Learning Brief

EVIDENCE USE IN COMMUNITY-LED LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS

Compiled by Jojoh Faal, from an original document (Review: Evidence Use in Community-led Learning Ecosystem; hereafter 'the review') by Marcela Morales H., Emma Broadbent & Racheal Makokha (OTT Consulting) for the Jacobs Foundation

2025

JACOBS FOUNDATION

OTT
A global consultancy
and platform for change

Table of Contents

About the Review

Since 2018, the Jacobs Foundation has partnered with organisations in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Colombia, and Switzerland to strengthen evidence use in education policy and practice.

The Jacobs Foundation Communities of Change initiative, champions and empowers community-led transformation processes. The initiative places strong emphasis on strengthening evidence-informed teaching and learning practices, particularly at the school district level. Central to this work is the idea of Community-led Learning Ecosystems (CLLEs) as an integral part of this approach.

This review comes at a time when there is significant interest in understanding and supporting CLLEs. However, there is a need for further exploration and articulation of the role evidence plays in CLLEs. This includes how evidence is generated, understood, and used to inform policy and practice - particularly at the community level.

About this Learning Brief

This learning brief presents key findings from a broader review conducted by OTT Consulting for the Jacobs Foundation. It offers a shortened and accessible version of the main report for time-pressed readers.

The review explores how evidence is generated, understood, and used within CLLEs. To address this, OTT Consulting examined three interconnected areas of literature and practice: 1) community-led learning ecosystems (CLLEs); 2) evidence use in education; 3) the broader evidence-informed policy field.

The methodology included:
- a desk-based literature review;
- 25 semi-structured interviews with key informants from practice, policy, and philanthropy; and
- an analysis of global case studies and documented initiatives in the CLLE space.

Together, these methods provided a foundation for identifying trends, challenges, and emerging practices around evidence use in CLLEs.

Key Messages

The cracks in the conventional education systems are now impossible to ignore.

Global disruptions, like the Covid-19 pandemic, escalating school violence and climate change have exposed the fragility of current education systems. These have caused unprecedented interruptions and magnified inequalities. Traditional, top-down education remains wholly inadequate, with models that fail to support young people's holistic development or prepare them to thrive in a fast-changing world. As such, more resilient, inclusive, and responsive systems are needed. **Community-Led Learning Ecosystems (CLLEs)** provide an opportunity to re-centre education on the lived experiences of learners, focusing on their agency and well-being. ➲ **Context**

CLLEs offer a compelling alternative but their definition, design and evolution varies each time.

Their strength lies in integrating global insights with local knowledge, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and empowering local actors in decision-making. By bridging the gap between policy, research, and practice, CLLEs present a compelling vision for the future of education — one that is flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of learners and societies alike. However, CLLEs are nebulous and evolving, defined by certain characteristics, rather than a fixed definition. ➲ **What are CLLEs?**

In CLLEs, learning expands beyond the classroom.

While schools remain a central institution in CLLEs, the learning experience is broadened to include the full ecosystem that surrounds and sustains students, educators, and their families. This expanded view brings the community to the forefront positioning it as a co-designer of learning experiences. As a result, the learning process becomes more dynamic and circular, complicating traditional measures of success and calling for systems-based approaches to assessment and change over time.

Evidence is the thread that ties learning and action together.

Effective CLLEs use a variety of evidence — from community stories to national data — to inform decisions, adapt strategies, and demonstrate impact. Crucially, actors in CLLEs are both users and producers of evidence, keeping the system dynamic and locally grounded for continuous adaptation to evolving needs of learners, families, and communities. While multiple evidence sources are vital for ongoing, effective, and sustainable CLLEs, the gathering, interpreting and acting on evidence in dynamic, context-specific settings brings with it certain challenges. Our review highlights opportunities for improving evidence use and identifies remaining gaps in our understanding. ➲ **Evidence use in CLLEs**

Nurturing cultures of evidence within CLLEs can bring about sustained, evidence data-informed decision-making.

