

Building Resilience through Inclusive Education Systems

Methodology and Theoretical Background



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes aspects of the Building Resilience through Inclusive Education Systems ([BRIES](#)) activity, carried out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency). Specifically, the report outlines the methodology of the BRIES peer-learning activities (PLAs) and the theoretical background to the activity's main output: the [BRIES Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education](#) (European Agency, 2024). It complements the [BRIES mid-term report](#) (European Agency, 2023), which focused in detail on the methodology, processes and results of the BRIES activities that were implemented between May 2022 and February 2023.

This report is divided into two sections: [Methodology](#) and [Theoretical Background](#). The latter provides details of the conceptual framework – models and theories – used and processes applied in the activity, specifically for developing the main output (the BRIES Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education).

Overview of the activity

Overall, the BRIES activity looked at European education systems and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected them. It focused on lessons learned and how to turn the crisis into an opportunity to build resilience in education. Furthermore, it examined issues around the well-being of learners, families and teachers in the educational environment and how to address these in times of crisis.

[The Impact of COVID-19 on Inclusive Education at the European Level: Literature Review](#) (European Agency, 2021a) was the starting point for the BRIES activity in 2021. This review highlighted how the switch to online and blended settings (combined face-to-face and distance learning) created barriers to learning, especially for vulnerable learners. It found that, during the early crisis phase of the pandemic, the well-being of all involved in the teaching-learning process was at stake, learning loss increased and teaching quality declined. The latter was due to teachers lacking the necessary time, skills and resources for digital and distance education. The review showed that, even though education systems have adapted to the unprecedented changes caused by the pandemic, several challenges remain.

The BRIES activity aimed to support decision-makers in the education field to identify and address the needs of learners vulnerable to exclusion and other education stakeholders in times of crisis. Furthermore, it aimed to facilitate exchanges among learners, teachers, parents and policy-makers about their experiences during the pandemic.

The Agency member countries that participated in the BRIES activity were Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Ireland and Sweden (the BRIES countries).

Phase 1

Phase 1 of BRIES (2021 – early 2022) included an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on inclusive education at European level, with a focus on measures and practices. This resulted in the [Inclusive Education and the Pandemic – Aiming for Resilience: Key European measures and practices in 2021 publications](#) report (European Agency, 2022a).



The report's key findings were a main resource for preparing the discussion topics for the BRIES PLAs.

In addition, a questionnaire helped to identify countries' needs and focus topics for the PLAs. The questionnaire was sent to all Agency member countries in autumn 2021. It included questions on inclusive education and the pandemic, countries' preferences for participating in the activity, and general PLA-related questions. The [BRIES mid-term report](#) (European Agency, 2023) contains more detailed information on the phase 1 methodology, including the questionnaire's content and outcomes.

Phase 1 of BRIES informed phase 2, providing input on which countries would participate in the activity, countries' priority topics, and content and questions for focus group discussions.

Phase 2

Phase 2 (May 2022 – November 2023) focused on two rounds of PLAs:

- Round 1 – spring 2022 to early 2023. The [BRIES mid-term report](#) (ibid.) includes details and outcomes of the stakeholder exchanges in Round 1.
- Round 2 – spring to autumn 2023. Round 2 focused on developing the [Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education](#) (BRIES guidance).

Both rounds of PLAs were dedicated to working with the BRIES countries and their stakeholders (learners, teachers, parents, policy-makers) to collect information, share experiences and reflect on building resilience in times of crisis. The main outputs of the BRIES activity were developed in co-operation with all stakeholder levels.

This report explains the phase 2 [methodology](#) and focuses on the development of the final output, the BRIES guidance. The [Theoretical Background](#) section elaborates on the two main components of the BRIES guidance:

- the **communication model** used, the theories it refers to and other models it is based on;
- the **well-being framework**, based on the **capability approach**, and how it can be understood in this context, with a focus on effective communication as a collective capability.

As such, this report can support decision-makers in using and implementing the BRIES guidance.



METHODOLOGY

Peer learning was the main methodology used in the BRIES activity. Peer learning is a ‘two-way, reciprocal learning activity’ where peers simultaneously learn from each other and ‘contribute to other peers’ learning by sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences’ (Pisano & Berger, 2016, p. 5). ‘Learning’ takes place when peers explain their ideas to each other, work collaboratively, give and receive feedback and evaluate their own learning. There is no single method of peer learning, as many approaches and mechanisms support it (Pisano & Berger, 2016).

The Agency’s Key Principles (European Agency, 2021b) also encourage collaboration with and between stakeholders. They focus on ‘processes to facilitate co-operation between schools, parents and members of the community to support inclusive school development and enhance learner progress’ (ibid., p. 22).

As such, the BRIES activity aimed to follow a peer-learning methodology, focusing on stakeholders exchanging and sharing personal experiences. BRIES phase 2 involved PLAs with the BRIES countries. In the PLAs, stakeholders from different levels (learners, parents, teachers and policy-makers) from all six BRIES countries had the opportunity to share experiences and practices.

The following sections describe the processes the stakeholders were involved in during both rounds of the BRIES phase 2 PLAs.

Peer-learning activity: round 1

PLA round 1 took place between May 2022 and February 2023. It involved same-level and multi-level stakeholder discussions. Input from stakeholders was collected through online focus group meetings and face-to-face meetings.

The questionnaire sent to Agency member countries, which was based on the outcomes of the BRIES phase 1 literature analysis, identified two key discussion topics for round 1:

- Topic A: Mental health and socio-emotional needs
- Topic B: Learning loss.

In round 1, two groups of three countries (groups A and B) discussed these topics separately. However, it became clear that, in both groups, mental health and well-being were central to stakeholders’ discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic and education. As ‘learning from the pandemic’ was a main theme of the BRIES activity, it indicated that any potential output needed to consider well-being. As a result, groups A and B were merged for PLA round 2.

Table 1 lists the steps taken in PLA round 1, where countries were split into group A and group B.



Table 1. BRIES PLA round 1

Step and when	How/where	What and who
Step 1, May 2022	Face-to-face meeting	Kick-off meeting with the representatives of the six BRIES countries
Step 2, May/June 2022	Online focus group discussions	Exchanging experiences with same-level stakeholders from different countries (divided into groups discussing topics A and B)
Step 3, September 2022	Face-to-face exchange in each country	Exchanging experiences between stakeholder levels from the same country (one group on topic A, one group on topic B)
Step 4, October 2022	Online bi-lateral meetings	Bi-lateral meetings with all BRIES countries that had in-country discussions with stakeholders in step 3 in September, to exchange on the outcomes
Step 5, November 2022	Face-to-face meeting during the Agency's bi-annual meeting	Representatives discussing results of in-country discussions and identifying main focus areas
Step 6, January/February 2023	Face-to-face meetings in Athens (topic A) and Dublin (topic B)	One policy-maker and one stakeholder per country discussed the results so far and agreed on key area for developing a tool in two groups: topic A and topic B countries

The focus groups (step 2) consisted of stakeholders from four different levels:

- Vulnerable learners from lower- and upper-secondary schools
- Parents of vulnerable learners
- Teachers of vulnerable learners
- Policy-makers from the six BRIES countries.

