



European Education Area Strategic Framework  
**Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability**  
Understanding and addressing eco-anxiety in students  
Key messages



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# **Understanding and addressing eco-anxiety in students**

## Key Messages





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# 1. Introduction

Climate change is recognised as a major global challenge, threatening public health and livelihoods worldwide. Research is now recognising its impact on mental health and well-being. Many young people report fearing for their future, and experiencing a sense of loss, hopelessness and anger as they witness the impact of climate change around the world.

This short report summarises the findings of a webinar on eco-anxiety in school education organised by the European Commission Working Group on learning for sustainability in September 2023.<sup>1</sup> It describes the phenomenon and its implications for education policy and practice. The points set out below were based on (i) two presentations given in the webinar by researchers working on eco-anxiety and well-being and (ii) discussions which took place amongst the members of the working group.

## 2. Eco-anxiety– the challenge

**Eco-anxiety has been described as a condition in which someone feels frightened or very worried about climate change.** As a relatively new concept there is no single definition and the term itself has gained popularity in recent years. It is often understood as negative states of emotions such as fear and worry linked to the environmental crisis.

**Research shows that young people are more likely to be ‘eco-anxious’, and often experience fear and worry alongside anger and hopelessness.** Eco-anxiety is of course experienced differently and to differing degrees by people. For some, eco-anxiety can lead to serious health issues, such as insomnia, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. These feelings can intensify throughout teenage years. Many young people feel they lack the power to make a difference and they can feel burdened by expectations that their generation needs to find solutions to the current crisis.

**Climate change can be strongly related to existential emotions.** Anxiety, worry, and ambivalence, which can be emotional reactions by young people to the environmental crises should not be ignored in teaching and learning.

**Eco-anxiety is not synonymous with eco-paralysis.** Humans react or ‘cope’ differently with their emotions. Coping is a cognitive and/or behavioural effort to manage specific stressors. Those who are concerned about climate change are in fact more likely to make changes and take action in response to climate change. Worry can therefore be a starting point for positive pro-environmental action, thereby lessening the feelings of eco-anxiety.

## 3. Educational responses to eco-anxiety

### 3.1. Dealing with the emotions of climate change

**Emotions are always part of the learning process.** Both positive and negative emotions are always present within and beyond the classroom and can be both constructive and destructive forces depending on how learners cope with and channel their emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> The webinar took place on September 26, 2023. Two researchers presented on topics related to addressing eco-anxiety: Maria Ojala (CESSS, LEADER, Örebro University, Sweden) and Antje Disterheft (CENSE, NOVA, University Lisbon, Portugal).

**Learners with eco-anxiety can benefit from developing what is known as ‘critical emotional awareness’ to deal with their anxiety.** Critical emotional awareness skills involve thinking about emotions in a reflective way whilst acknowledging that emotions are also connected to power, culture and societal structures. Understanding how to deal with emotions linked to the climate crisis can help teachers to support learners and prevent that education on global crises worsens feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and despair and further damage mental health.

**Acquiring critical emotional awareness will not only aid teachers’ understanding of their own emotions but also help them support their students.** Experiencing emotions like worry related to climate change can impact young people’s overall quality of learning and relationships at school and beyond. Critical emotional awareness can aid teachers in fostering a supportive learning environment while recognising the political nature of the engagement around climate change and sustainability, bringing in critical reflections from sociology and educational science.

**Initial teacher education and in-service professional development should provide opportunities to learn about and address eco-anxiety in the classroom.** This could include: (i) learning about emotions and their role in everyday life and learning processes (ii) learning how to verbalise and best respond to emotions in the classroom; (iii) gaining awareness of the latest research on emotions in order to challenge outdated knowledge; (iv) gaining awareness of how young people at different ages cope with and regulate emotions; (v) understanding how emotions and coping are impacted by external aspects at the social-psychological, cultural and structural level; (vi) looking at ways to promote a trustful atmosphere in the classroom where emotions can be shared (e.g. pedagogy of invitation).

**Critical emotional awareness can be particularly useful in overcoming stigma related to admitting worry or concern.** This is not about imposing 'correct' emotions but rather equipping teachers to take a research-based and critical approach to emotions (e.g., social as opposed to individual experiences), which allows them to tackle eco-paralysis as well as gender-stereotypes (e.g. that boys find it difficult to express their fears about climate change, while girls tend to ruminate together on their worries)

**Critical emotional awareness can be instrumental for strengthening learning for sustainability .** The goal is not to remove worry but to promote constructive, problem-focused and meaning-focused approaches and to build trust and resilience. In learning to understand and deal with their emotions, learners can be empowered to take action to address climate change.

