in monetary poor households had diminished play opportunities due to the lack of access to available and safe playing environments. Schools and/or a range of other organisations attempted to address children's rights to education, food, play, socialisation and more in a range of ways; key examples are outlined below.

In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Oak National Academy was created in April 2020 by a group of teachers and partners; within two weeks an online classroom and resource hub was established to help educators, parents and children in their remote learning (Vegas and Winthrop, 2020). Such support was often cross-sectoral, also tackling food poverty and, in some occasions access, to play and leisure. Teachers went beyond their traditional responsibility to liaise with authorities and social services in order to ensure learning, food distribution and mental health support towards students. Over a third of them provided their own personal laptops and devices to sustain educational continuity (Sharp et al. 2020). Various mechanisms were used by teachers to ensure their welfare duty too, from having 1-to-1 online or phone calls with children to visiting vulnerable children at their homes, and from seeing students at school to distributing food parcels and handing out meal vouchers at their own expense (Moss et al. 2020, HRW 2020). It was common for school staff to distribute food, education materials, play packages and books, often in partnership with charities.

Similarly, adventure playgrounds in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland played a key role with workers going beyond their current duties and doing more outreach work (King, 2020). Adventure playgrounds in deprived neighbourhoods became key places to provide support for young people during the pandemic (ibid.). In some cases, playworkers (professionals working at adventure playgrounds) worked with local communities to extend provision out of their managed sites – for instance in supporting 'play streets' schemes, with temporary small-scale adaptations to outdoor spaces and streets such as play trails (Russell and Stenning, 2021).

Similar mobilisations occurred in Africa. In Congo, a partnership between the government, UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) generated the "School Feeding at Home" initiative, which distributed take-home food rations via more than 340 schools to 61,000 children (Hittmeyer, 2020). In South Africa, some schools in the Western Cape Province were used to distribute meals to eligible learners, while learners could collect their meals from schools closer to them in instances where their schools were further away (Hendricks et al., 2021).

Box 2: Levana primary school – growing learning, nutrition, and community resilience in

The Levana Primary School in Lavender Hill, Cape Town is a meaningful case study. The school was established in 1977 and is a no-fee school. It is situated in the Cape Flats which is a poverty and gang-ridden area of the city with high levels of unemployment. An informal settlement that depends on services delivered to the neighbourhood is also situated in this area. Before 2015, many organisations working with the school, including ESKOM (the South African electricity public utility company) stopped supporting it due to vandalism and robbery to school property which greatly stifled any successful projects. However, in 2015, the partnerships were renewed, and a garden was established at the school to provide outdoor and hands on learning for the learners. Levana Primary School transformed into an eco-school, which beyond normal school feeding schemes, grows its own food in two organic vegetable gardens, alongside a medicinal and fynbos garden. During COVID-19, after feeding learners, food grown from the vegetable gardens was distributed to the wider community. In this way, the school expanded both on its already wide ambit as a source of nutrition and subsistence for learners, to provide limited but crucial nutrition and subsistence support to the wider community.

Source: Authors.

Turning to South America, again, schools and teachers played critical roles, alongside community and other actors, as in Brazil. In Honduras, teachers prepared food rations and rode their bikes going door-to-door and distributing them to their students (World Food Programme, 2020). In Brazil, the failure of state representatives to provide for all children's needs led to the spread of food distribution initiatives; these emerged from school communities, in conjunction with civil society, private actors and religious entities (Boullosa and Peres, 2022; Domingos et al., 2022). NGOs and civil society organisations provided play kits with educational materials to be used by families, alongside the kinds of online spaces of interaction indicated above (Memoricidade, 2020).

Service provision in Brazil extended beyond schools displaying other ways to deliver various forms of learning and access to key services via hubs. In Paraisópolis, the second

largest favela in São Paulo known for its history of social mobilisation and fight for rights, a series of autonomous projects were developed in the neighbourhood community centre, the 'Pavilion'. One of them led to the local production and distribution of packed lunches (Mãos de Maria) and masks (Costurando Sonhos). The Pavilion also started hosting a logistics centre for the distribution of online shopping in the community (Favela Brasil XPress), as well as a series of projects focused on social communication about COVID-19 prevention. These initiatives were boosted by public and private resources mobilised by the G10 Favelas, a non-profit organisation focusing on social entrepreneurship and the right to lifelong education. In Luz, a very deprived area and the primary spot for drug (crack) dealing and consumption in the city, the action developed by the Teatro de Contêiner Mungunzá are revealing. Established in 2016 (initially for a temporary period on an empty parking lot owned by the municipality), the theatre enlarged its cultural activities and community actions during the pandemic. From offering free artistic and educational activities during the day for local residents, as well as being a safe place to play and socialise for children and young people, it supported and hosted social enterprises focusing on adults (specifically), for example, women training (sewing, business development). It also played a key public health role by producing and distributing masks and food as well as running health programmes (vaccination and addictions).