The stakeholder groups were asked to discuss their experiences during the pandemic and identify priority areas they thought would need most attention in their topic, A or B.

These focus group discussions were useful and enriching for all participants. The analysis of the collected data provided a rich basis for continued work towards priority areas, including a multi-country and multi-level focus. Stakeholders built on the knowledge and results acquired in the previous discussions.

The results of the step 2 discussions were summarised, translated and shared with the participants before the multi-level stakeholder discussions in individual countries in



step 3. In this step, stakeholders worked on suggestions for tools and materials they considered useful in times of crisis.

During the face-to-face meetings in step 5, the country representatives discussed which of the suggestions from step 3 the activity should focus on. In the meetings in Dublin and Athens (step 6), countries and stakeholders agreed on an overall key area of effective communication, and identified a clear need to explore this topic in depth.

In the discussions with different stakeholders, it became clear that effective communication is key to identifying needs early and ensuring well-being. Also, the stakeholders' experiences during the pandemic demonstrated how important digital literacy and accessibility are to enhance well-being. Effective communication supports a rapid identification of needs in these areas in times of crisis. Finding rapid responses to needs enables learners vulnerable to exclusion to participate successfully in education during challenging times (European Agency, 2023, p. 36).

Being able to exchange with other country representatives and between stakeholder levels was extremely beneficial for all participants and for the BRIES activity in general. The positive feedback from participants particularly emphasised the need to include vulnerable stakeholders in policy-making processes and discussions. Participants were highly motivated to stay involved and contribute to developing a tool to improve resilience and well-being through effective communication. The principle of including stakeholders throughout the BRIES activities continued in PLA round 2.

The [BRIES mid-term report](#) (European Agency, 2023) contains more detailed information on PLA round 1. It describes the main topics discussed during all the meetings and steps that led to round 2.

Peer-learning activity: round 2

PLA round 2 ran from February 2023 to December 2023. It aimed to collect experiences, existing practices, local initiatives and policies, focusing on the identified key area of effective communication during the pandemic.

Table 2 lists the steps taken in round 2. The steps are described in more detail below the table.

In PLA round 2, the countries and participants from groups A and B merged into a single group. Step 7 in the table indicates the participants' original topic groups in brackets.



Table 2. BRIES PLA round 2

Step and when	How	What and who
Step 7, February – May 2023	Online meetings: teaming up stakeholders from groups A and B	Four online meetings were held: one for each stakeholder level (policy-makers, teachers, learners and parents). The stakeholders discussed questions related to effective communication. During the policy-maker meeting, a vignette and a road map were shared and the participants provided information on their existing communication practices, processes and experiences. Session 1: Policy-makers from all BRIES countries (road map + vignette) Session 2: Teachers from Bulgaria (topic B) and Sweden (topic A) Session 3: Parents from Germany (topic B) and Estonia (topic A) Session 4: Learners from Ireland (topic B) and Sweden (topic A)
Step 8, May 2023	Face-to-face meeting	Representatives of the six BRIES countries attended a workshop focusing on developing the BRIES guidance
Step 9, September 2023	External consultancy	A communication expert gave feedback on the draft BRIES guidance in an online discussion with written feedback
Step 10, September – November 2023	Written online (email) consultations	Collecting inputs from each stakeholder level involved in the PLAs
Step 11, November 2023	Face-to-face meeting	Final BRIES meeting with representatives of all BRIES countries. The meeting aimed to share the BRIES guidance as a main output, collect general feedback on the whole activity, and plan the dissemination event scheduled for May 2024

In PLA round 2, four online discussions took place – one for each stakeholder level (step 7). The first was for policy-makers, the second focused on the teacher level with teachers from Bulgaria and Sweden, the third involved parents from Germany and Estonia, and the fourth addressed learners from Ireland and Sweden.



For their online meeting, policy-makers completed an internal working document on effective communication. The document consisted of a grid with open-ended questions and multiple choice options to choose from. The questions asked about the quality of communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to improve strategies, and the challenges for establishing effective communication. The aim was to collect accurate information on existing strategies and mechanisms for effective communication, or communication challenges in the BRIES countries' education systems. Additionally, a country vignette allowed each BRIES country to share inspiring practices of effective communication.

The sessions with learners, teachers and parents in step 7 aimed to collect examples of practice and experiences of effective (or ineffective) communication in times of crisis. The following questions guided the discussions during the three sessions:

- What is effective communication for you?
- In what situations would effective communication be needed the most (referring to the COVID-19 pandemic)?
- What do you need to be able to communicate early with learners/stakeholders?
- What needs to be changed or improved to enable effective communication?

During each online discussion, participants shared similar experiences. Stakeholders' experiences naturally enriched the exchange because they could relate to each other's realities, despite their varying personal contexts and situations.

The examples of promising practices and experiences shared during discussions were very useful. They illustrated the theory and core elements in the BRIES guidance for effective communication.

In-person meetings with the BRIES countries' representatives took place in May 2023 and November 2023 (steps 8 and 11). The meetings aimed to share and support the development of the BRIES activity outputs.

A communication expert supported the BRIES activity by giving feedback and input on the theoretical background and general approach to communication in the BRIES guidance (step 9).

Additionally, email consultations collected stakeholder feedback on the developed material (step 10). In these consultations, three questions guided the feedback on particular sections of the draft BRIES guidance:

1. How do you think this is useful or would be useful for you?
2. Where do you see problems (what is difficult to understand/to follow, what is missing, etc.)?
3. Do you have any general feedback or suggestions?

At the final meeting with the representatives of the six BRIES countries in November 2023, the Agency team presented the final draft version of the BRIES guidance and collected final comments.



All peer-learning steps in the BRIES activity provided time and space for stakeholders to meet and exchange. This was extremely rewarding for the participants, who would not have had this opportunity otherwise.

The BRIES activity made the added value of peer-learning exchanges visible. This was evident in the stakeholder feedback that was collected throughout the activity. Participating learners, their parents, teachers and schools reported an increase in learner self-confidence. Parents and teachers reported improved well-being, as they felt heard and included in important processes. They particularly highlighted the opportunity to exchange equally with decision-makers as an added value in their reflections.

The methods used throughout the activity greatly benefited the development of the BRIES Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education.

Developing the Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education

The [BRIES guidance](#) is the main output of the BRIES activity. It was developed in close collaboration with the BRIES countries and their stakeholders. It aims to support decision-makers to address the needs of all learners during times of crisis by implementing and ensuring a culture of effective communication in education.

An [infographic](#) displays the main elements of the guidance, to support its implementation and use. A [video](#) promotes the BRIES activity and the BRIES guidance.

