

How do adult practitioners experience Learning for Sustainability

Background

This report is a companion to our 'Children's Parliament Investigates: Learning for Sustainability' report, based on our investigation into Learning for Sustainability with children from March - August 2022. Our children's report can be read here: childrensparliament.org.uk/learning-for-sustainability

Children's Parliament worked alongside adult educators in each setting throughout our Investigation. They supported the MCPs to complete their weekly mission activities and were actively present during our introductory and Early Years workshops.

We also delivered a Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) session to our partner schools on children's human rights and Learning for Sustainability. Through this, we heard from educators that they are passionate about Learning for Sustainability, but felt they wanted more training in the practicalities of its delivery and how to meaningfully incorporate children's human rights.

"After this session, I now have a spark for sustainability again" Teacher,
Clackmannanshire

Educators did not always feel they have the tools, support and knowledge to deliver the Learning for Sustainability curriculum in full within their existing lessons and school set up. They wanted to see more sharing of practice between settings, such as during our CLPL session.

To ensure their views and experiences were captured to strengthen the new Learning for Sustainability Action Plan, Children's Parliament was asked by Scottish Government to return to the educational settings we worked with over the summer term and speak to the supporting adults on the project. We conducted short individual interviews with teachers and Early Years practitioners in five settings to further delve into how they understood the Learning for Sustainability curriculum at present, and what could be improved.

We were provided with a series of questions to guide the interviews and fit with the wider work of the Action Plan group in Scottish Government. Below are the responses from educators.

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1. How is Learning for Sustainability understood by practitioners/educators and children?

There was variability across the five settings in how Learning for Sustainability was understood by both practitioners and children. We found that education on the physical environment was consistently delivered across all settings, such as “photosynthesis through looking at plants in the sun” (MCP, FossoPLAY) in the Early Years and lessons, taught outside in primary and secondary schools.

Practitioners shared that they didn’t feel confident combining Learning for Sustainability with Rights Respecting Schools and children’s rights practice, especially when trying to teach the subject of climate change. They felt that approaches could unhelpfully place the idea of responsibility onto children when learning about rights was understood to mean learning about ‘rights and responsibilities’. Adult practitioners wanted any training linked to Learning for Sustainability to include explicit links to children’s rights practice in order to fully understand the links between children’s human rights and their learning around the natural environment.

“I didn’t know that children shouldn’t be taught about responsibility and that they just have rights. This is hard when we think about climate action.” Supporting teacher, Perth and Kinross.

The combination of children’s human rights and Learning for Sustainability was also varied in the Early Years settings, as “relationship building and emotional development have to be prioritised in the younger years before they can build concepts of citizenship outside their everyday experiences” (Early Years Practitioner, Edinburgh). The Early Years settings understood Learning for Sustainability in the Early Years through the lens of children’s human rights practice and prioritising early childhood development, including outdoor learning, rather than as a variety of curriculum topics to be introduced to children.

The ways in which children understood Learning for Sustainability across settings was even more varied. Practitioners mentioned that this depended on the subject and involvement of the adults in the setting, as well as their location and access to resources. This was especially true in the Early Years settings, where practitioners told us that the way children understood Learning for Sustainability was much more dependent on their everyday experiences than it was on knowing the curriculum terminology. This was a strong theme across our findings in the children’s consultation as well. Elements of Learning for Sustainability appear across settings but are either inconsistently implemented or are not labelled as such by adults or children.

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“We have Learning for Sustainability strongly across our subjects, but I don’t think the children would call it that. They might not even know the word in the younger years. It’s hard to call every element Learning for Sustainability when we are also trying to incorporate other guidelines, the Sustainable Development Goals, Rights Respecting Schools and Curriculum for Excellence all at the same time.” Educator, Perth and Kinross.

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2. How have schools gone about developing whole-school approaches to Learning for Sustainability?

Only three of the practitioners we spoke to felt their setting had developed a whole school approach to Learning for Sustainability. Where this was successful, it was set within a well-resourced and well-used outdoor learning space, such as “a school polytunnel that the children absolutely love learning eco-skills in” (Educator, Perth and Kinross). One Early Years setting is completely outdoors, and practitioners there felt that this allowed them to meaningfully engage every child with outdoor learning through everyday play and exploration.

Other settings found developing a whole school approach to Learning for Sustainability challenging based on how passionate or available staff members were. Settings felt that they required top-down support, extra time and capacity of staff, and dedicated financial resources to be able to deliver a meaningful whole-school approach to Learning for Sustainability. Educators also found a whole school approach challenging when there was variation across subject areas around how much Learning for Sustainability was prioritised; “there isn’t always a whole school culture to embedding Learning for Sustainability, so the whole responsibility fell onto one teacher who was trying to balance an already large workload” (Educator, Inverclyde). A whole school approach requires buy in from every staff member across subject areas in addition to top-down support from leadership.