### 3.2. From eco-anxiety to taking action

**The synergies between learning for sustainability and well-being should be better linked and recognised in education.** The World Happiness Report 2023 and the IPCC’s 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report highlight the link between human and planetary well-being and the importance of human action for reversing anthropogenic environmental change and safeguarding both planetary and human well-being. Given its importance for the quality of learning and its strong links with sustainability, the concept of well-being needs to be better integrated into learning for sustainability practice. Possible synergies to be further explored are (i) the mind-body connection; (ii) nature-connectedness and belonging; (iii) facing and dealing with (challenging) emotions; (iv) fostering happiness and resilience.

**Being outside in nature, moving, and sensing, could play a key role in strengthening the mind-body connection for improved quality of learning related to sustainability.** The mind-body connection is vital as the brain, mind, body and environment together constitute an integrated system for learning. Concentration and focus improve with increased bodily activity, but young people as they move through the education system are less likely to have these opportunities to get outside and be physically active.

**Nature-connectedness can enhance physical and mental well-being and pro-environmental behaviours.** Children who spend a lot of time playing and learning outside develop a deeper sense of caring for nature which can help in turn in dealing positively with eco-anxiety. It is thus necessary to strengthen nature-connectedness and belonging early in life through outdoors education which can activate the senses and emotions related to beauty, meaning and compassion for nature.

**Addressing emotions, including on climate change, needs to be an integral part of teaching practice.** Teachers should be supported to: (i) create more opportunities for expressing emotions (e.g., through small group discussions, art-based and place-based pedagogies), (ii) develop coping strategies (e.g., through mindfulness and nature-embodied experiences) and (iii) introducing children to positive role-models who care for nature and can reflect openly on their own eco-anxiety coping mechanisms.

## 4. What role for policy? (national/regional/local)

**Schools need more opportunities to integrate nature into the learning experience.** Physical education could focus more on activating senses and developing mind-body connections. Some good practice examples in this regard are included in the new sustainability toolkit for schools in **Ireland** and an increased focus on mindfulness in **Portuguese** schools.

**It is not enough that the educational institution is close to nature** if nature is not integrated into the learning experiences or if everyday practices are 'nature-disconnected' (e.g., students are unaware of where the food in the canteen is sourced). Schools in rural areas are in theory closer to nature, but educational institutions do not always take advantage of this or do not bring nature into the campuses. In **Slovakia**, the 'School in Nature' programme allows students to spend one week per academic year learning in and about nature. It is highly popular among students, especially from urban areas.

**Eco-anxiety should be included in teacher education in a way that is practical and tailored to the student teacher's context.** Education on this topic needs to consider potential challenges and how teachers can best address these (e.g., how to deal with harsh criticism or anger from the students towards political leaders and other adults). Teachers could benefit from a toolbox that covers the latest research on potential teaching methods and responses (e.g., pedagogy of hope, Critical Emotional Awareness and nature-connectedness) tailored for different age groups. Such a toolbox should also focus on mental health issues and dealing with emotions more generally in the classroom in order to support student well-being and learning.

**Having a platform for conversations between teachers and other education staff is crucial.** Teachers need to be able to connect and share ideas about how to tackle eco-anxiety in their classroom, how to discuss the climate crisis in a sensitive manner and suitable resources that could be used. Teachers could benefit from such a sense of community and they can be empowered through action learning. Such conversations between teachers may need to be brought to the a wider school community, including parents.

**Teachers could benefit from guidance and toolkits on eco-anxiety.** While there is currently strong research interest in the emerging field of eco-anxiety on a European and global level, there are few good examples of policy guidance or measures related to eco-anxiety in education in Europe. Resources and guidance are needed to support teachers in tackling eco-anxiety in their classrooms. Policy action can provide toolkits, frameworks and templates that offer guidance on eco-anxiety for educational personnel and leaders of educational institutions. In the **Czech Republic**, there are currently long-term policy plans focusing on well-being, covering cross-cutting actions with recommendations on sustainability and well-being.

**Student involvement is key.** Students need to play an active part in these conversations and should get to influence decisions about nature-connectedness in their learning spaces, as well the approaches and discussions around eco-anxiety.

**Psychologists and counsellors are crucial partners for dealing with eco-anxiety.** Psychologists and counsellors are often lacking time and resources to deal with these challenges. They need to be supported, and for tackling eco-anxiety, collaboration between these specialised personnel and teachers could be fruitful. It is also important that teachers get support from other teachers, psychologists and counsellors at educational institutions in order to deal with their own emotions and be comfortable and confident to deal with eco-anxiety in the classroom.

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