Four components were key in developing the BRIES guidance and later became its main sections (in a different order):

- Aspirations defined by the stakeholders
- Core elements of effective communication emerging from stakeholder discussions and leading to a model for a culture of effective communication in education
- Well-being as a constant in the activity, leading to the adoption of a well-being framework based on the capability approach
- Reflection tool to encourage reflection on communication processes in education.

Stakeholders identified **four aspirations** in the consultations. These aspirations emerged from the stakeholders' defined priority areas. In the context of effective communication, the aspirations emphasise that:

- A culture of effective communication in education ensures the **provision of safe and secure psycho-social learning environments**. Creating trustful relationships to enable effective communication is key to support all learners. It involves knowing the learners and their needs, as well as their backgrounds and family situations.
- Teachers can be **enabled to act proactively and feel prepared for psycho-social emergencies** when they are involved in decision-making, and communication processes are transparent. Enhanced communication and exchange among teachers and between stakeholder levels can support this development. Adequate competence development opportunities in communication and information technology skills are key to support teachers, especially in time of crisis.



- **Supportive links in the community around learners and families** can be created by using effective communication to develop good partnerships between decision-makers and communities. Effective communication in education supports the development of relationships and trust among stakeholders. These are key elements for reaching all learners and families.
- **A culture of effective communication in education** ensures that communication about decisions and decision-making processes involves stakeholders of all levels. Communication strategies that use multiple communication channels and define clear roles support stakeholders in their aspiration **to address all learners' needs**.

The aspirations are one of the components of the BRIES guidance.

In step 7 of the PLAs, **four core elements of effective communication** emerged from analysing the discussions with learners, teachers, parents and policy-makers. These are clarity, accessibility, trust and transparency. The Agency team developed these core elements by confirming their appropriateness with findings from relevant publications and research studies. The core elements are therefore enriched and supported by evidence-based findings from relevant literature. As such, they became essential elements for the **model of effective communication** developed for the BRIES guidance. An external communication expert evaluated the communication model and confirmed the appropriateness of the theories and models used as basis.

Well-being was considered an essential topic throughout the BRIES activity. As such, the BRIES guidance used a **well-being framework** in the style of the capability approach (Sen, 1992) to embed the model of effective communication in the main theme of well-being.

A **reflection tool** is the fourth component of the BRIES guidance. In this tool, guiding statements based on the four core elements of effective communication support decision-makers to reflect on existing communication structures.

Examples of inspiring practices from the BRIES countries and experiences reported by the PLA participants support reflection on existing communication processes in educational environments.

The sections of the BRIES guidance develop the reader's understanding of the aim of establishing a culture for effective communication in education.

The next section explains the theoretical background of the main elements of the BRIES guidance.



THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As mentioned, the Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education (the BRIES guidance) is the main output of the BRIES activity. The BRIES guidance does not include in-depth explanations of the theoretical background. This allows users to focus on the content and prevents them getting lost in theoretical details.

As such, for transparency and to enhance users' understanding, this section provides information on the theoretical background that influenced the development and is the backbone of the BRIES guidance. This background consists of relevant concepts, theories and models found in literature which guided and underpinned the BRIES guidance development work.

The BRIES guidance consists of the four components mentioned in the previous section: the aspirations, communication model, well-being framework and reflection tool. The aspirations and the reflection tool are both related to the communication model and the well-being framework, and are therefore embedded in the same theoretical background. As such, the following sections focus on the theoretical details of communication and well-being in the BRIES context.

Communication model

The BRIES activity identified effective communication as a main focus in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (the [BRIES mid-term report](#) (European Agency, 2023) provides more information on the identification process). The stakeholder discussions identified four core elements of effective communication in education: clarity, accessibility, trust and transparency. Findings from several publications supported these core elements, which were therefore integrated into an existing model of communication. In-depth research on communication theory and consultation with a communication expert guided the Agency team in developing a communication model for the BRIES guidance.

Before going into detail about the model, this report will briefly discuss communication in general.

Communication theory is a vast field, and it is easy to get lost in a multitude of fundamental details dealing with all kinds, levels and characteristics of communication. Barnlund summarises the essential dimensions of a complex concept:

The word 'communication' stands for those acts in which meaning develops within human beings as neuro-motor responses are acquired or modified. It arises out of the need to reduce uncertainty, to act effectively, to defend or strengthen the ego. Its aim is to increase the number and consistency of meanings within the limits set by attitude and action patterns that have proven successful in the past, emerging needs and drives, and the demands of the physical and social setting of the moment. It is not a reaction to something, nor an interaction with something, but a transaction in which man invents and attributes meanings to realize his purposes (1970, p. 47).



Below, the essential aspects of communication presented by Barnlund are placed in the context of the outcomes of the BRIES activity. To do so, the most relevant parts of the quotation are listed and explained in the context of education and the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Develop/attribute meaning:** communicate to identify what has happened in education during the pandemic, identify what is important, gain orientation
- **Reduce uncertainty:** communicate to exchange information, to develop knowledge about COVID-19 and how to act/react in the teaching-learning environment
- **Act effectively:** communicate to develop/maintain trust, support all learners, provide safe environments, identify what needs to be done
- **Defend or strengthen the ego:** communicate to defend well-being and strengthen resilience
- **Emerging needs:** communicate to identify and respond to the needs of all learners, develop/maintain a sense of belonging, identify and communicate learners' and one's own needs to decision-makers
- **Demands of the physical and social setting of the moment:** communicate to respond and react to physical/social demands during the pandemic: restrictions, fear, uncertainty
- **Communication as a transaction to realise purposes:** communicate on a two-way basis between education stakeholders at different levels, including decision-makers, to be able to act effectively and realise the purpose of responding to the needs of all learners (and all involved in the teaching-learning process).

All these aspects are important in fostering resilience and well-being, especially in times of crisis. People's lives are greatly affected by communication and the meanings that are transacted through it (for example, Evans, 2002). Communication is especially important in the context of decision-making that influences and changes peoples' lives.

As far back as 1940, the *Needed Research in Communication* memorandum recognised the need for more effective communication between decision-makers and stakeholders (Bryson et al., 1940; see Sapienza, Iyer & Veenstra, 2015 for further context). It stated that: 'More effective communication from the government will require getting promptly to the people adequate explanations of proposals or decisions which change their lives' (Bryson et al., 1940, pp. 4–5). It pointed out the need to focus on 'how the people feel themselves affected by proposals or decisions thus explained' (ibid.) and concluded:

Research, then, will be doubly essential to two-way communication, first, to supply facts needed to make explanation both prompt and adequate; and, second, to bring back from the people an equally prompt and adequate response. With such research, the present gap between the government and the people can be closed (ibid.).

Although this memorandum might be considered outdated, it emphasises the importance of two-way communication between decision-makers and stakeholders at grassroots level.



