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SUSTAINABLE LEARNING
BRIDGING THE GAPS

Bridging the Gap

A New Learning Ecosystem for Young People

Popular Science Edition

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Kompetansemegleren

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Summary

This research presents the knowledge base and results from the Erasmus+ project "Sustainable Learning" (2023–2026). Based on a three-country study, this project explores the untapped potential of combining formal schooling with practical, everyday learning. The project involves two partner organisations each from the Netherlands, Italy and Norway.

Introduction: Learning in All Its Forms

This research presents the knowledge base and results from the Erasmus+ project "Sustainable Learning" (2023–2026). Based on a three-country study, this project explores the untapped potential of combining formal schooling with practical, everyday learning.

Why do so many young people fall through the cracks of the education system? Why does school work brilliantly for some and feel utterly irrelevant to others? These are the questions at the heart of the Erasmus+ project "Sustainable Learning" (2023–2026), a three-year collabouration between six partner organisations from Norway, Italy and the Netherlands.

Before we proceed, it is important to be clear about the scope of this project. Our research has been broad: we investigated learning wherever it happens — in schools, in community organisations, in workplaces, and in everyday life. We firmly believe that out-of-school learning is just as valuable as what takes place within classroom walls.

However, in this article, we have made a conscious choice to focus on a learning system that connects, where relevant, to formal schooling. It is because our findings point to schools as the place where a structural intervention can currently have the greatest impact on the young people who are most at risk of being left behind.

The scale of the challenge is striking. Across the EU, an estimated 8 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 are currently classified as NEET — Not in Education, Employment or Training. In Norway alone that is around 111,000 young people (6.8%); in the Netherlands 155,000 (4.9%); in Italy a staggering 1.3 million. These are not statistics about failure of individuals. They are evidence of a system that was not built for the full diversity of how human beings actually learn.

> *"Thirsty for national profit, nations and their education systems are mercilessly discarding the skills needed to keep democracies alive.*
> — Martha Nussbaum, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (2010)

The Problem: A School Built for a Different Century

Today's school largely traces its roots to the industrial revolution of the early 1800s. It was designed to produce a disciplined, uniform workforce for a society moving from farming to factories. The hallmarks of that era — standardised timetables, rows of desks, teacher-led instruction, assessment through written tests — are still very much present in European classrooms today.

The most fundamental problem is not that teachers are bad or that students are unwilling. The problem is structural: schools implicitly assume that everyone learns best in the same way, in the same room, at the same pace, through the same kinds of activities. Our research, and a growing body of European evidence, shows clearly that this assumption is wrong.

Education researchers distinguish three broad modes of learning: formal learning (structured, teacher-led, theory-based); non-formal learning (organised but outside school — clubs, workshops, community projects, experiential programmes); and informal learning (the tacit knowledge and social skills we absorb through living). The traditional school focuses almost entirely on formal learning. The other two are largely invisible, unrecognised and unrewarded.

The consequences fall hardest on young people who thrive through doing, through social interaction, through hands-on problem-solving. For them, the classroom creates what we might call a learning vacuum — a place where their real capabilities are simply not visible.

> *"A classroom with very, very different problems and personal profiles. With one teacher. You have to adapt, but you cannot adapt when you are alone with 20–25 students.*
> — Female educator, 50+, Italy