In the Early Years, Learning for Sustainability was treated as an important subject that was a part of a broader approach, such as the Froebelian method¹. Practitioners in these settings felt it was important that children were supported to develop positive emotional relationships and literacy in conjunction with learning about the physical environment and climate, but that this emphasis hadn’t come across in the current Learning for Sustainability Action Plan. As such, they felt the action plan didn’t lend itself well to the priorities Early Years practice needed to address.

“We first encountered the Learning for Sustainability Action Plan after we planned the delivery of our nursery outside, but it was more a case of knowing that we ticked the boxes rather than referring to it all the time in our delivery.” Educator, Perth and Kinross

¹ Reference: [Froebel Trust | Children and nature](#)

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3. How have children and young people (and parents/guardians, school/CLD community) been involved in their development [of a whole school approach to Learning for Sustainability]?

Across the Early Years and primary school settings, staff felt very positively about including children in the development and delivery of learning. In some settings, children were encouraged to speak to adults every day about materials and types of play they wanted to see outdoors or were directly involved in the planning of subject content. With children being so passionate about climate change and their outdoor learning, this successfully addressed part of the Learning for Sustainability curriculum. A headteacher in Clackmannanshire told us “this school has seen amazing results from involving children in planning the curriculum each year in our journey to being a rights-respecting school. When they choose what they learn they are really engaged and excited in their learning and this has had positive effects across the whole school and staff.”

In the settings that did not have whole-school approaches to Learning for Sustainability, adults shared that it was more difficult for them to involve children in the development of their curriculum and learning spaces. Without top-down support and explicit time set aside for teachers to plan Learning for Sustainability delivery across a setting, children couldn't be brought in to planning and participation in a consistent manner.

All the adult practitioners we spoke to were excited to develop a more consistent approach to involving parents and the wider community in Learning for Sustainability, as it is currently varied and reliant on parents entering the setting with already developed interests. They felt that this was made very difficult during COVID but that it was a key opportunity for encouraging thorough engagement of both adults and children with the curriculum. Some shared that they would need extra time and finances to do this, but that they wanted to embed the approach within their school improvement plans.

“We are excited post-COVID to invite parents into school again. We hope that we can bring the whole community into improving the school and developing a nice outdoor space, which we don't have now” Educator, Clackmannanshire.

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4. What have children and young people's experience of Learning for Sustainability been? In what contexts have they encountered Learning for Sustainability?

All the adult practitioners shared the children's positive experiences with Learning for Sustainability. They felt the children were engaged, passionate and "the main reason that...school[s] do keep working on climate action and sustainability" (Educator, Inverclyde). This included extra-curricular eco-groups, pupil voice groups and how children engaged with the outdoor spaces available to them.

However, a common theme was feeling that the children didn't always understand what fell under the umbrella term of Learning for Sustainability. They were often being taught about climate change or outdoor learning but didn't connect this to a specific curriculum area. Practitioners also shared that global citizenship is the strand that is least included in delivery compared to outdoor learning, sustainable development and the climate emergency. This connects to our findings in the children's project that the MCPs mostly associated Learning for Sustainability with the latter topics. "They [the children] are never sure when their subject is part of Learning for Sustainability and teaching the LfS curriculum in their lessons or not" (Educator, Inverclyde).

In larger secondary schools, adults told us that children tended to experience Learning for Sustainability in certain subjects such as Humanities and Biology but not across the curriculum.

"We teach climate change really well in social studies but in other subjects I think it isn't the priority" Educator, Inverclyde.

This also highlights the common occurrence of focussing very strongly on climate change over other subjects - something we observed in the children's project as well. This is a subject area that both adult practitioners and children are very passionate and aware of and comes out more prominently than other Learning for Sustainability subject strands. Children's experiences of Learning for Sustainability are therefore very defined by learning about climate change and climate action.

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5. What has worked well in developing whole-school approaches?

Two main recommendations arose from the adult practitioners who felt their setting had a well-developed approach. These were the provision of outdoor spaces to be used across all curriculum areas, and the involvement of all staff and children in the development of content taught through the school year.

In the Early Years settings with large amounts of outdoor space and play materials, practitioners felt it was easier to deliver the Learning for Sustainability curriculum in ways that children tangibly related to and understood. They also felt that this fostered elements of “stewardship in the children, as they felt a part of their outdoor environment and therefore want to learn more about it and protect it” (Educator, Perth and Kinross). This ensured that any learning, across the three Learning for Sustainability strands, was well understood and engaged with by children of all ages and brought staff on board as well.