The memorandum built on Lasswell's construct of communication (Sapienza et al., 2015). While nowadays this construct is often considered to lack important aspects, it provided the basis for many developments in communication theory. Lasswell's main formula was: 'Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?' (Sapienza et al., 2015, pp. 616–617). This simplified approach to communication makes it useful as a basic construct to build on.

In the [BRIES guidance](#), the communicators (education stakeholders at different levels) are the 'who' and 'to whom'. It focuses on multiple channels as essential to effective communication, and the aspirations show 'what effect'. The following sections explain these areas in depth.

Communication as a two-way process

The BRIES Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education focuses on two-way and non-linear communication processes. Stakeholders' contributions to discussions in the BRIES activity pointed to the need for clear, accessible, trustful and transparent communication and decision-making processes, especially in times of crisis.

'Communication is seen as a two-way process' (Fischhoff, 2012, p. 3). Listening to people is essential 'to understand what they know and value' and 'to provide them with relevant information in a comprehensible form' (ibid.).

More recent contributions to communication theory refer to two-way communication ideas while considering different contexts and variables that influence the communication process (for example, Chandler & Munday, 2011; Parackal, Parackal, Mather & Eusebius, 2021; Tan & Lim, 2022; Schneider & Arnot, 2018). The BRIES guidance's main reference is the transactional communication model, but it also relies on parts of the interactive model (Barnlund, 1970; Chandler & Munday, 2011; Jones, 2013).

Unlike linear models, the transactional model views communication as a two-way interaction where sender and receiver both act as communicators and create content together. This particularly emphasises the role of context (Barnlund, 1970). Context can be relational, cultural, social (in the transactional model) and physical/psychological (in the interactive model).

The transactional model focuses on constant exchange, whereas the interactive model alternates between two sides of communicators (sender – receiver) (Jones, 2013; Chandler & Munday, 2011).

The transaction model of communication describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts. In this model, we don't just communicate to exchange messages; we communicate to create relationships, form intercultural alliances, shape our self-concepts, and engage with others in dialogue to create communities. In short, we don't communicate about our realities; communication helps to construct our realities (Jones, 2013, p. 20).

In times of crisis, effective communication is essential to people's lives. It affects how people are informed and, consequently, enabled to address challenges arising from the crisis. It affects well-being and quality of life, in terms of feeling part of a supportive community, feeling safe, prepared, informed and listened to, etc. In this way, effective



communication constructs people's lived realities. Therefore, it is essential that everybody is entitled and enabled to communicate effectively. The right to communicate effectively is crucial for individual well-being and resilience.

Communication in crisis situations

To begin this section, it is necessary to define 'crisis'. In the BRIES activity, a crisis is 'an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes' (Coombs, 2007a, pp. 2–3). Coombs (2007b) also states that a crisis is 'a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly'.

More generally, a crisis is defined as 'a phase of disorder in the development of a person, an organization, a community, an ecosystem, a business sector, or a polity' (Boin, Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2009, p. 5). This shows that crises can be looked at from individual and organisational points of view. Both approaches are important for this report, as it focuses on both individual stakeholders and schools (or communities) as organisational entities.

Effective communication in education is essential, both in times of crisis and in normal times. It enables education stakeholders to respond to the needs of all learners. As such, providing a culture of effective communication to all stakeholders works preventively.

Tanović, Šašić, Ajdinović and Čizmić state: 'Every crisis requires effective communication in order to reduce the damage associated with the event' (2021, p. 1142). However, prevention and preparation can significantly affect the effectiveness of communication in crisis situations. In educational environments, communication structures and systems must be prepared and improved, and a culture of effective communication must be established and in place when a crisis occurs.

A major aspect to develop when investing in effective communication for prevention is a core element of effective communication in education: trust.

Nearly all practitioners and researchers in the field of risk and crisis communications view two key variables as fundamental factors – trust and credibility. The terms overlap in some respects but are very different in others. Understanding how messages are impacted by the levels of an audience as a group as well as by individual audience members is thought by many to be a key to a successful communications event (Walaski, 2011, p. 19).

In crisis situations, there are usually fewer opportunities to communicate but a greater need to do so. This affects stakeholders' well-being and increases the need to communicate via different channels. Creating trust between education stakeholders (communicators) enables effective communication through different channels.

Digital communication includes many different communication channels that have been extensively used during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, digital communication also presents several challenges that need to be addressed.

One such challenge is digital literacy. This includes learners', families' and teachers' abilities to use different online tools to communicate in the teaching-learning process. In other words, 'digital literacy is a set of skills required [...] to use digital tools to support the achievement of goals in their life situations' (Reddy, Sharma & Chaudhary, 2020, p. 66). As



such, the accessibility of both tools and content is essential. Are devices and connections available? Is the content presented in an accessible way for everyone?

Opportunities for exchange, discussion and a feeling of belonging are linked to the ability to communicate via digital channels during times of crisis. If the communication is effective (clear, accessible, built on trust and transparency), it can build resilience and foster well-being. Hence, the aspects of well-being, digital literacy and effective communication are clearly interlinked.

Additionally, on-going engagement with communities is essential in a situation of uncertainty and change. It is important to consider social dynamics, socio-cultural diversity and a rapidly changing media landscape.

People's engagement [...] is heavily influenced by their cultural and social identity, age, gender, and access to resources. These factors influence people's preferred modes of communication, who and what they perceive as a 'trustworthy authority,' and, importantly, their capacity to act and respond to information (Hylan-Wood, Gardner, Leask & Ecker, 2021, p. 2).

Using stakeholders' preferred modes of communication enhances the quality of effective communication.

A well-established culture of effective communication is considered essential to lay a solid foundation for potential crises where the well-being of learners, especially those vulnerable to exclusion, is at stake. In this context, Durkee-Lloyd (2022) emphasises the need to develop an environment of trust. This facilitates the communication of information that is 'accurate, timely, consistent, clear, and simple to understand' (ibid., p. 2).

It is also important to be aware of and consider the impact of accessibility and context factors, such as cultural and social backgrounds. As such, Durkee-Lloyd includes literacy rates, language barriers and access to devices and the internet as relevant aspects to consider (ibid.).

Core elements of effective communication and context factors

The BRIES guidance places the four core elements of effective communication (clarity, accessibility, trust and transparency) at the centre of its model. Next to the core elements, context factors are meaningful variables that influence effective communication. In the BRIES guidance, these context factors are relational, cultural, social, physical and psychological.