A New Framework: Three Types of Knowledge

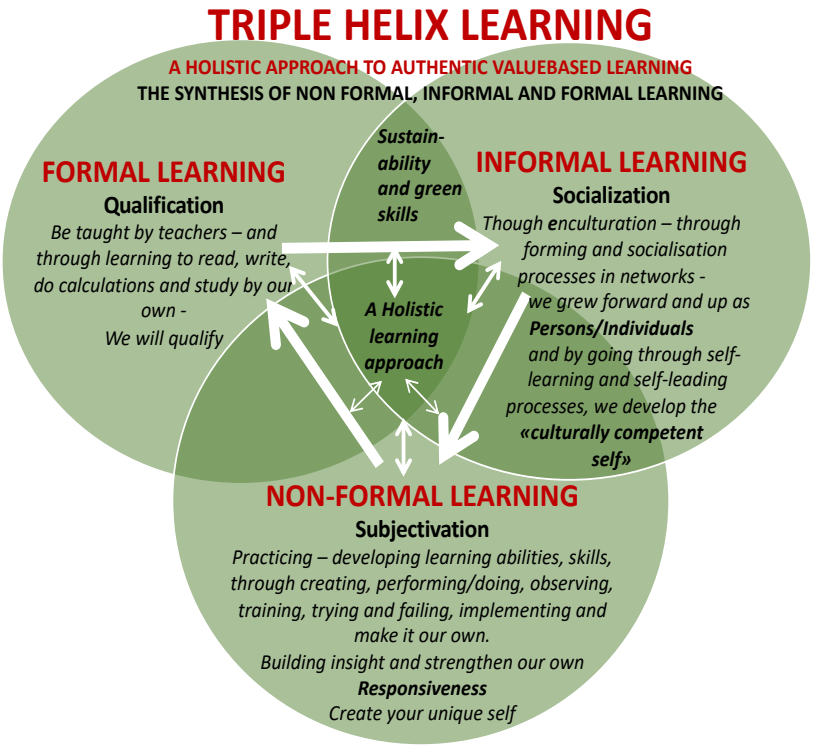
The philosophical backbone of our project draws on ideas that are surprisingly ancient. Aristotle — writing more than 2,400 years ago — identified three kinds of knowledge: Episteme (theoretical understanding), Techne (practical skills) and Phronesis (practical wisdom: knowing what to do in a real situation, with real stakes).

Modern educational theorist Gert Biesta echoes this distinction in a different language. He argues that education must simultaneously serve three purposes: qualification (giving people skills and knowledge), socialisation (integrating them into communities and cultures) and subjectification (helping them to become autonomous, thinking, morally engaged individuals).

What struck us during our research was how closely these ancient and modern frameworks align — and how poorly the current school system serves all three simultaneously. Schools tend to over-prioritise qualification while under-investing in socialisation and especially subjectification. Yet it is precisely this third dimension — helping a young person to find their own sense of agency and purpose — that makes the difference for those who are most at risk.

We also drew on the work of Albert Bandura, whose concept of self-efficacy — the belief in one's own ability to succeed — has been shown repeatedly to be one of the strongest predictors of whether a young person stays engaged with learning. Self-efficacy is not built by listening to lectures. It is built through doing, trying, failing, trying again, and experiencing mastery in contexts that feel real and meaningful.

The figure “Triple Helix Learning” represents a synthesis between the virtues of knowledge of antiquity and modern philosophy of education:



The interaction between the three dimensions of training/education – qualification, socialization and subjectification (Good Education in an Age of Measurement, Biesta, G. (2010)

Figure 1: The Triple Helix Learning — synthesising the virtues of knowledge of antiquity and modern philosophy of education

How We Conducted the Research

The project involved six partner organisations across three countries: Bloom Foundation and ROC Mondriaan in the Netherlands; Associazione KORA and CPF Como in Italy; and FREM Bodø AS and Dag Ofstad Kompetansemegleren in Norway. Together, we carried out an extensive qualitative research process over three phases.

In total, 124 people participated across a wide range of roles: young people in and outside education, teachers, youth workers, counsellors, school leaders, and representatives from business, the public sector and civil society. We conducted eight focus group interviews (with more than 50 participants in total), fifteen individual interviews, and collected 53 questionnaire responses. Partners also gathered 60 “best practice” examples from across Europe.

The methodology was qualitative and iterative — we developed, tested and reflected in repeated cycles, adjusting our understanding as we went. We used focus group dialogues guided by facilitators, semi-structured individual interviews, and a final pilot phase in which 43 young people took part in hands-on learning programmes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed in full, and analysed thematically.