In settings where lessons occurred indoors, or where there was less access to outdoor space, practitioners felt that success in Learning for Sustainability delivery came from embedding children’s human rights and participation into curriculum planning. As children are so passionate about climate change and learning about other places around the world, elements of Learning for Sustainability tended to be delivered even if the focus remained on climate. This also ensured that staff members who may have previously not engaged as much with the subject were brought on board to teach it, even if they didn’t explicitly label it under the umbrella term.

“It’s worked well for [our school] to have children in each year group contribute to the subject content they learn each year. We have seen positive results from this as the children are really engaged” Educator, Clackmannanshire.

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6. What, if any, challenges have schools/CLD settings encountered, and how have these been/could they be overcome?

A common challenge practitioners faced across each setting was the lack of time in an already busy educational year. Even where whole school approaches were embedded, extra time was required to support children to learn outside, participate in curriculum development, and plan the content across all subjects.

We also observed this in working with the supporting adults on the project, as it was always difficult for them to find the time and resourcing to support the children's participation. One of the supporting teachers shared that their school "is probably [one of the schools] that would benefit the most from Learning for Sustainability delivery, and our students are so passionate, but we can engage with it the least because we do not have the time as classroom teachers [to support it] and there is no top-down support for this curriculum" (Educator, Inverclyde). Financial/resource support and time for educators to plan and deliver Learning for Sustainability, and training for senior leadership in settings, were the suggested ways to overcome these barriers.

More specifically, financial barriers were felt in varying degrees across educational settings and local authorities. One practitioner shared that they currently provide Learning for Sustainability opportunities from their total budget for the school year, which is £20 per student head. They felt this wasn't enough to offer meaningful opportunities for children's experiences of the curriculum, especially for outdoor learning activities. This barrier was something we observed in our work with the children as well. Areas with greater access to financial resource had greater access to varied opportunities to experience Learning for Sustainability, especially quality nature spaces to play and learn in.

In the Early Years, practitioners felt that the biggest challenge was incorporating Learning for Sustainability into their practice while also prioritising children's healthy emotional development. As this must take priority in Early Years learning, it was suggested that the new Learning for Sustainability Action Plan should explicitly include strands on building healthy relationships and development.

Finally, challenges were faced by settings in rural areas as practitioners found it more difficult to tangibly engage children with the concept of global citizenship. They shared that this was especially difficult to incorporate into learning in remote locations, where children were in a smaller and less varied environment, so they struggled to relate to global locations and concepts. There were also fewer opportunities in these areas for children to meet and connect with people and perspectives outside their immediate

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communities, so these settings needed extra time and resource investment from educators to provide these opportunities and expand the children's understanding of their curriculum to a global scale. They wanted to see an explicit focus on engaging schools in rural parts of Scotland with other schools and children around the world in the new Action Plan.

"The part of Learning for Sustainability we engage with the least in our school is global citizenship, because this is a small rural community. The children don't see different perspectives every day, so we have to put extra opportunities in place for them."
Educator, Perth and Kinross

We know that Scotland has many rural and remote educational settings, so a suggestion to overcome this was to form networks of schools around the world with external financial and administrative support. More broadly, practitioners also wanted to see more practical examples of Learning for Sustainability delivery shared between settings. Settings would also need increased resourcing and access to fast and reliable technology for their online learning to allow children to engage in networks locally, nationally and internationally and support and training for staff to help develop these networks as well. This was also a call from the children we worked with.

"We really enjoy having links to another school internationally and would like to do this more to teach the children about global citizenship" Educator, Perth and Kinross.

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7. What practical examples are there of school/CLD buildings, grounds and policies supporting Learning for Sustainability?

Every practitioner shared positive and exciting examples of their school buildings, grounds and policies supporting Learning for Sustainability delivery.

One setting we interviewed successfully combined climate education and outdoor learning into teaching eco skills through growing food in a school polytunnel. Another had regular trips to nature areas and libraries depending on what children wanted to learn. While every setting had good examples of outdoor learning, climate education, and eco skills incorporated into the resources they had, they all shared that they would benefit from extra finances and space in more urban areas to expand their provision.

“It is difficult for us to incorporate as much outdoor learning as we would like when we have such a small budget per child in the school. We can’t ask the parents in this area to self-fund outdoor trips and other opportunities. Sometimes this means that the children learn about it but don’t get to really experience it” Headteacher, Clackmannanshire

Exciting and engaging examples we encountered through our interviews included children’s participation in Learning for Sustainability curriculum development in their school, the provision of a nature strip² to children in urban schools, the engagement of pupil voice groups in recycling and other school building activities, and the delivery of lessons across all subjects through teaching eco skills outside.

Although delivery of global citizenship was a challenge across settings, the development of links with other schools internationally and time carved out for sharing skills and cultures across parents, carers and the community linked to the setting were two positive examples we encountered. For example, one setting invited parents and carers to share bread making and traditional instrument skills with the children on set days.