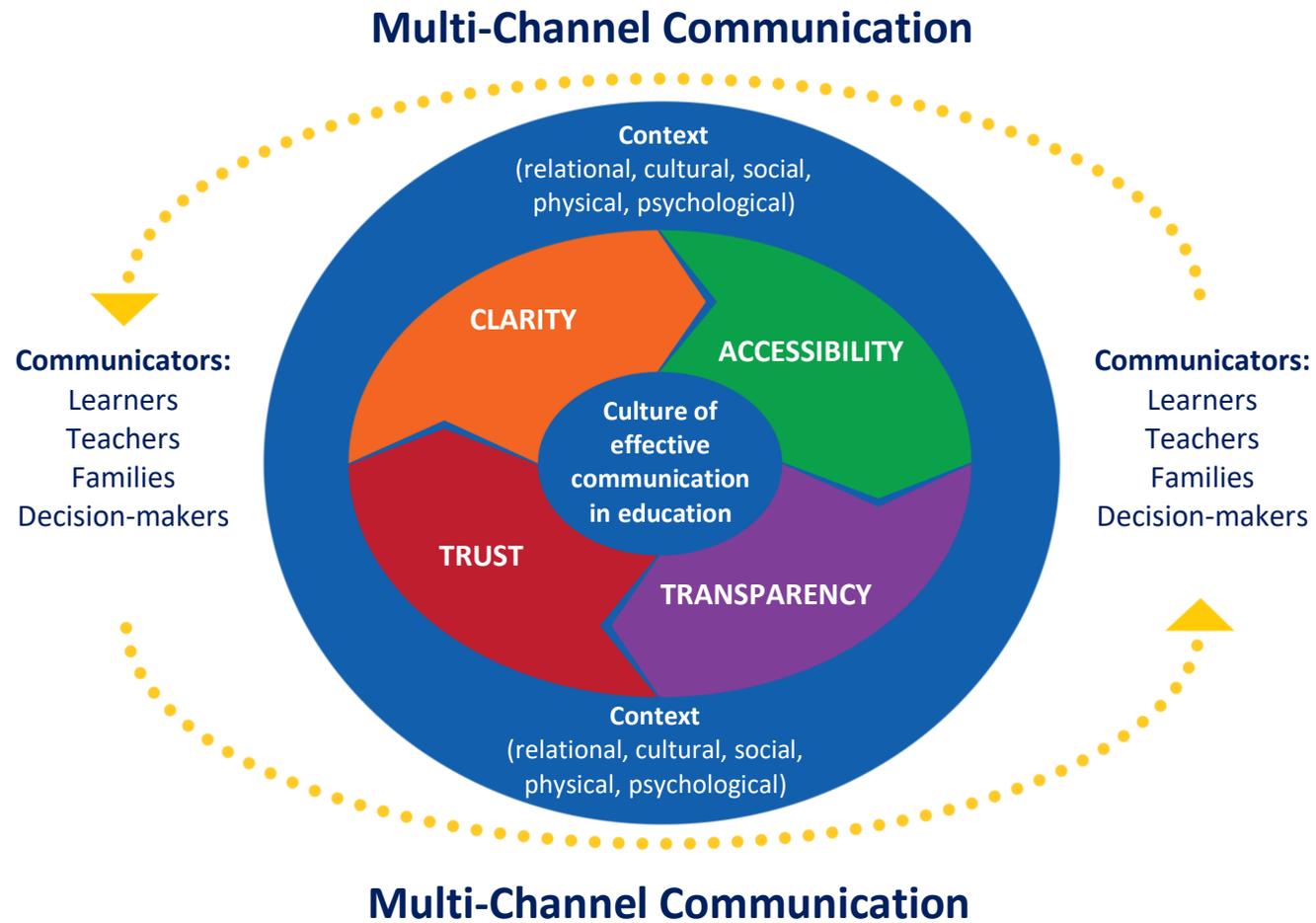


Figure 1. Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education model



The core elements and context factors determine whether communication is effective. Both can support or hinder the effectiveness of communication and affect and contribute to the interpretation of communication processes.

What contributes to interpret a communicative act beyond the spoken words may, broadly speaking, be included. Intuitively, context is the background for comprehension, what makes communication possible. This is a critical point. In fact, context both is an inescapable concept in the study of communication and eludes univocal definition. There is no one context but many (Airenti & Plebe, 2017, p. 1).

Context is complex and greatly depends on the individual communicators' circumstances, situations and backgrounds. However, implementing the identified core elements in communication can enable consideration of and respect for context factors. This can make the process of communication effective.

It is essential to consider context factors when establishing a culture of effective communication. For example, the core element of accessibility can affect the physical context. To be effective, communication must take place in an accessible environment (which can be online). This affects the communication process, as the physical context changes according to the communicators' needs.

Implementing the core element of trust can positively influence the psychological and relational context. A trustful relationship will lead to more effective communication compared to relationships between communicators who are untrusting. Furthermore, trust can create an environment where marginalisation and power differences dissipate. Clarity and transparency might help to overcome misunderstandings due to cultural diversity. These core elements (clarity, transparency and trust) can support communication while considering social context. Communication processes based on trust can consider and address rules and unstated norms.

In this way, the core elements for establishing a culture of effective communication in education can be seen as conversion factors, converting existing communication resources into effective communication.

Core elements and the capability approach

The core elements are essential to effective communication, so stakeholders must use and implement them in communication processes to convert existing communication resources to effective communication. This requires training, awareness-raising and creating a culture of effective communication in different educational environments.

When the core elements are used and implemented, they can influence the context factors and improve communication processes. In other words, a focus on the core elements as conversion factors always includes the context as an important variable to convert communication resources into effective communication.

The BRIES guidance supports the implementation of the core elements in essential education communication processes. This establishes a culture of effective communication, helping to build resilience and foster well-being among all involved in the teaching-learning process.



The well-being framework was adopted from Sen's capability approach (1979; 1992), which considers conversion factors as responsible for turning people's resources into capabilities. Capabilities are real opportunities to do and be what a person values. The capability approach's main concept is that achieving well-being and quality of life requires a focus on people's valued capabilities (opportunities to choose from) and 'functionings' (realised beings and doings). Having the freedom to choose from certain capabilities improves people's well-being.

Effective communication was identified as a capability for education stakeholders. If stakeholders can and do choose to use effective communication, they become part of a culture of effective communication in education. Consequently, the use of a culture of effective communication becomes a functioning:

Functionings are capabilities that have been realized. Whether someone can convert a set of means – resources and public goods – into a functioning [...] crucially depends on certain personal, sociopolitical, and environmental conditions, which, in the capability literature, are called 'conversion factors' (Robeyns & Byskov, 2023).

The core elements can influence some of the abovementioned conditions. If a culture of effective communication exists in their educational environment, stakeholders can choose to communicate effectively if they think it will contribute to their valued beings and doings. This, in turn, leads to improved well-being and quality of life.

Well-being and the capability approach

The previous section introduced the main elements of the capability approach. This section provides a general overview of the BRIES guidance's well-being framework and puts the core elements (clarity, trust, accessibility, transparency), effective communication and aspirations in context.

The capability approach is a normative theory – a tool or framework to evaluate and develop concepts like inequity or well-being. It can be applied across disciplines but is most often used in development studies, welfare economics, social policy and political philosophy. The capability approach can be seen as a 'framework of thought' or a way to think about normative issues. It focuses on information needed to evaluate individual well-being.