One honest note about the process: working across three countries with limited resources meant we relied heavily on digital collabouration. Partners abroad conducted their own interviews, with central analysis carried out asynchronously. This was a genuine methodological challenge — interpreting nuance across

languages and contexts when you have not been present is demanding. We worked hard to ensure that key findings were validated across all three contexts.

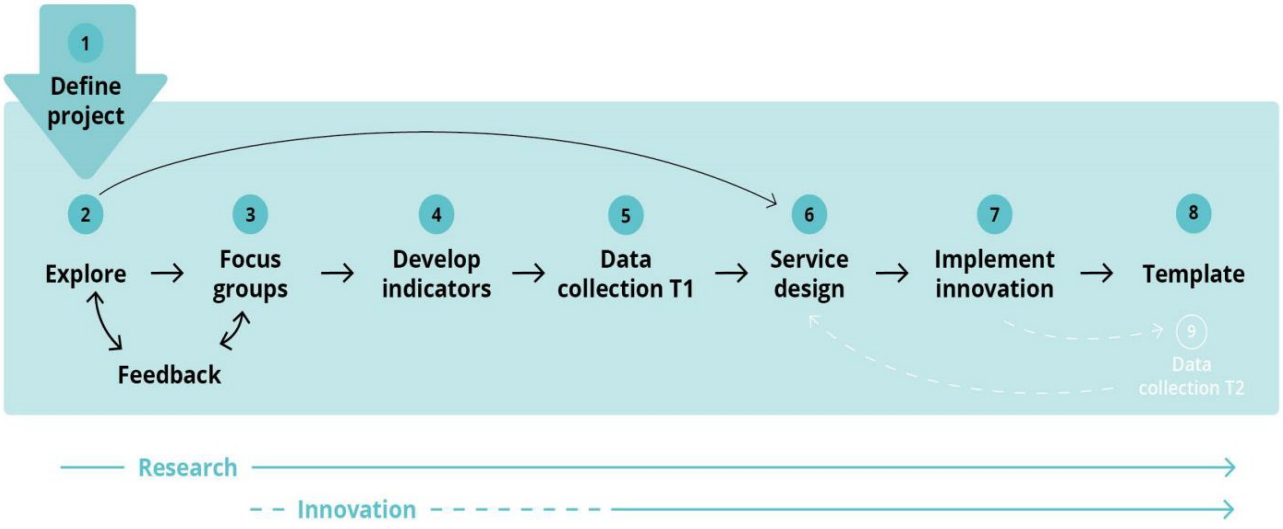


Figure 2: Research and Innovation Cycle Reference: Eide, A. H, Ofstad, D, Støylen, M, Hansen, E, Høiseth, M (2022)

What We Found: Six Indicators for a Better Learning System

Our thematic analysis of the research material — across interviews, questionnaires, best practice examples and our own reflections — produced six key indicators. These are not passive categories. They are active signals of what needs to be in place for a learning system to genuinely serve all young people.

1. Autonomy and genuine choice

Young people need to feel that they have real agency over their learning. This means offering different physical and digital learning spaces, building flexible curricula where progression is measured by demonstrated competence rather than hours spent, and — crucially — involving young people in actually designing their own learning programme. When a young person feels that their voice has shaped the framework, ownership comes naturally.

2. Careful planning and design

Good outcomes require good preparation. This means module-based plans with clearly defined learning goals, experienced educators who can mentor newer colleagues, systems for documenting and validating what has been learned from day one, and genuine interdisciplinary collabouration — including with local businesses and community organisations.

3. Learning that matches real needs

The single most consistent finding across all three countries was the power of learning by doing. Moving teaching out of the classroom and into workshops, outdoor environments, or real workplaces; ensuring that theoretical reflection always follows practical action; and training educators to act as coaches who ask open questions rather than delivering ready-made answers — these were the approaches that repeatedly made a difference.

> "*I believe in learning through action. Then you understand the simplicity or difficulty, and that it is okay to struggle.*
> — Male educator, 40, Netherlands

4. Leadership that commits

Without active support from school or programme leadership, even the most motivated educators cannot sustain change. Management must protect time for joint planning and interdisciplinary work, embed sustainability goals into the organisation's core strategy, and formalise partnerships with external learning environments. Civic participation — active citizenship — should be treated as part of the core curriculum, not an optional extra.

