

Restorative Democracies and Climate Literacy: The SECAP School Model for Civic Engagement and Ecological Agency in Secondary Schools

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Abstract: The ecological crisis is not only about emissions and targets: it exposes a deeper fracture in sociocultural and educational models—namely, the persistent human–nature dualism. This article argues for transforming education into a space of reconciliation, in which society and ecology are conceived and lived as inseparable dimensions. Drawing on the pedagogy of reconciliation (Mansion, 2022), we foreground practices that cultivate relational knowing, embodied learning, and place-based responsibility. We present the SECAP/PAESC School Action Research, developed by INDIRE with EuCliPa.it and CMCC, as a participatory, place-based model that engages students in local climate governance through Nature-based solutions (NBS), in alignment with the EU Nature Restoration Regulation. The project adopts a multi-site action-research design with mixed methods and iterative cycles (co-design, implementation, reflection), integrating student questionnaires, observation rubrics, and focus groups. Early evidence indicates strong teacher interest and a strengthening of their environmental identity and civic agency, to be transferred to students through the co-design of concrete proposals within their municipalities. In the conclusions, we discuss implications for inclusive methodology and teacher education, with particular attention to collective and political action that operationalizes GreenComp through NBS activities, youth civic engagement, and renewed contact with nature—understood as a source of well-being and an ally of learning via embodied practices.

Keywords: Climate action; Nature-based Solutions (NBS); Youth civic engagement; Embodied learning; GreenComp.



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1. Introduction

The project described in this paper involves young people in real institutional dialogues where they analyse, co-design, and negotiate Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) within the framework of Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAP) implemented by municipalities. NBS are widely recognized in scientific literature not only as participatory tools, but also as effective measures of both climate change mitigation and adaptation, contributing to carbon sequestration, biodiversity enhancement, and resilience against extreme weather events. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (State of the Union, 2025) stated: “We

have to radically step up our efforts on climate resilience and adaptation, and nature-based solutions, but we have to give ourselves the tools to respond.” By NBS we mean: “Nature-based solutions are inspired and supported by nature, are cost-effective, and simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help build resilience. They bring more, and more diverse, nature and natural processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes through locally adapted, resource-efficient and systemic interventions.” (European Commission, Climate-ADAPT, 2024).

Although youth engagement is widely promoted in EU policy discourses (e.g., the European Green Deal, the Climate Pact, the Education for Climate Coalition), only about 8% of reported cases involve the education sector, making schools one of the least engaged domains in urban climate-adaptation planning—far behind environment & biodiversity, transport, or public health (each 200+ reported instances). This evidences a persistent structural gap in recognising schools as key stakeholders in climate governance (Mancarella et al., 2023). In 2023, across the EU, about one in four young people aged 15–24 identified climate change as their top concern, the most frequently selected priority among the options proposed in the Commission survey—an increase of roughly 50% since 2013 (EAEA, 2025). This salience reinforces the need to embed meaningful participation within education systems. The project also aligns with the EU Nature Restoration Law (Reg. (EU) 2024/1991), which calls for ecosystem restoration through multi-level governance and inclusive community participation. By operationalising this vision in school settings, SECAP/PAESC School reframes educational institutions not as passive recipients of top-down policies, but as active agents of restorative democracy. In this model, the relationship between people and nature is not only repaired but co-designed by new generations through learning, civic engagement, and place-based care. Anticipating national implementation pathways, the project offers a concrete framework for recognising schools as legitimate stakeholders in local restoration planning.

The SECAP School project concentrates the development of sustainability competences along two integrated axes within the GreenComp framework (JRC, 2022):

(1) Promotion of nature—conceived as a relational and embodied competence within Area 1: Embodying sustainability values (competence 1.3); and (2) Collective and political action—conceived as the ability to design, negotiate, and participate in public climate decisions at the local level within Area 4: Acting for sustainability (competences 4.1–4.2).