Box 3: The 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition – reclaiming urban space for play, learning, and community in New York City

In the United States of America, in New York City, the 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition located in Queens/Jackson Heights, in a very ethnically diverse neighbourhood, offers an example directly related to play and leisure opportunities but that also provides more informal opportunities for the evolving right to education. Over 100 languages are spoken in the area and residents include recent migrants. Poverty and hunger are common, along with a lack of community spaces and green and open spaces. The structure rests upon the delivery of a programme of open streets that covers 26 blocks (12 miles), with 34th Avenue closed permanently between 7am and 8pm, every day, and activities running at different times of the day, throughout the year and in partnership with local schools and a range of other small organisations. It started in May 2020, as residents were all locked into their homes with no space to exercise, play or socialise safely. The street was the only available space for people to convene but was heavily dominated by cars. Community members who had been living in the neighbourhood for over a decade then got together, reached out to new residents (including recent migrants) and applied to the US Department of Transport (DOT) Open Street scheme. The group quickly reached a dozen core community members (who formed a committee) and 147 registered volunteers, enabling a key point of articulation for community integration and participation. The programme focuses on allowing the community to live together in the neighbourhood differently, particularly to walk and cycle safely, play, socialise and learn new skills. Activities include sport and dance classes for different age groups, arts, gardening, children's races and biking. They also include training sessions targeted at newly arrived residents, from English classes to workshops dedicated to administrative tasks (e.g. registering children at schools). Food distribution is organised every week to assist those in need. Food bank trucks complement the provision of food on an ad hoc basis, with residents queuing in the street while other activities are occurring. The scheme, now made permanent, is run thanks to DOT financial support and other not-for-profit grants along with fundraising. DOT also supports the management of barriers for daily road closures as the size of the area covered by the scheme made it unmanageable for the community group alone.

Source: Authors.

The 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition Project:
when the street becomes a space for play, socialising, learning, and accessing key services.

The alternative provision of services during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates three important points. Firstly, schools have sustained their role as traditional education providers but have also seen their work stretched far beyond 'standard' duties to include the fulfilment of other rights, including further access to and delivery of food, play, leisure and health support. This was made possible thanks to schoolteachers and other staff volunteering, self-organising or in other ways going 'above and beyond' their statutory duties to support their communities. This involved working outside of hours and outside of school facilities to undertake tasks not solely focused on learning but also social services. These efforts are rarely duplicable or scalable if solely led by teachers but rely on ensuring that hubs are sufficiently resourced and/or linked to other organisations and services to provide such support. Hence, for policy-makers, a key question for consideration is the extent to which they may put in place political and/or institutional support that enables the scalability of learning and community hubs once they are established from the bottom-up (or, indeed, top-down initiatives to introduce them).

Secondly, other providers (such as play or community facilities) 'outside' the government education system have extended beyond their normal work to provide both formal and informal educational support to communities. In some cases, such work involved collaboration between schools, communities, private, religious and other organisations. In both senses, actors and organisations from within and outside the formal education system 'stepped in' to supplement or fill gaps in terms of the right to education (and associated rights), in different ways and different places. This was made possible and triggered by in-depth local knowledge about people (and those in need), places and networks (i.e. organisations able to work together). It was also supported by dedicated and exceptional funding which could be allocated quite flexibly to priority initiatives while resting upon individuals' and groups' commitment to help others. Maintaining such momentum and limiting community fatigue are key, and rest upon sustaining access to resources, which can often be challenging.

