



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools, Sub-group on

Learning for Sustainability

Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education

Key messages



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Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education

Key Messages

European Education Area Working Group Schools

Learning for Sustainability

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1. Introduction

The European Education Area's Working Group on learning for sustainability held a meeting on citizenship and sustainability education in Lisbon on 16-18 October 2024. Site visits to a local school and presentations by teachers and students, representative organisations, NGOs and the host team – the Portuguese Ministry for Education, Science and Innovation – shed light on the opportunities and challenges in linking learning for sustainability and citizenship education.

The Portuguese school education system has a **strong connection between sustainability and citizenship** education. The curriculum component of 'Citizenship and Development education' is comprised of (i) compulsory domains which need to be taught at all cycles and levels, (ii) domains that need to be covered in at least two cycles of basic education and (iii) optional domains. 'Sustainable Development' and 'Environmental Education' are two **compulsory domains that need to be taught at all cycles and levels**.

The National Strategy for Citizenship Education recognises that **citizenship education benefits from a whole-school approach** in which cooperation between the school and the community is crucial to enable students with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to not only understand the world but also to participate in democratic processes and benefit from practical experiences gained through school life and activities in broader society.

Citizenship and Development is taught in a **cross-curricular** way throughout compulsory education, as a **specific subject** (2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education), and through a strong focus on school projects. The Ministry supports school project work with guidelines, in-service teacher training and launching challenges and invitations for specific projects. Participation in projects developed within the scope of the Citizenship and Development component **are registered in the student's qualification certificate**, in compliance with the rules established in national legislation.

Other countries organise learning for sustainability and citizenship education in different ways. For instance, while citizenship education is a separate topic in France, Spain and Ukraine, other countries, including Finland, Ireland and Slovenia, integrate sustainability and citizenship in a cross-curricular way. In Portugal, sustainability is organised under the umbrella of *citizenship*, while citizenship is found under the umbrella of *sustainability* in Cyprus. In the Netherlands, as part of a curriculum reform, sustainability is placed under the core objectives of citizenship, people and society and people and nature. This diversity of approaches between countries is to be expected, given diverse interpretations of citizenship as well as differing educational contexts and priorities.

The key messages outlined below arise from discussions at the meeting. These focus on how education systems can better integrate learning for sustainability and citizenship education, how connections between both can be reinforced and how the school community can be supported in these areas.

2. Agency and action competence

- **Coming together for agency and action:** Action competences² and student agency³ unite learning for sustainability and citizenship education. Curricular and non-curricular

² Action competence: the ability to take action to solve a specific problem. Note: There is no universally agreed upon definition. It is usually defined as a composite competence consisting of different parts (e.g., interest, intention and critical understanding of problems, possibilities and one's own role).

³ Agency: the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. Student agency: students having a say (voice), an active role in decision-making (choice) and being personally invested in their learning experiences (responsibility).

activities in these areas can foster action competences, self-efficacy, communication and critical thinking, environmental awareness, and science skills. Such activities often require students to engage with others and develop communication skills to advocate for change. Schools and teachers could be better supported in understanding how to best develop these action competences in both learning for sustainability and citizenship education.

- **Example:** as part of the long-standing cooperation between the Ministries of Education and the Environment, the Portuguese Environment Agency [APA](#) in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation have created a **teacher network** that coordinates and supports environmental education projects in schools. The network supports teachers with training and project advice, facilitates interdisciplinary approaches and active pedagogies, and strengthens links between the school, the community and the environment.
- **Collaborative classroom spaces and partnerships:** These can provide the setting and motivation for developing action competence. Having an external audience adds further purpose to schoolwork, teaching and management. Whenever schools organise initiatives with local partners, students can take an active part in the organisation, showcasing their projects and reporting on results.
- **Engagement skills:** Overall, active engagement with the community helps students, teachers, and school leaders strengthen individual and collective action competences, as well as critical and strategic thinking, listening, advocacy, leadership, problem-solving and story-telling skills.
- **Example:** The Amadora Oeste School Cluster in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area has a range of innovative education projects. The 'Amadora stream' is a collaboration project between one of the schools and two NGOs that aims to strengthen learners' action competence and care for their environment. Through lab work, learners investigate the eco-health and bio-diversity of their local stream. Learners prepare awareness-raising videos to share their findings. As a result, learners, as well as other community members, feel engaged and enhance their connections with their local environment.