Axis 1: Promotion of nature as an embodied, relational competence

For competence 1.3 (often rendered in Italian as “promozione della natura”), GreenComp stresses that humans are part of nature and should respect the needs and rights of other species and nature itself in order to restore and regenerate healthy, resilient ecosystems. While the official English label highlights “embodying” sustainability values, the Italian translation frequently uses “incorporare”; we adopt the French “incarner” to emphasize a pedagogical stance grounded in embodied learning/embodied cognition. From this perspective, promoting nature is not the external protection of biodiversity as “object,” but the cultivation and restoration of embodied relations between human agents and more-than-human contexts.

This relational orientation resonates with Reconcilism (Mansion, 2022), which foregrounds practices that repair cognitive, affective, and political ruptures between

humans and ecosystems through sensorimotor, place-based, and affective engagements. Epistemologically, we build on the enactive view: cognition is embodied and situated (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). In this broader sense, experience arises through enaction—the bringing-forth of a world via action—where mind, body, and environment are co-emergent. Knowing nature therefore implies participating in it (from sensory experience to practical, projective engagement), not merely observing it from without. This also aligns with Jonas’s call for a renewed ethic of responsibility (2014) and with the educational lens of Embodied Education, here understood within the embodied cognition paradigm (Gomez Paloma, 2025; Barra, 2025).

Embodied learning directly addresses Pyle’s warning about the extinction of experience: the loss of everyday contact with nature erodes perceptual skills and motivations for ecological care. Re-establishing relation with nature becomes a primary lever for sustainability (Mansion, 2025), countering what Louv (2005) termed nature-deficit disorder (linked to reduced attention, greater anxiety, and weakened ecological bonds). A robust empirical base supports the physiological, psychological, and educational value of sustained nature experience: faster stress recovery after exposure to nature (Ulrich et al., 1991); broad health associations with greenspace (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018); immune benefits from forest bathing (Li et al., 2007, 2010); links between nature and mental health/cognition (Bratman et al., 2019); restorative effects on attention and memory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989); and better sleep quality associated with greenspace (Grigsby-Toussaint et al., 2015). Collectively, these findings substantiate embodied, place-based pedagogies as both health-promoting and learning-enabling.

Axis 2: Collective and political action as civic climate competence

The second axis integrates Area 4: Acting for sustainability—specifically collective action and political agency (4.2; 4.1)—with the first. SECAP School translates these domains into citizen engagement: co designed -NBS (Nature-Based Solutions) with local communities, participatory monitoring/citizen science, and evidence-informed proposals for local policy. European monitoring highlights a persistent curricular gap: elements of collective action appear in roughly a third of national curricula, while political engagement is rarer and often restricted to upper-secondary analytic tasks (Eurydice, 2024). SECAP School addresses this gap by turning GreenComp domains (embodiment, complexity, responsibility, collective action) into place-based pathways, citizen-science activities, and participatory governance models that interface schools and municipalities.

Operationalization

Competences are treated as dynamic networks connecting embodied experience, ecological knowledge, and collective–political practice. Assessment therefore requires mixed methods—visual methods, behavioural indicators, attitudinal scales, and institutional measures—within research designs that combine pre/post measures and longitudinal follow-ups to capture both experiential change and shifts in civic agency.

Climate and embodied learning between reconnection with nature and NBS

Scientific premise and social attitudes

To address climate issues, it is essential to rely on science, while also listening to that part of the population which, although not denying the ongoing crisis, expresses concerns and resistances.

As Francisco Varela says: “Experience and scientific understanding are like two legs we need in order to walk.” (Varela, 1991) [our translation from the French edition]

Population priorities

A significant example comes from a large-scale citizen survey (>13,000 respondents). According to this recent French survey (Odoxa, September 2025), some results are particularly interesting: beyond the fact that 9 out of 10 people do not deny ongoing climate change, the sample indicates three priorities for municipalities: strengthening urban green space (67%), limiting construction and land sealing (64%), and educating citizens on good ecological practices (56%). All of these align with the recent Regulation (EU) 2024/1991 on nature restoration (European Parliament & Council of the EU, 2024) and also emerged among teachers’ NBS proposals during the first phase of the project (see *infra*).

Problem framing: where is nature in students’ daily lives?