Finally, however, it is important to note that not all schools were or are able to step in or even willing to take up their role as a 'hub' and this is a very important policy problem to account for. Schools also can risk becoming overwhelmed given competing and multiple demands on often limited resources (and schools hence can fail in being hubs). Combined with a shrinkage in public funding for education in many contexts and a shortage of teachers, schools face an uncertain future and often do not have capacity to do more than core duties. Devolving more responsibilities and pressures to and on schools is not a policy solution without proper political support and funding, which, in the current context in highly problematic. In the unprecedented COVID-19 context, the ability of schools and other organisations to step in and step up was exceptional and meaningful. It demonstrated how collectively shared efforts, values and goals allowed to engage with the evolving right to education. This is in the context that we turn to discussing the underpinnings of what we name '*learning and community hubs'* and how they need to be promoted as a way to deliver an evolving and interdependent right for education and other key related rights within the scope of availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability and accountability.

5. Bringing together key principles for learning and community hubs as ways to deliver an evolving and interdependent right for education

5.1. Key principles and considerations for learning and community hubs

Whilst not a replacement for the state funding and provision of universal and inclusive education, in contexts where such provision might (even temporarily) be uncertain, the development, promotion and support towards learning and community hubs are a fundamental way forward to fulfil the evolving right to education in contexts of crises, or to address the global challenge of equity and relevance in education. The reasons for this diversification of service provision vary with context, but constitute a response linked to several issues: disinvestment by national or local governments; traditional providers becoming overwhelmed by demand; the geographical location of a hub (i.e. closer to communities requiring a service; within accessible buildings in a central location); greater levels of trust of, or engagement with, a particular hub; and acute challenges, such as a disaster or pandemic. Hence, hubs for service provision may operate over a range of timescales, depending on the nature of the challenges and demand. This is important to account for as many learning and community hubs provide services that are or had been more commonly provided by other facilities. This is particularly the case for schools, which historically, as we demonstrated, deliver services that extend beyond their central educational remit.

In this section, we draw together the key features of hubs from the previous sections and case studies, to provide a framework of **key principles and points for consideration by policy-makers and practitioners** that can be built upon and specified according to local contexts, in order to support both the evolving right to education and the fulfilment of other, related rights. These principles relate both to the functioning of hubs and the ways they can be supported and evaluated. We acknowledge that the implementation of these hubs depends on addressing and overcoming many challenges from resources, to staffing and skills to political commitment (as outlined at the end of Section 4). The implementation of hubs also relies on local knowledge, as well as the development of trust that can allow appropriate social capital and community action to develop.

Hubs can be defined as multi-sector sites with diverse functions that can be equally powerful in fostering social cohesion and addressing the evolving right to education, integrating education with other needs, and seeing learning as being part of a wider life cycle process including individuals' development but also their inclusion in wider communities and in society. Reflecting upon the initiatives and cases discussed in the previous sections, we consider that learning and community hubs can and should be founded upon five principles, each of which offers a point for further reflection and prompt for policy- and decision-makers. In particular, since bottom-up, locally-initiated learning and community hubs are rarely duplicable or scalable, they would rely on ensuring that hubs are sufficiently resourced and/or linked to other organisations and services to provide such support in a larger-scale and/or more sustainable way. Hence, for policy-makers, a key question for consideration is the extent to which they may put in place political and/or institutional support that

enables the scalability of learning and community hubs once they are established from the bottom-up (or, indeed, top-down initiatives to introduce them).

First, hubs – whether in or out of formal education settings – **deliver learning**: from traditional literacy skills to digital skills, to life skills. This principle accounts for the availability and accessibility of education across the lifecourse, and across social difference. It also accounts for its acceptability in terms of content and relevance for employability, adaptability to account for specific evolving topics, needs and forms of learning and accountability as being aligned with rigorous critical monitoring frameworks (when possible).

Second, as well as learning, hubs have a broader role, particularly in delivering **childcare, health and wellbeing** services. We recognize that learning is interconnected with meeting other rights (i.e. availability of and accessibility towards food, play and leisure) and hence the provision of care. Care is also related to various types of health and wellbeing support, from vaccinations to mental health, as well as learning about healthy eating and lifestyles, reproductive health and sex education. All are aligned with acceptability, adaptability and accountability of care.

Third, hubs should be places where **community integration, empowerment and citizen participation** can be fostered. Hubs allow different age groups to interact but more importantly groups of different socio-economic, ethic, religious and other backgrounds to meet and exchange. Hubs foster the involvement of members in decision making related to programmes and initiatives, allowing voices to be heard and opinions to be shared and debated. Opportunities to develop new skills or lead on initiatives are forms of empowerment and citizen participation, which are again interdependent with principles of availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability and accountability of learning for all.