3. Integrating sustainability and citizenship education in the curriculum

- **Making policy connections:** Learning for sustainability and citizenship education are integrally connected, but most guidelines and frameworks present them separately. Teachers and school leaders would benefit from the two areas being more seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, guidelines and plans. Policy leaders can set out long-term plans on cross-curricular topics and transformative approaches for schools, ministries and municipalities.
- **Interministerial linkages:** Strong interministerial collaboration when setting out these plans would make them more useful. Funding for projects that are cross-cutting and integrate both approaches can also be beneficial to support an integrated vision.
- **Example:** The Portuguese Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation has created an overarching strategy for citizenship education with compulsory domains closely linked to sustainability. The strategy for citizenship education involves curriculum reform, changing school culture, student participation, project work and working with communities. It is expected that all schools create a strategy for citizenship education. There is room for choice and adaptation to the local context regarding the school's main focus, timing and teaching methods.

4. School culture – the hidden curriculum

- **The ‘invisible teacher’:** The hidden curriculum⁴ drives unintended learning outcomes and influences how learners understand learning for sustainability and citizenship education. It is informed by values and norms, social interactions, democratic processes, sharing responsibilities, emphatic communication and entrepreneurial culture. It recognises that we 'live what we learn and learn what we live'. Learners quickly pick up on contradictions between intention and practice. It is therefore crucial to align what the schools practice and teach. Policy mechanisms should support interdisciplinarity, whole-school approaches, and can-do entrepreneurial school cultures that make the hidden curriculum visible and supportive of learning for sustainability and citizenship education.
- **Key actors:** To create a school culture that supports learning for sustainability and citizenship education, there needs to be clear direction, communication and support from school management and leadership. Teachers are essential as they are role models that inspire ambition, curiosity and inclusivity, reflecting the school's values. Support from parents/carers and the broader school community is also crucial in creating and sustaining a positive school culture for learning for sustainability and citizenship education.

5. Intergenerational learning

- **Intergenerational learning:** this involves the sharing of expertise, experience and learning across generations. The involvement of family members and broader communities in school projects can enable different experiences and long-term time frames to be valued. Mentorship programmes, peer learning between learners of various ages, or shared teaching are ways to foster intergenerational learning
- **Bringing the school home:** Equally, learners can influence home practices and perspectives in connection with these agendas. Policy initiatives should encourage schools to get training on and develop intergenerational learning opportunities throughout the school.

6. Local-global connections

- **The dynamics of scale:** Both citizenship and sustainability education shine a light on local to global challenges. Learning that involves local engagement and connects this experience to global issues can lead to the development of learner competences in *both* citizenship education and learning for sustainability.
- **Guiding practice:** Policy measures should encourage greater local-global connections by developing guidelines for schools and local actors on how to support global citizenship for sustainability. Such guidelines should focus on situated learning experiences and community-based approaches and tackle how to deal with potential challenges (e.g., ideological debates). Inspiration for the guidelines can be taken from the work of the [Global Education Network Europe](#).
- **Funding support:** This is critical to the development of partnerships and the engagement of local expertise (e.g., universities, businesses, NGOs, civil society). With

⁴ Hidden curriculum: lessons that are learned in school but not intended, for instance through transfer of norms, values and beliefs.

the right level of support, schools could be hubs of engagement and beacons of practice around these issues.

- **Connections:** Municipalities and local councils can play a critical role in connecting schools with local stakeholders and experts. Linking schools within or across countries working on similar sustainability challenges also depends on financial resources. The Erasmus+ programme provides such experiences while providing the necessary funding. These practices can also strengthen the quality of work in citizenship education and learning for sustainability overall.