In the context of education:

Well-being is a state in which pupils are able to develop their potential, learn and play creatively.

Concretely, well-being at school means

- feeling safe, valued and respected
- being actively and meaningfully engaged in academic and social activities



- having positive self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of autonomy
- having positive and supportive relationships with teachers and peers
- feeling a sense of belonging to their classroom and school
- feeling happy and satisfied with their lives at school

Pupils who experience well-being can build and enjoy positive relationships with others and feel belonging to their school community (European Commission, no date).

The capability approach focuses on quality of life and well-being. These can be achieved when people are free to live the kind of life they have reason to value (Sen, 1993; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Robeyns & Byskov, 2023). The term ‘capabilities’ was chosen to ‘represent the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be – the various “functionings” he or she can achieve’ (Sen, 1992, p. 30). In other words, capabilities are ‘a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being’ (ibid.) or their ‘real freedoms’ or opportunities to achieve functionings (Robeyns & Byskov, 2023).

Functionings are therefore a person’s achievements, their ‘beings and doings’. It is important to consider that ‘knowing the goods a person owns or can use is not sufficient to know which functionings he/she can achieve’ (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99). This is due to the different factors (for example, social, environmental, personal) that determine whether a person can convert certain resources into real beings and doings.

We have to examine the overall capability that any person has to lead the kind of life she has reason to want to lead, and this requires that attention be paid to her personal characteristics (including her disabilities, if any) as well as to her income and other resources, since both can influence her actual capabilities (Sen, 2004, p. 3).

Figure 2 presents a simplified overview of the different elements of the capability approach:

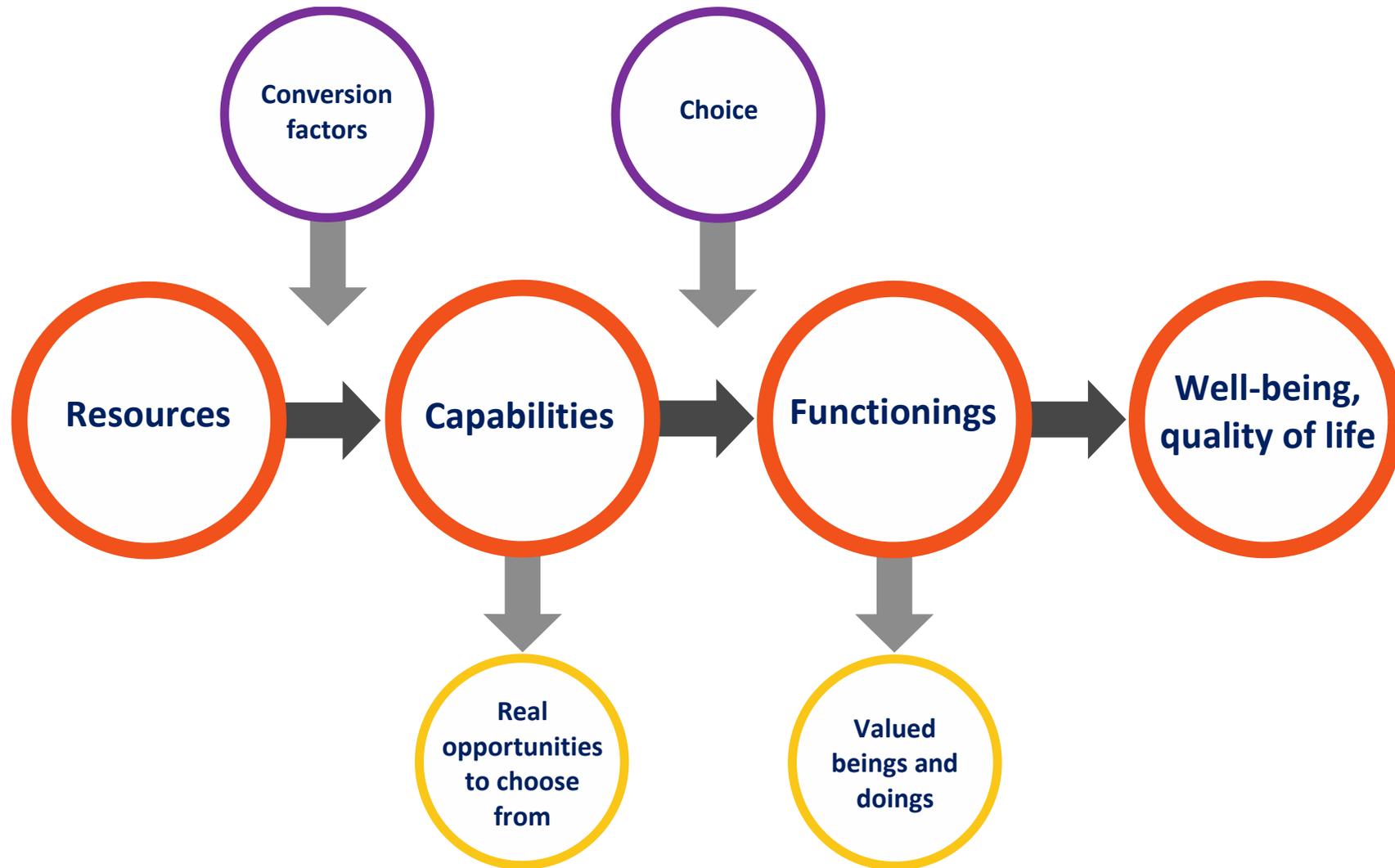


Figure 2. The capability approach



A person's resources can be converted into capabilities if certain conditions are in place. For example, if someone wants to achieve the functioning of riding a bike, certain conversion factors will determine whether this is possible: the geographical environment must be suitable for a bike, and the social/cultural and personal factors (physical condition, etc.) need to allow that person to ride a bike. If all these factors apply, the person's resources become a capability: the opportunity to ride a bike if they choose to do so. If the person does choose to ride the bike, it becomes a functioning that adds to their well-being and quality of life, because it is a valued 'doing' for that person. If, for example, the community does not allow the person to ride a bike (for example, social/cultural factors that prevent women from riding a bike), their resources cannot be converted into a capability (Robeyns & Byskov, 2023). Conversion factors determine the shift from resources to real opportunities to choose from (capabilities).

Figure 3 presents the capability approach as well-being framework for the BRIES guidance. The concept of effective communication in education and the core elements (conversion factors) are its main elements. It shows clearly how well-being and resilience result from a culture of effective communication in education as a **functioning** (being and doing) which comes from the **capability** (real opportunity to choose) of effective communication in education.