This involves long-term investment in cultivating environments where evidence is valued and utilised through comprehensive training programs, access to resources, and leadership that champions evidence-based practices. ➲ **Recommendations**

Context

Despite the growing interest in community-led initiatives, evidence on Community-led Learning Ecosystems (CLLEs) remains fragmented. Studies are often disjointed, and best practices for CLLEs are not well-documented or synthesised. Moreover, there is limited documentation of how existing CLLEs successfully use evidence (or not) to enhance their effectiveness.

The Jacobs Foundation has made strides in researching and promoting community-led Thriving Learning Ecosystems, but challenges persist. This review addresses this gap by undertaking a detailed review of existing literature, case studies, and conversations with experts in the space to lay a solid groundwork for effective CLLEs.

The CLLE approach presents us with an opportunity to reimagine education in relation to its:

- **Purpose**: Redefining educational goals to address future challenges, by focusing not just on basic skills and exam success but also on fostering well-rounded, adaptable individuals.

- **Power**: Empowering learners, educators, and communities to take active roles in shaping educational experiences, ensuring diverse voices are included in decision-making.

- **Practice**: Promoting innovative, learner-centred approaches that challenge standardisation and address systemic inequities.

By bridging the gap between policy, research, and practice, CLLEs offer a compelling vision for the future of education — one that is flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of learners and societies alike.

What are CLLEs?

In existing literature, definitions of learning ecosystems diverge in emphasis. Some definitions underline community engagement and the blending of both formal and unconventional knowledge sources, whereas others highlight multi-stakeholder collaboration or the importance of system-level thinking. The concept of CLLEs adds a specific dimension by drawing attention to local actors who play a formative role in shaping these ecosystems. Consequently, CLLEs are nebulous and evolving, defined by certain characteristics, rather than a fixed definition.

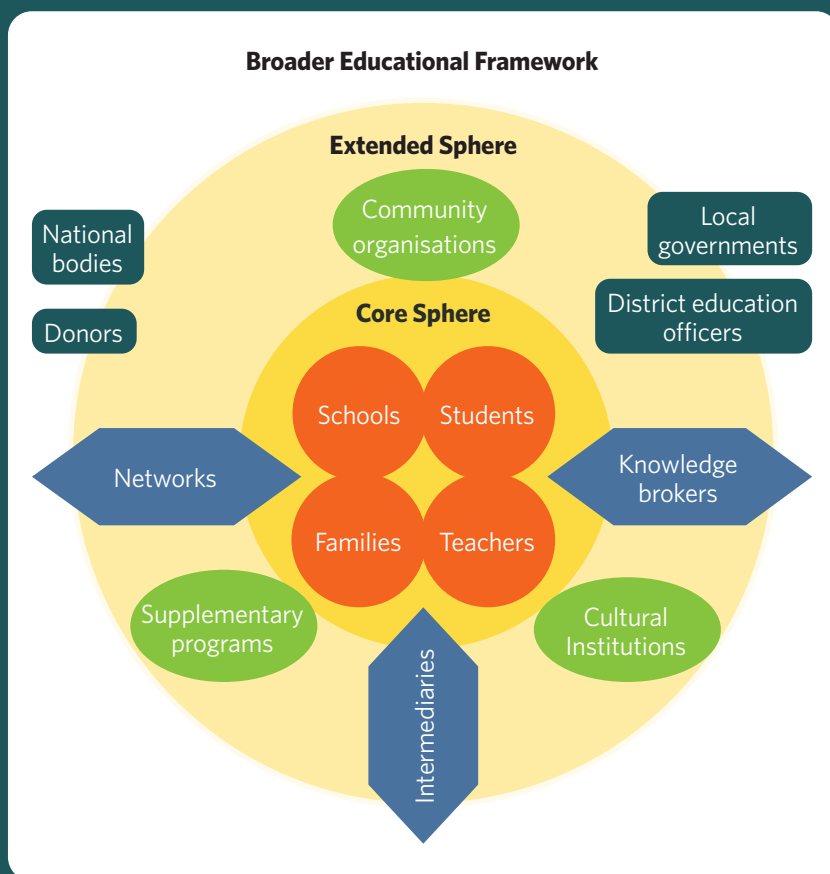## CLLEs are dynamic and context-driven.