Fourth, there should be consideration of and support for **multi-sector working**: in other words, the ways in which community hubs that provide extended learning and care **connect to more formal policy interventions** (such as Extended Services, Full-Service Community Schools and breakfast clubs) which already rely upon schools to extend their opening hours. These interventions do not only provide discrete services but may also offer wider forms of care and socialisation for children and their families (Jose et al., 2020) that connect with the ways in which communities may learn to attend and care (Sobe, 2023). It is thus vital to acknowledge and, where appropriate, provide mechanisms to support the ways in which state, community, NGO, private, religious and other organisations can work together as hubs to support the evolving right to education (and related rights).

Fifth, the collection and collation of **evidence about hubs' effectiveness** remains a key priority. As this paper has indicated, despite research and case studies about the kinds of roles that hubs may play, evidence about their effectiveness – whether for learning outcomes, fulfilling the evolving right to education, and/or fulfilling other rights – can be patchy. There is a need to develop a robust, interdisciplinary research and evaluation framework that is sensitive to local contexts but also enables cross-cultural comparison. This paper should also be seen as a prompt for sharing examples of both good practice and ways to evaluate such practice.

5.2. Support for policy and practice through UNESCO's Global Happy Schools Framework

Education systems today are grappling with pressing issues like poor learning outcomes, early school leaving, school violence and discrimination, stressful heavy workloads, declining student mental health, as well as teacher burnout and attrition (UNESCO, 2016, 2022). In times of crisis, these issues are amplified, and whilst learning and community hubs may support the right to education, they are neither the sole solution, nor can they operate without appropriate support. **Our recommendation is that the five principles for learning and community hubs outlined in this paper connect with and should be enabled and supported by UNESCO's new global movement for transforming schools** in response to the twin crises of equity and relevance, and also the growing crisis in student well-being.

Specifically, UNESCO's (2024) **Global Happy Schools Framework**[3] can support the development and operationalisation of a community hub that enables the learning, health, well-being, and daily joy of the entire school community, including students, teachers, parents, leaders, support staff, health workers and education administrators. The initiative stems from research in the science of learning which shows that humans learn best in active, engaged, socially interactive, meaningful, and safe learning environments (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022). Not only are these the types of environments that improve learning, but they also propel the development of today's most globally valued skills in life and the workplace, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, innovation and empathy (Marr, 2022).

The Global Happy Schools Framework provides the guidelines to support countries to transform their education systems into happy schools. Specifically, it can also enable this transformation in and through times of crisis. The Framework is organized around the four pillars of People, Process, Place, and Principles. Each pillar highlights key criteria that governments and school communities can meet to address and promote happiness in and for learning, as follows.

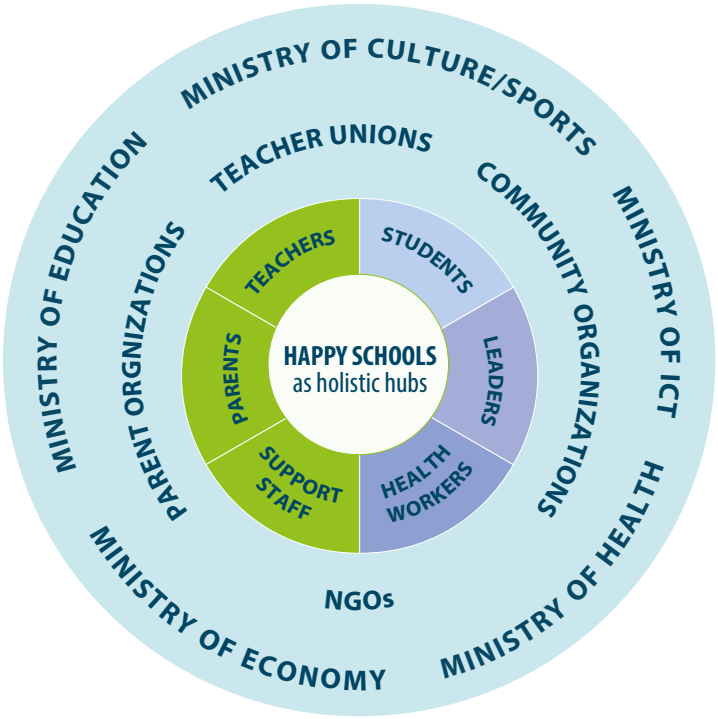
- The '**People**' pillar focuses on enhancing the interpersonal relationships, well-being, and positive attitudes of the actors within school communities, such as students, parents, teachers, school leaders, support staff, central managers and community members.
- The '**Process**' pillar concentrates on transforming curriculum, pedagogy and assessment systems to leverage happiness and daily joy in schools, including activities such as recess, sports, arts and other extracurriculars that positively shape teaching and learning experiences.
- The '**Place**' pillar directs attention on improving physical and digital spaces, including infrastructure, facilities, spatial design and school climate, to make schools healthier, safer, and more inclusive community hubs.
- Finally, the '**Principles**' pillar pinpoints on cultivating fundamental values that bind together members of the school community and enable the realization of the people, process and place pillars. These concepts are illustrated in Figure 1.
  Critically, as Figures 1 (criterion 9, specifically) and 2 demonstrate, learning and community hubs, of the kinds discussed and exemplified in this paper, are a key facet of Happy Schools.