7. School projects and after-school clubs

- **Beyond school spaces:** Student enterprises, extra-curricular projects and after-school clubs can bridge and connect formal and non-formal learning. They provide opportunities for practising active 'green' citizenship through sustainability-focused and interdisciplinary learning activities.
- **Quality guidelines:** Policy leaders, supported by representative organisations, unions and teacher networks, could create guidelines to ensure a minimum level of quality for after-school projects and clubs. Such guidelines could benefit newly created clubs or clubs in rural areas that are potentially more isolated from other initiatives. To not stifle ongoing creativity and innovation in the clubs, the guidelines should be supportive tools and not mandatory requirements.
- **Recognising and valuing teachers' work:** Often, a culture is created by celebrating what you value. It is, therefore, crucial to recognise the value of the work of the schools and teachers who participate in extra-curricular initiatives. This can be done by rewarding teachers with suitable incentives for outstanding efforts.
- **Embedding innovation:** Training and professional development are needed to embed the innovation these initiatives bring to the curriculum. Building confidence and developing competences for teachers through time release, flexible work schedule, secondment and certifications will enhance possibilities in this area.
- **Recording experience and learning:** Learners often participate in after-school activities without formal recognition. Recording experiences and learning in writing is vital to capturing achievements and lessons learnt. Official participation records also provide proof that learners can refer to when applying to another school, project or work.
- **Example:** In the Amadora Oeste School Cluster, a 'Citizenship passport' is created detailing the student participation in all the projects developed within the scope of class citizenship projects. Although this is a local practice, the 'Citizenship Passport' complements the national certificate of qualifications. The Passport and the Certificate help students show proof of experience in citizenship.
- **Example:** National Networks play an important role in supporting teachers. In Portugal, the ['Live Science Clubs at School'](#) network aims to develop scientific and technological literacy in formal and non-formal learning environments through interdisciplinarity, practical and experimental work, and by involving the local community (e.g., clean water projects, crafts from recycled materials and a meteorology lab for measuring climate change impacts). Through partnerships with scientific and higher education institutions, municipalities, 'Ciência Viva' centres, companies, museums and other cultural institutions, they approach topics such as sustainability, climate change, citizen science, biodiversity and health.

- Today, there are approximately 900 Live Science at School Clubs throughout Portuguese schools involving over 700 000 students, 3500 teachers from various subject areas and almost 4000 partner entities. Policy leaders should extend leading practice in this area through more significant and long-term investment in school projects and support of national networks for clubs.
- **Example:** the Lisbon Oceanarium / Oceano Azul Foundation implements, together with the Ministry of Education, the [Ocean Project – Educating a Blue Generation](#). This national project teaches Portuguese students (lower primary education) about the ocean through practical and hands-on teaching activities, encouraging interactive fieldwork and understanding sustainability and the need for ocean conservation. The European sustainability competence framework, [GreenComp](#), has been used in the development of the project.

8. Balancing individual and collective needs

- **Passivity and neutrality:** Learning for sustainability and citizenship education face the challenge of teachers and the wider school community sometimes perceiving these educational approaches as too political. This situation occurs due to a misconception about neutrality – doing nothing is also political. Sustainability and citizenship education may expose students to information and experiences that challenge pre-conceived notions. Focusing on (collective) action or seeking changes in one's community can be empowering. Still, it can also be provocative for those in the community who do not agree or are not used to such actions. As a result, not all teachers feel comfortable teaching these issues. This needs to be acknowledged through the guidelines and relevant teaching strategies.
- **Climate action:** Climate action, depending on its form and nature, may be politically acceptable in some countries/regions and less in others. This can create different challenges for teachers depending on the type of activities their students undertake. For example, planting a micro forest on school grounds is less 'controversial' than students advising the mayor on sustainability improvements for the city. In some countries/regions, political polarisation is more pronounced, making climate action potentially a more contentious topic. Conversely, in other countries, climate action is less divisive than core citizenship issues. To address these variations, policy leaders could aim for a balanced curriculum that includes both individual and collective action. Additionally, providing clear guidelines and materials can help teachers navigate any political sensitivities associated with climate action and/or citizenship.

9. Relevant reading materials

[Wiki page for the Working Group, including input papers and previous key messages](#)

[Education for Sustainable Development for 2030 toolbox](#)

[Education Scotland - Learning for Sustainability advice and guidance: Global citizenship](#)

[Global Education Network Europe](#)

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