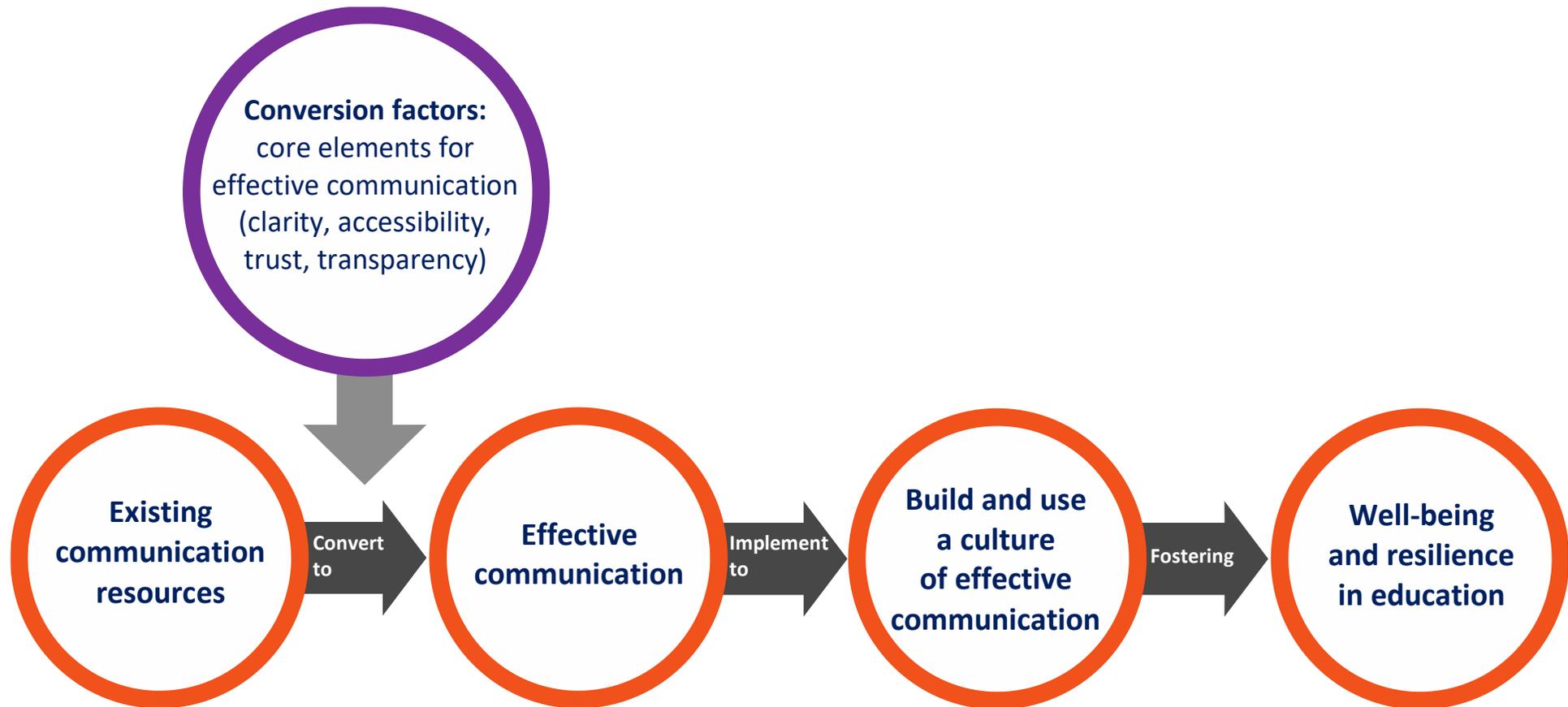


Figure 3. Well-being and effective communication in education



A culture of effective communication can only be established with the participation and inclusion of all relevant education stakeholders. This is essential, as it turns the individual capability of communicating effectively into the ‘collective capability’ of effective communication (see the [Effective communication as a collective capability](#) section).

Organized collectivities – unions, political parties, village councils, women’s groups, etc. – are fundamental to ‘people’s capabilities to choose the lives they have reason to value’. They provide an arena for formulating shared values and preferences, and instruments for pursuing them, even in the face of powerful opposition (Evans, 2002, p. 56).

In the context of the BRIES activity, the ‘powerful opposition’ is the COVID-19 pandemic or any potential crisis. When speaking about building and using a culture of effective communication in education – the functioning in the capability approach – the four aspirations that emerged from the BRIES stakeholder discussions are the ‘shared values’.

Stakeholders need to collectively build and use a culture of effective communication in education to:

- provide safe and secure psycho-social learning environments for all learners (aspiration A);
- be able to act proactively and feel prepared for psycho-social emergencies (aspiration B);
- create supportive links in the community around learners and families (aspiration C);
- address the needs of all learners (aspiration D).

Figure 4 illustrates how the aspirations integrate into the well-being framework.