The “squaring of the circle” is therefore twofold: on the one hand, reconciling with nature (Mansion, 2022); on the other, questioning where this nature exists in the everyday life of students. Evidence from several teacher-led project designs revealed that, in many schools, access to nature is structurally denied to the entire school community. By access to nature we refer to the physical, social, and cultural possibility of reaching, experiencing, and benefiting from natural spaces (parks, gardens, forests, coasts, agricultural areas) under conditions of safety and inclusion. It is not only a matter of distance, but also of quality, usability, and perceived hospitality.

Health and access benchmarks (WHO/Europe)

According to the WHO Regional Office for Europe (2016), every residence should be within 300 meters of a quality green space ($\approx$ five minutes on foot), with shorter distances (100–200 m) recommended for young children to allow autonomous use. Travel time and frequency of use are also key parameters. Alongside these quantitative indicators, qualitative ones are equally important: perceived environmental quality (biodiversity, maintenance, shade, water, quiet), types of possible activities (free play, sport, nature observation, relaxation), and subjective feelings of well-being and connection to nature. Actively involving school communities—especially in urban and peri-urban contexts—strengthens both the democratic legitimacy and territorial relevance of ecological restoration efforts.

Justice and distributional concerns

This marginality is particularly critical in urban peripheries, where students experience both ecological degradation and social inequalities. In such contexts, green infrastructures are often unequally distributed, producing what has been described as green privilege (Agyeman, 2013; Wolch et al., 2014), which limits access to nature for the most vulnerable youth and amplifies their exposure to climate impacts.

2. Materials and Methods

Grounded in the SECAP School rationale—schools as priority civic-environmental infrastructures within SECAP planning and as test-beds for nature-based solutions (NBS) delivering a triple impact (urban climate resilience; student well-being/learning; civic agency)—the study pursues the following objectives.

- Youth participation in local climate governance

Assess the depth, quality, and inclusiveness of students' participation in municipal climate decision-making, referencing established frameworks for meaningful youth engagement. (UNICEF, 2022; Hart, 1992)

- Alignment with municipal SECAP priorities

Compare teachers' and students' NBS proposals with existing municipal SECAP priorities; where a SECAP is absent, document agenda-setting pathways that support future SECAP adoption within participatory, nature-based adaptation approaches. (Kabisch et al., 2017; Frantzeskaki et al., 2019)

- School–municipality interface and institutionalization

Evaluate the responsiveness, continuity, and routinization of dialogue between schools and local governments, drawing on models of multi-level governance and school–community partnerships. (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Loorbach et al., 2015)

- Sustainability competences (GreenComp)

Analyze the development of sustainability competences with focus on Area 2 (Embracing complexity) and Area 4 (Acting for sustainability), integrating transformative learning and embodied learning/cognition as pedagogical drivers. (Bianchi et al., 2022; Sterling, 2001; Mezirow, 2000)

- Enablers and constraints in unequal territories

Identify enabling and limiting factors for participatory climate education—organizational, territorial, and socio-cultural—especially in socio-environmentally unequal areas. (Sund & Lysgaard, 2013; Bellino & Adams, 2014)

- Identity, imagination, and agency

Investigate impacts on students' environmental identity, civic imagination, and sense of agency, drawing on place-based and identity-focused education. (Clayton, 2003; Clayton et al., 2021; Gruenewald, 2003)

- Green infrastructure and equity (“green privilege”)

Map the territorial distribution of green infrastructure around schools and analyse dynamics of green privilege/green gentrification, with implications for equitable access to nature and climate vulnerability. (Agyeman, 2013; Wolch et al., 2014).

The research involves the collaboration of two partners: EuCliPa.it and CMCC engaged in the three phases of the project.

Phase 1 – Teacher Training.

Approximately 70 teachers participated in an intensive training programme on European and national climate policies, with a specific focus on the SECAP/PAESC School (Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans). The methodology combined traditional training tools with innovative visual instruments, including systematic mapping techniques adapted from professional guidance approaches such as Visual Orientation (de Maurissens & Torna, 2025). The final assessment required the design of an NBS (Nature-based Solution) project applied either to the school site or to the surrounding territory. Around 50 project proposals were submitted, of which 30 requested further support from the partners to strengthen implementation. A dedicated commission evaluated the proposals, considering both their feasibility and their potential territorial impact.