CLLEs are inherently fluid, due to their community-driven evolution, variable structures, and ever-shifting roles. This decentralised nature enables them to remain agile, participatory, and aligned with the unique realities of local contexts. However, their flexibility also poses significant hurdles for evaluation, long-term planning, and comparative analysis.
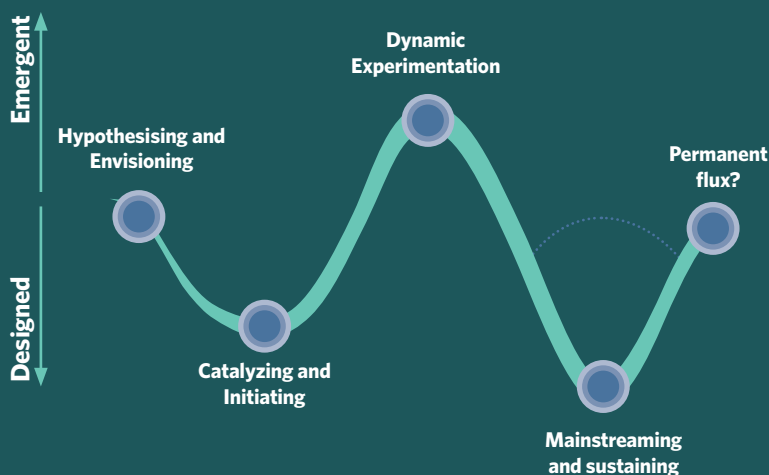
CLLEs are founded on diverse and collaborative communities.

A recurring theme in both the literature and expert interviews is that all stakeholders—students, peers, families, teachers, and community leaders—are active contributors to learning processes. Each possess unique expertise, insights, and resources that shape education. This collaborative dynamic, grounded in mutual respect and shared objectives, distinguishes a true community from a mere network. It can be helpful to envision a flexible typology that categorises actors according to their primary sphere of involvement. This typology is neither exhaustive nor rigid, as actors may shift roles or occupy multiple spheres over time.

Broader Educational Framework

Extended Sphere

Community organisations

National bodies

Local governments

District education officers

Donors

Core Sphere

Schools

Students

Networks

Knowledge brokers

Families

Teachers

Supplementary programs

Cultural Institutions

Intermediaries

CLLEs have varied and overlapping functions.

Despite being often overlooked formally, CLLEs in practice fulfil a variety of functions and should be perceived as integral components of the wider learning landscape. In different contexts, CLLEs will serve one or several of the following functions:

Enhancing the learning process and improving outcomes in formal education, by improving practices.

Broadening the range of learning opportunities, both inside and outside the formal education system.

Responding to specific local workforce needs by aligning learning experiences with local economic demands.

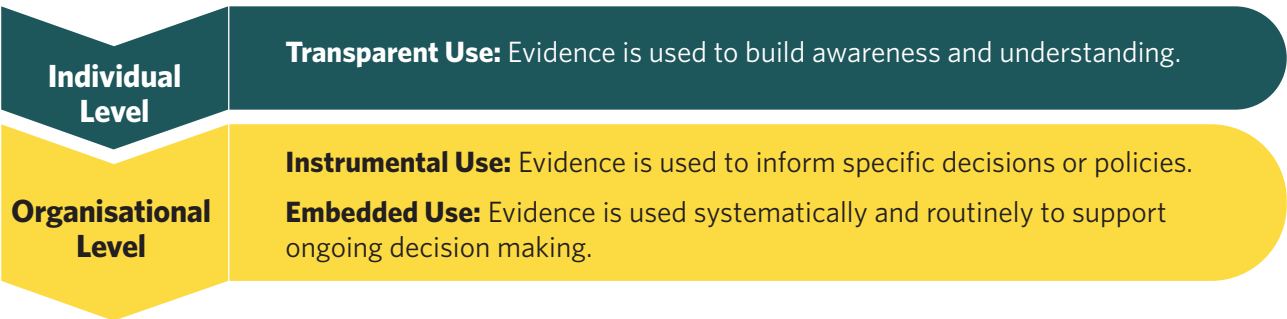Connect actors in the ecosystem and facilitate learning and sharing.

