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Learning for Sustainability: Good Practice in Teacher Education and Gaps in Provision



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Contact: Deirdre Hodson

E-mail: EAC-UNITE-B2@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

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Key messages

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1. Political will, momentum and funding

Teacher education is increasingly seen as of determining importance to the learning for sustainability agenda. Political momentum, support and funding are critical to advance teacher professional learning in this area. To be effective, teacher professional development must be seen alongside, and not in isolation to, other reforms and policies related to sustainability and education for sustainable development (ESD). At EU level, supporting measures are needed to accelerate current interest in learning for sustainability and to identify, share and scale exemplary national/regional policies on teacher education. To help countries turn commitments into action ('walk the talk') funding at national and EU level is crucial. Tapping into funding opportunities which have the potential to support large-scale reform (e.g. the EU's European Social Fund and the Recovery and Resilience Fund) could be a game changer for learning for sustainability. This requires better visibility of existing funding at EU level as well as cross-government/inter-ministerial cooperation at national level to ensure learning for sustainability, including teacher education, is given the focus it urgently needs.

2. Teacher qualifications and expertise on sustainability

Revising teacher learning provision and teacher qualifications is needed so that sustainability can be embedded in teacher professional development and career paths. Prioritising practical training in initial teacher education is particularly important. Building stronger connections between higher education (initial and continuous teacher education), experience and the school practice can support this endeavour. For example, in Belgium (French-speaking community) teacher educators mapped the Sustainable Development Goals against initial teacher education offerings and developed an action plan based on gaps identified. Pedagogical research relating to sustainability can be helpful when it is embedded effectively in policy and practice. Higher education could usefully engage further with practicing teachers and schools in this dialogue. Practical, task-centred and resource-based learning on sustainability should be a priority for time-pressed teachers. Higher Education can potentially benefit from the experience of the school education sector when it comes to interdisciplinary approaches to teaching sustainability.

3. Embedding sustainability in teacher professional standards

There is an urgent policy argument to be made for embedding sustainability into teacher professional standards and for supporting systemic actions to raise the importance of sustainability capacity and competence building. For example, Hungary has systematically built teacher competence relating to green and sustainability issues into its teacher standards. It has defined the levels of competence it expects of novice, experienced and master teachers in this area, and uses an e-portfolio tool to assist all education staff including school leaders, instructors, assistants and support staff to assess their progress towards the attainment of ESD competences against core indicators.

4. Holistic approach to sustainability education for teachers

It is critical to link teacher education on sustainability with whole school approach and leadership priorities. Focus should be given to: 1) supporting school leaders; 2) re-orienting of the curriculum so that it supports a transdisciplinary approach to teaching; and, 3) strengthening links between learning, the school and its community around real-life problems. As part of developing a holistic approach, it is important to provide opportunities to teachers for different ways to build capability, including facilitating 'micro-moments' of learning within the school (e.g. discussion on useful resources on sustainability/ESD at a staff meeting) and encouraging peer-to-peer networks as well as opportunities for more formal education programmes. In-school training and seminars that take in consideration the needs and circumstance of teachers in their specific setting can be highly beneficial.

5. Culture of collaboration and learning within the school

A school culture where sustainability is a focus area can help support day-to-day, informal learning between teachers and other staff members. Establishing a staff committee/taskforce/learning group on sustainability (bringing together teachers of different subjects and/or staff with non-teaching roles) can be vital to exchange ideas, resources and best practice and to bring issues to the attention of the whole school community. A sustainability lead or coordinator within a school can also support staff learning on sustainability.

6. Collaboration and peer learning

Policy action at EU and national levels that supports and facilitates peer learning and collaboration work on teacher education would be welcomed by educational research and teacher educator associations. These approaches can also serve to inform national policy and support a cascade model of change. Relatively inexpensive actions which support peer-learning can be considered, such as identifying schools/colleges that can catalyse ideas and practices, regionally or even nationally. Teachers working with schools, colleges and ministries through action learning approaches has shown to be highly effective in terms of the development of teacher capacities and competencies; the offering of practical guidance curricula and teaching practices review as well as in encouraging reflexive learning. Some regions and countries, such as Spain and Hungary, are already exploring these strategic approaches. It is also critical to ensure synergies across government departments so that policy planning and action on sustainability become a key priority and are connected across the system.

7. Civil society and NGOs

By providing a range of non-formal education and training opportunities, civil society organisations (CSOs) and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can support teacher education for sustainability in several ways: 1) environmental organisations and centres can

advise and assist teachers to prepare and organise sustainability, including outdoor, activities with students. 2) CSOs/ NGOs have a wealth of resources and practices that can be drawn on to inform school curricula; 3) CSOs/ NGOs can provide knowledge-creation and competence-building opportunities around sustainability practices; 4) Complementing formal education and training opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers; and, 5). CSO /NGOs can support countries where there is limited political commitment or networks on sustainability.

8. The digital and sustainability nexus

Digital technologies offer considerable value and potential to transform the practice of learning for sustainability in schools across Europe. There is a need for policy work that acknowledges and promotes this – both at EU and national levels. Peer learning for both teacher educators and policy makers can assist in building understanding of the digital agenda, its integration in education and how this relates to sustainability and futures education – e.g. visualising smart green cities, linking digital with outdoor experiences as well as envisioning alternative scenarios for technology use in education.

9. Wellbeing and learning for sustainability

Concerns for wellbeing should be a reference point for all policy work on learning for sustainability. Planning initiatives and interventions that allow for time, opportunities to participate, and effective capacity building can significantly improve learning for sustainability policy. Well-being concerns are also closely related to teachers' overall working conditions, including teaching time, student-staff ratio and available support. Resources and financing are key to this as is access to transformative pedagogies that involve the whole community in inclusive and locally relevant ways.

10. Resources and toolkits for teaching and learning on sustainability

Resources that go beyond a narrow content focus by linking the 'what' and the 'how' are crucial to support teaching for sustainability. The new Erasmus+ Teacher Academies projects on sustainability have shown great potential in reorienting teaching and learning towards sustainability and should be promoted regionally, nationally and at EU level. CLIMADEMY includes three well-regarded centres of teacher education. It focuses on the technical skills and resources needed to bring teachers out of the classrooms – gather data and understand climate change. EduSTA focuses on microcredentials relating to learning for sustainability by creating learning pathways where teachers can develop and demonstrate their sustainability education competences with digital badges. The TAP-TS project involves initial and continuing teacher development centres and focuses on producing, testing and validating packages of resources relating to sustainability that will be useful to both teachers in schools and in teacher education.

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