5. Sustainability as a living thread

Green skills and sustainability knowledge must be woven through all learning, not isolated as a separate subject. This means using the EU's GreenComp framework to define specific competencies — systems thinking, ethical reflection, futures literacy — and choosing local, real-world challenges that young people actually have a relationship with.

6. Meaningful validation of all learning

Perhaps the most structurally important finding: the existing system recognises only a very narrow range of what young people actually know and can do. We need digital portfolios, open badges, and competence banks that make practical skills visible and valuable. We need self-assessment and peer review as genuine parts of the learning process. And we need to open a dialogue with formal education institutions so that participation in non-formal programmes can be recognised toward qualifications.

A Vision for the Future: The Sustainable Learning Model

The six indicators and their associated variables led us to sketch a model for a genuinely holistic learning system — one that we call the Sustainable Learning Model. The core idea is an ecosystem, not an institution: a dynamic network of people, resources and communities that interact to create, share and develop knowledge.

Within this ecosystem, three forms of learning work together as equals. Formal learning provides structure, theoretical grounding and recognised qualifications. Non-formal learning — through projects, workshops, community work and experiential programmes — provides practical skills and a sense of agency. Informal learning — the social, relational, tacit knowledge that accumulates through being part of a community — provides identity, resilience and the moral wisdom Aristotle called phronesis.

In practice, this means designing learning programmes that move fluidly across settings: a classroom, a workshop, a local business, a community garden, a digital studio. It means treating mentors and workplace supervisors as educators. And it means keeping sustainability not as a module to be taught but as the lens through which every learning experience is understood.

An Idea Worth Exploring: The Proactive Programme

Note to readers: The following section describes an idea that emerged during the research and writing process, rather than a formally agreed output of the project group. It is presented here as a potential future direction rather than as a core project outcome.

During our research, one concrete programme concept emerged that illustrates what a radically different learning environment might look like in practice. We have called it the Proactive Programme (PAP). It is not a blueprint — it is a thought experiment, a provocation, an invitation to imagine.

The PAP is designed as a one-year learning community for up to 20 young people — primarily those who have left the mainstream education system and have not yet found stable footing in work or training. They are divided into four small teams, each supported by a dedicated educator.

The programme begins in what we call a Strategic Forum: a period of several weeks in which the teams collectively design their own curriculum for the year ahead, anchored around five interlocking themes: personal agency and self-awareness; social innovation and collabouration; digital and professional skills; project-based learning; and democratic citizenship. Sustainability runs as a cross-cutting thread through all of them.

Each participant builds a Personal Strategic Development Plan — a living document that records experiences, reflections and competencies gained throughout the year. This becomes the portfolio through which their learning is validated, both for themselves and potentially for external recognition.

> *"I had students who wanted to make their workplace out of a car. They got a car from a scrap dealer, and learned a lot informally along the way — challenges, frustrations, technical problems, all of which contributed to their learning. This type of experiential learning is very powerful.*
> — Male educator, Netherlands

We offer this as an idea for further exploration and piloting — not as a finished model, but as an example of the kind of thinking that our research suggests is needed.