Synthesising evidence for practical use through locally relevant approaches.

Evidence use in CLLEs

In CLLEs, evidence is integral to decision-making, program design, and continuous improvement. These ecosystems bring together schools, NGOs, local governments, and community members who rely on multiple sources of evidence—from research studies to local insights.

In CLLEs, evidence use occurs at three interlinked levels: individuals, organisations, and systems. Actors at these levels are not merely consumers of evidence but also play active roles in generating and applying it to inform decisions about education programs, policies, and practices. Understanding evidence use across these levels reveals the diverse and interconnected ways actors contribute to and shape learning ecosystems.

Different case studies and key informant interviews highlighted different forms of evidence use in CLLEs:

Individual Level	**Transparent Use:** Evidence is used to build awareness and understanding.
Organisational Level	**Instrumental Use:** Evidence is used to inform specific decisions or policies. **Embedded Use:** Evidence is used systematically and routinely to support ongoing decision making.

Source: Own elaboration based on Hayter & Broadbent (2024) and others.

The variety of evidence used by initiatives analysed and actors interviewed in the review is also outlined in the table below:

Organisation/Initiative	Type of Evidence	Evidence Use
Luminos Fund	Research evidence, sector-generated data, pedagogical evidence	Instrumental use (real-time data adjustment), embedded use (ongoing adaptation)
Building Tomorrow	Research evidence, sector-generated data, pedagogical evidence	Instrumental use (RCT data informs teaching models), embedded use (continuous adaptation)
Smart Start	Research evidence, sector-generated data, practice-informed advice, pedagogical evidence	Instrumental use (adapting curriculum), embedded use (coaching and feedback system)
Dream a Dream	Research evidence, sector-generated data	Transparent use (raising awareness on life skills), embedded use (tailoring interventions based on state feedback)
Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)	Research evidence, practice-informed advice	Transparent use (toolkit for awareness), instrumental use (guiding policy and program adaptations)
Firelight Foundation	Practice-informed advice, sector-generated data	Embedded use (long-term systemic change, community-driven data collection)
Lively Minds	Practice-informed advice, sector-generated data	Embedded use (community input), instrumental use (adjusting ecd programs)

How is evidence used within CLLEs?

CLLEs face an inherent tension around evidence use. An effective CLLE requires multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions on an ongoing basis. But, the dynamic, context-specific nature of CLLEs makes the gathering, interpreting and acting on evidence somewhat challenging. Our key informant interviews revealed the consensus around the following points:

What success looks like is different for each CLLE.

"Success in a learning ecosystem might mean better academic outcomes, but it might also mean stronger community ties, greater student agency, or increased family involvement. Measuring those things requires new thinking and new tools."

Emily Morris, Brookings

Participatory evidence systems capture both tangible results and deeper, intangible transformations.

"We use participatory approaches, collecting stories and feedback from communities to assess how well local organisations are driving systems change and whether our approach is building long-term sustainability."

Ronald Kimambo, Firelight Foundation

Qualitative data is key to capturing a richer picture of how CLLEs affect communities.

"We collect a lot of stories from our partners about how these collaborations are influencing student learning and community development. Those stories are an important part of the evidence base because they reveal what's happening on the ground in ways that numbers alone can't."

Tyler Samstag, Remake Learning

Overall, there is a need for more comprehensive and adaptable tools for assessing learning ecosystems.

"If we want to measure the effectiveness of learning ecosystems, we need to focus on how the system is changing, not just the outcomes it produces. Are schools becoming more connected with their communities? Are families more engaged in the learning process? These are the indicators of long-term success."

Emily Morris, Brookings

For effectiveness, CLLEs must incorporate a locally relevant collective narrative, that fosters local ownership, enables transformational leadership and ensures continuous stakeholder capacity development. Together, these aspects serve to tackle existing barriers to success, including the lack of trust around evidence use, the limited scope of traditional metrics, the often-ignored political economy of evidence and the higher cost of comprehensive evidence collection.