[3] https://www.unesco.org/en/education-policies/happy-schools

Figure 1. The global Happy Schools framework

Source. UNESCO, 2024, p.15.

Figure 2. A system-wide approach to Happy Schools as holistic community hubs.



Source. UNESCO, 2024, p.67.

The Happy Schools Framework is specifically designed for local contextualization and adaptation. To support school communities to implement the Happy Schools Framework, UNESCO's Education Microplanning Toolkit is designed to support education planning at the local level (UNESCO, 2014). It emphasizes four main aspects of planning and change: increasing access, improving learning outcomes, enhancing community participation, and supporting open and informed decision making. This framework has moved education microplanning from being a functionalist planning and management tool to one that appreciates the social and cultural contexts in which planning takes place and attempts to bring communities together to meet identified needs at the local level. The rationale is that different social and institutional contexts of education systems affect school management and leadership differently, therefore actions – in particular those aiming at addressing the challenges hindering teaching and learning, need to be taken into account, and are likely to more effective where the challenge originates, i.e. at the school and classroom levels.

6. Conclusion

Learning and community hubs are social entities that can support communities – particularly those experiencing disadvantage and/or marginalisation – through the compound challenges they face, and particularly during times of crisis. This is not to say that all diverse or financially disadvantaged communities are at risk of breakdown or require hubs to enable social cohesion; rather, hubs may operate in an adaptable, place-specific way to ensure the inclusion and participation of diverse groups in contributing meaningfully to a community's life and its future.

Hence, understood through the key principles suggested in Section 5, and operationalised through guidance from UNESCO's Global Happy Schools Framework and Micro-Planning Toolkit, hubs may offer spaces through which progressive, inclusive initiatives may be proposed, contested and developed. As posited by UNESCO through its Global Happy Schools Initiative, there is urgent need to promote a transformational reform of education systems through a paradigm shift by prioritizing both learning and wellbeing as the core of education policy and practice. Grounded in both science and philosophy, the initiative recognizes wellbeing and happiness as both a means to and an outcome of quality learning. Academic excellence and wellbeing are not mutually exclusive. Wellbeing and happiness can be key levers for enhancing learning experiences and outcomes. The initiative invites education authorities to rethink learning environments as spaces for socialisation and community hubs by integrating collaboration, wellbeing and lifelong learning into educational environments and scale up joyful learning practices and wellbeing from schools to policy levels.

Again, they may not only support the right to education (for instance by ensuring that the educational needs of marginalised groups, including women and ethnic minorities, are met), but may offer informal educational opportunities for learning to live together and learning to be. Schools may also be key sites at which social cohesion and citizen participation may be promoted – not least given that young people tend to be under-represented in terms of local decision-making (with their ability to have their voices heard in a meaningful way - a key aspect of the CRC). Whether formally sanctioned through public health, educational or school building policies, or emergent through the necessity of operating in informal tented settlements or peripheral urban communities, learning and community hubs may facilitate community development and cohesion as well as the evolving right to education.

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Learning and community hubs for the evolving right to education in times of crisis

This working paper highlights the transformative role of learning and community hubs in safeguarding and advancing the right to education in times of crisis. Grounded in international research and UNESCO's Global Happy Schools Framework, it demonstrates how hubs can bridge gaps in access, equity, and wellbeing while fostering resilience and community cohesion. It calls on policymakers, practitioners, and partners to recognize and strengthen these hubs as vital pathways toward inclusive, adaptable, and future-ready education systems. By investing in and scaling such approaches, the global community can ensure that no learner is left behind, even in the most challenging circumstances.

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