In some cases, schools were located in municipalities that did not yet have a SECAP/PAESC. In such situations, the partners, together with INDIRE, are working to encourage the municipality to adopt one. While this process cannot be completed within a single school year, it could mark a groundbreaking achievement: for the first time in Europe, the adoption of a /SECAP/PAESC initiated by a school

community — specifically in the case of Palmi (Reggio Calabria). This represents a remarkable outcome of the research-action approach.

Phase 2 – Curricular Integration.

The second phase involves the integration of climate and sustainability topics into different school subjects, including civic education. In this stage, teachers can request targeted support from project partners, particularly from EU Climate Pact Ambassadors, to facilitate curriculum design and classroom implementation.

Phase 3 – Political Dialogue.

The third phase focuses on political engagement, enabling students and teachers to present their NBS proposals directly to local governments. With the support of sector professionals, these proposals are framed in ways that highlight their multi-disciplinary nature and systemic integration, addressing the complexity that municipalities must manage when considering nature-based interventions.

3. Results

SECAP/PAESC Schools, to our knowledge, is among the first school-initiated pathways toward SECAP/PAESC adoption in Europe, where schools proactively open a policy channel to municipalities. Presented in Brussels at the annual EU Climate Pact Ambassadors' meeting (Oct 2025), the model was recognised as a good practice, underscoring transferability and policy

Theoretical and practical contributions

The project articulates embodied sustainability competences by bridging GreenComp (esp. Area 1 and Area 4) with embodied learning. Sustaining the relationship with nature is treated as a primary lever of sustainability: supporting the relation means sensory, place-based engagement (observation, care, co-design), not mere conceptual transmission. Practically, the model converts school work (NBS, citizen science, monitoring) into evidence-informed inputs for SECAP/PAESC processes, offering policy leverage to local authorities.

Limitations

Findings are not generalisable. Each case is situated (territory, municipal priorities) and strongly shaped by teacher agency (discipline, ties to place, deep intention, and capacity to engage students). The study is work in progress; longitudinal effects on competences, identity and policy uptake require follow-up.

Implications for research and teacher education

Next steps include testing across diverse territories, refining mixed-methods indicators for embodied competences and civic agency, and tracking policy uptake of school proposals in SECAP/PAESC revisions. For teacher education: practice-based modules on NBS co-design, participatory mapping/monitoring, and embodied outdoor pedagogy; plus multi-institutional research teams (schools–municipalities–universities–third sector) to anchor SECAP/PAESC alignment.

(a)

(b)

4. Conclusions

In the current climate context, sustaining the relationship with nature is a first-order lever for learning, well-being, and civic agency. NBS provide concrete, place-based techniques that can illuminate territories ecologically and socially. To be effective, youth must be genuinely involved in policy and decision-making through their schools—yet schools still carry too little weight in local climate governance. SECAP/PAESC School shows that aligning embodied practice, curriculum, and municipal dialogue enables students and teachers to co-design solutions and act as credible policy interlocutors. The immediate priority is to scale up school-led NBS pathways and formally recognise schools as legitimate stakeholders in SECAP/PAESC cycles, including the Risk & Vulnerability Assessment (RVA) phase, so that participation becomes a structural element of local restoration planning and restorative democracy in education.

The project confirms that restorative democracy in education emerges when schools both foster embodied relations with nature and enable participation in climate governance. This dual movement—reconciliation with ecosystems and engagement in democratic processes—creates fertile ground for ecological literacy and civic empowerment. By situating learning within local restoration efforts and promoting the adoption of SECAP/PAESC where absent, SECAP/PAESC School pioneers a model in which schools become laboratories of embodied sustainability and democratic renewal. Looking ahead, instruments such as the Generational Impact Assessment (VIG – Valutazione d’Impatto Generazionale)—already tested in Italy via Youth-Check and piloted by the City of Parma—offer a promising framework to link education, civic participation, and intergenerational justice. Embedding such assessments into local and national policy cycles can further align school-based climate engagement with long-term democratic and ecological responsibilities.

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