What are the challenges of evidence use within CLLEs?

Our exploration, particularly through expert interviews, yielded these key takeaways, highlighting both the potential and complexities inherent in CLLEs and evidence use.

CLLEs are challenging to define, measure, and standardise. There is no singular method to implement CLLEs; instead, they thrive on locally relevant and contextually adapted approaches. While this adaptability offers a significant opportunity to examine, amplify, and understand the role of evidence at the local level, it is time- and resource-intensive.

Evidence use within CLLEs is both complex and contextual. It must encompass diverse data types, to support inclusive and responsive decision-making process, enabling continuous adaptation to effectively meet local needs.

Local knowledge is underutilised in decision-making processes. Many ecosystems rely on external evidence or standardised approaches that do not always align with the needs and realities of local communities, leading to missed opportunities for tailored, impactful interventions.

Barriers to effective evidence use in conventional approaches persist within CLLEs. These include capacity constraints, resource limitations, and systemic resistance. Furthermore, conceptual issues around defining evidence and its use make it difficult to establish universal standards or practices.

Conventional metrics fail to fully capture the holistic outcomes of CLLEs. Addressing this gap requires developing innovative, process-based metrics that reflect the comprehensive impact of CLLEs, such as student well-being, agency, and community cohesion.

What gaps remain in our understanding?

There are certain gaps in the overall understanding of how CLLEs operate, and the role of evidence use within them:

Mapping how political and institutional dynamics influence the way CLLEs evolve, and the role evidence plays. This includes examining power relations, policy influences, and the role of various stakeholders in shaping evidence practices and promoting evidence use.

Navigating the tension between balancing local leadership with scaling dynamics. This balance is critical to ensuring that scaling efforts do not dilute the core principles that make CLLEs effective.

Strengthening the integration of CLLEs within national education systems. To amplify their impact, CLLEs should strive to align local initiatives with national policies and frameworks and influence their reform.

Recommendations

Drawing on insights, we offer the following recommendations for funders and implementers aiming to contribute to the growth and sustainability of these ecosystems:

Funders should

Strengthen existing networks and promote peer learning: Prioritise strengthening existing networks to foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation, essential for the long-term sustainability and growth of CLLEs.

Advance contextualised measurement and impact evaluation: Support the creation and piloting of contextualised measurement frameworks that align with the goals and priorities of community-led initiatives.

Advance advocacy and policy engagement: Facilitate dialogues between ecosystem actors and policy-makers towards policy reforms that embed successful community-led models within formal education frameworks. This is crucial for scalability and sustainability of CLLEs.

Support long-term learning and sustainability: Adopt a long-term approach to resource allocation, enabling CLLEs to develop resilient and adaptable structures. Flexible funding models that support experimentation, learning, and iteration are fundamental to sustainability.

Leverage convening power to foster collaboration and avoid duplication: Utilise convening power to bring together diverse stakeholders and address fragmentation of CLLEs caused by duplicated efforts and overlapping initiatives.

Implementers should

Promote an evidence culture for sustained, evidence-informed decision-making: Cultivate environments where evidence is valued and utilised through comprehensive training programs, access to resources, and leadership that champions evidence-informed practices.

Encourage conscious learning and raise awareness of CLLEs as a distinct approach: Ensure stakeholders understand and appreciate the unique dynamics of community-led initiatives. This involves educating stakeholders about the benefits and methodologies of CLLEs without undermining local leadership or imposing top-down scaling strategies.

Conclusion

To sustain community-led learning ecosystems (CLLEs), we must nurture the culture of evidence use. This demands capacity building, resources, and leadership that champions evidence-informed decisions.

Effective CLLEs hinge on strong cross-collaboration between schools, NGOs, governments, and communities. Encouraging partnerships and knowledge-sharing networks is vital to avoid fragmentation and leverage the diverse expertise. Funders should invest in platforms that enable this interaction.

Finally, conscious learning about CLLEs is essential for stakeholder understanding. We must implement holistic metrics to assess impact and align local initiatives with national education systems for sustainability. Education and local empowerment are paramount, not top-down approaches.

JACOBS
FOUNDATION