² Nature Strip – A nature strip is typically an area of wildlife or green space carved out in an otherwise urban setting. For one of our schools this was a green space between the school and the road where they planted trees and wildlife for the children to engage with the natural environment.

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8. What are the key differences/similarities between schools and CLD settings in how Learning for Sustainability is understood and implemented?

All schools and educational settings we interviewed had strong approaches to outdoor learning and climate change, citing how passionate children of all ages are on these topics. Each practitioner also shared that they felt less able to deliver lessons around global citizenship and children's human rights and would like to see more CLPL training in these subjects for educators.

"I hadn't thought about rights and responsibilities in relation to the climate emergency before this project, and I would like to know more so I can embed it into my teaching"
Educator, Perth and Kinross

However, as mentioned above, Learning for Sustainability wasn't always implemented as an umbrella term and therefore each setting delivered the different strands in different ways. This was especially relevant when it came to outdoor learning, with settings having very different spaces and resources to access. In some settings, provision was highly dependent on having one or two specifically passionate staff members who developed quality spaces and relevant Learning for Sustainability lessons for children.

The level of children's participation in the development of the curriculum and extracurricular involvement also varied. Groups such as eco clubs were referenced by many of the practitioners we interviewed, but there were different understandings of the purpose of these groups. In one setting, children in eco clubs were able to suggest the introduction of sustainable changes to the school, while in others they didn't participate in decision making around their school. While positive results were cited by practitioners who observed high levels of children's participation in Learning for Sustainability delivery in their settings, this wasn't consistent and tended to focus on climate change and climate action over sustainable development education and global citizenship under the umbrella term of Learning for Sustainability.

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9. Going forward, how can Learning for Sustainability approaches be strengthened and improved? What would help with this?

The adult practitioners we interviewed were very passionate about improving Learning for Sustainability delivery in their settings. They shared positive examples they felt the children they worked with already benefitted from. These mainly came from having extensive outdoor spaces, materials for children to play and explore, and the facilitation of children's participation in what they learned.

Key themes for improvement centred around **setting type, setting location, and setting resources**. Secondary schools and Early Years settings found it particularly challenging to address all strands of Learning for Sustainability, citing difficulties in timetabling, bringing all staff on board, and the need to prioritise other elements of children's education according to their age and progression. A suggestion from one practitioner was for the new Action Plan to be "less of a checklist, and more of a training manual to embed practice across whole settings including emotional development and children's human rights" (Educator, Edinburgh).

Settings in more rural areas felt more confident in their delivery of outdoor learning, but in urban areas this wasn't as easily embedded as there was not consistent access for children to learn and play outside. Practitioners in these areas felt they needed the finances to provide more trips for outdoor learning, such as overnight camps. Larger settings with fewer financial resources told us that they needed the time and resources to better plan in Learning for Sustainability delivery and provide children with the mechanisms for their participation in their education. They felt they were not able to balance their other workload pressures.

Finally, echoing the children's input into our project, the adults we interviewed also felt the time pressure of tackling the climate emergency in Scotland. They wanted to know how they could best improve their school's delivery of climate education while also taking climate action.

"It feels difficult when the Learning for Sustainability curriculum is split into different strands. We need it to be underpinned with what is being done by [Scottish] Government around climate change. It feels like discussion stops here at [our setting] and then we don't know what to tell the children about climate change and their futures." Educator, Edinburgh.

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Conclusion

Throughout our interviews and work on the project with adult educators, we saw incredible passion and commitment to Learning for Sustainability delivery. This included creative and accessible outdoor spaces for children to learn in, the embedding of children's participation into curriculum development, and the inclusion of Learning for Sustainability content in their subjects and settings.

We also observed first-hand and heard from educators that they need more time, resources, and training to ensure that children across all settings receive consistent and well-resourced curriculum across all elements of Learning for Sustainability. The new Action Plan is an exciting opportunity to consistently share the knowledge and good practice required to do this, including through embedding children's human rights practice and participation.

Specifically, all settings in Scotland need fair and consistent access to outdoor spaces, built into estate planning, to ensure children are supported in their outdoor learning and play. Time and resources can also benefit adult practitioners to ensure that they are delivering a cohesive Learning for Sustainability curriculum that is interrelated and not highly focussed on one subject. This needs to be supported from the top-down in every setting and needs buy-in from all staff to avoid over-reliance on specific staff members who display passion and dedication for the subject. Finally, these provisions need to be fair to children of all ages, including in the Early Years, and the Action Plan should support that through its language and focus.

"The new Action Plan could be an exciting time to bring back the Sustainable Development Goals and make sure that we have enough time to really deliver the Learning for Sustainability curriculum] all to the children, because they love learning about it" Educator, Perth and Kinross.

Thank you to all our amazing supporting adults on this project who took part in the interviews. We look forward to hearing what changes and improvements Scottish Government is undertaking to build on good practice across Scotland.