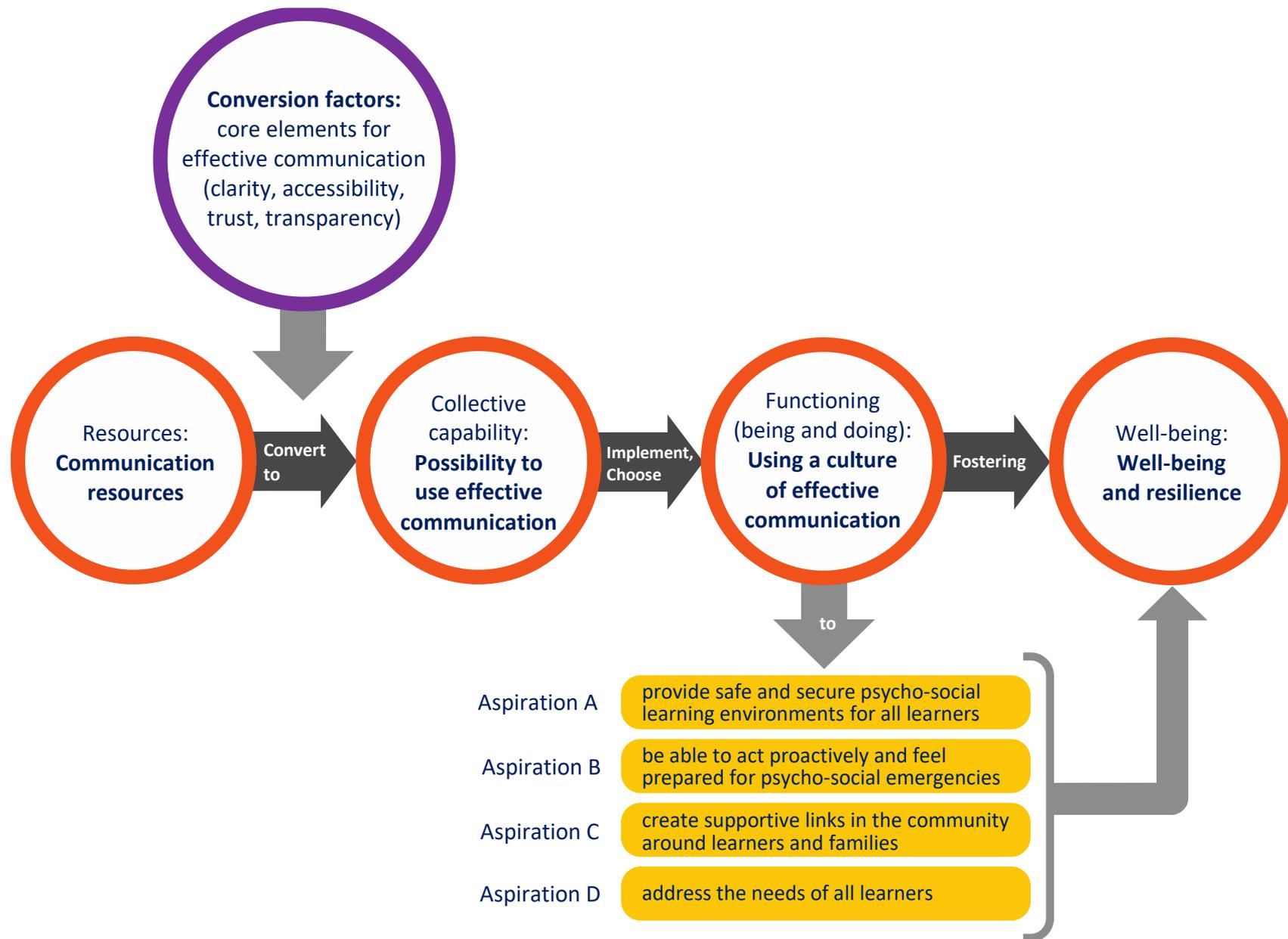


Figure 4. Well-being framework, including aspirations



Effective communication as a collective capability

The opportunity to communicate effectively is a **collective capability**. The term ‘collective’ refers to the fact that this capability only exists if all stakeholders are included and participate in a culture of effective communication. In other words, an individual cannot achieve a culture of effective communication. The core elements of effective communication that can influence the context must be implemented collectively.

For example, the core element of trust leads to trustful communication. Trustful communication can only develop if at least two people are involved and participate in developing trustful relationships. The same is true for the other core elements. Clarity, accessibility and transparency only make sense if communicators (or stakeholders) communicate their needs (send information) or answer and act on communicated needs (respond) and participate in communication processes.

This is essential for effective communication in education and converts it into a collective capability. Social structures in communities – including a wider school community – are vital to expand capabilities (for example, Ibrahim, 2006). ‘Yet the concept of collective capabilities is not a synonym of community, since collective capabilities may also be expanded in different types of organizations’ (Tonon, 2018, p. 122).

The essential message in this section is that establishing a culture of effective communication in education is a collective capability, whose fruits of well-being and resilience can only be harvested if all education stakeholders participate and are included equally.



CONCLUSION

This conclusion aims to bring together the two sections of this report – that is, the BRIES peer-learning activities [methodology](#) and the [theoretical background](#) of the activity’s final output, with an emphasis on communication and well-being.

The conclusion builds on the Agency’s aim of involving education stakeholders from all levels in its activities by inviting them to contribute, to exchange, and to discuss potential challenges in education that affect them – in other words, by inviting them to communicate about these challenges and contribute their perspectives and experiences.

The Agency position on inclusive education states that personalised approaches should engage all learners, support their active participation and give them a voice in the learning process. Furthermore, partnerships and networks with stakeholders and local communities are seen as essential in developing inclusive education policies (European Agency, 2022b).

Involving stakeholders, listening to their voices and acting on their messages is clearly about communication. The first operational element in the Agency’s Key Principles (2021b) focuses on collaboration and effective communication at all levels. This includes collaboration between ministries, regional- and local-level decision-makers, and services and disciplines, including non-governmental organisations and schools.

The BRIES activity was organised around stakeholder involvement. As such, throughout its lifetime, it followed the principles of supporting active participation, giving voices to learners and families (referring to the Agency’s [Voices into Action](#) activity) and enabling collaboration and effective communication between all levels.

In the context of the theoretical background set out in this report, implementing peer learning activities can be seen as ensuring stakeholders’ right to communicate. The Agency’s overarching principle is set around a widely agreed concept of rights-based, inclusive education. The right to communicate, participate and be involved can be seen as part of this wider concept. Stakeholders’ right and opportunity to contribute to, exchange on and communicate about educational issues therefore receives special attention in Agency activities. In the BRIES activity, the evolving concept of a collective capability of effective communication in education therefore also builds on a rights-based perspective.

The right to communicate is not a new concept. It is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948 (United Nations, 1948; Schejter, 2022). As a human right, communication also finds its way into the capability approach, where it supports people’s well-being and quality of life.

Some of the greatest intrinsic satisfactions in life arguably come from social interaction with others who share our interests and values—friends, families, communities, and other groups (Evans, 2002, p. 57).

Communication is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects in human life. The capability approach as a rights-based framework of thought enforces the capability to



communicate. As such, communication and the right to communicate are essential for all people.

Having the freedom to choose to communicate is key. Schejter states that ‘only freedoms that can be realized are considered valuable’ (2022, p. 1828). A society in which those freedoms can be realised by all can be considered an equitable society. Therefore, decision-makers in education must also consider communication as a human right and make it a real opportunity (or capability) for all.

The right to communicate must be particularly ensured for learners vulnerable to exclusion from education, while looking after their socio-emotional well-being. Hart and Brando (2018) refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) as a starting point for analysing tensions ‘between protecting well-being and freedom rights during childhood’ (Hart & Brando, 2018, p. 296). They identify a ‘protective side’ and a ‘participatory side’ of children’s rights (ibid., p. 297). Children’s rights need to be secured. However, at the same time, children must be protected against harmful situations that might infringe upon their freedom rights in specific cases (for example, eating healthily when they might prefer to eat sweets).

Effective communication in education defined as a collective capability must focus on learners’ capabilities to participate in communication processes. The four aspirations and the model for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education with its core elements therefore account for the protective side of learners’ rights. Clarity, trust, accessibility and transparency ensure that learners understand content, are involved, are listened to and that their needs are addressed (aspiration D). At the same time, these elements enable stakeholders to protect learners by providing safe and secure learning environments (aspiration A).

As a collective capability, effective communication and, consequently, the functioning of using and participating in a culture of effective communication in education are carried by a collective momentum where the only way that everyone can benefit is if everyone is enabled to contribute. Therefore, the right to communicate must be an option for all. This right must be enforced, implemented and supported by everyone involved in the teaching-learning process. The Agency’s [Thematic Country Cluster Activities](#) will specifically build on these findings and will implement the principle of effective communication in education throughout with Agency member countries.

Finally, this right to communicate underlines the importance of effective communication and the development of a [Guidance for Establishing a Culture of Effective Communication in Education](#). The BRIES guidance aspires to facilitate the building of such a culture, while embracing a rights-based principle of effective communication in education to support the development of an inclusive education system.

Overall, the BRIES activity has enabled participants from all levels to reflect on existing communication practices, realities and policies. The activity has highlighted the need to strengthen communication in education to include all learners.



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