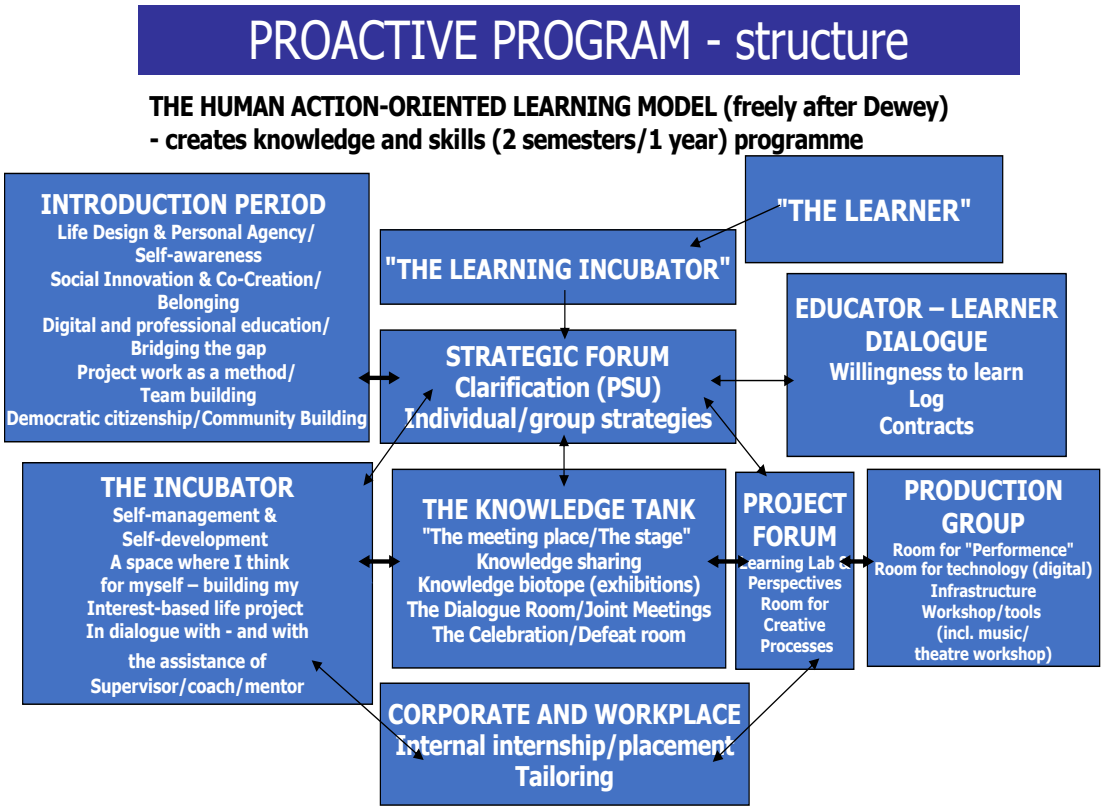


Figure 3: The Sustainable Learning Model

Conclusions: What Needs to Change

Our research leads us to a clear and uncomfortable conclusion: school dropout is not primarily a problem of individual young people. It is a systemic failure — the predictable result of designing an institution for one kind of learner and expecting it to serve all kinds.

The good news is that we now know a great deal about what works. Practical, contextual, social and experience-based learning engages the young people that formal schooling leaves behind. Small communities, real challenges, trusted mentors and meaningful validation can rebuild the learning motivation that years of classroom failure have eroded.

If European education systems are serious about inclusion — about the UN commitment to learning as a right, about SDG 4, about the EU's own Union of Skills agenda — then the structural changes required are significant:

- Schools must move from being isolated institutions to becoming open learning networks embedded in their communities.
- Non-formal and informal learning must be formally recognised — not just encouraged in principle, but counted toward qualifications in practice.

- Documentation of competence must expand beyond written tests to include portfolios, digital evidence and peer assessment.
- Mentors from civil society, business and community organisations must become permanent partners in education, not occasional visitors.
- Sustainability must shift from a curriculum topic to the organising principle of how we learn.

The social and economic cost of inaction is enormous. The estimated lifetime cost to society of each NEET young person in the EU runs to approximately €1.5 million. With 8 million NEETs across the bloc, the total figure approaches €12 billion. The investment required to build better, more inclusive learning systems is modest in comparison.

> *"Sustainable Learning is not just an educational project for the few, but a necessary paradigm shift for a sustainable society where no talents are allowed to go to waste.*
> — Male, 76, Research participant

About the Project

The "Sustainable Learning" project (2023–2026) is funded under the Erasmus+ programme. It brings together six partner organisations: Bloom Foundation and ROC Mondriaan (Netherlands), Associazione KORA and CPF Como (Italy), and FREM Bodø AS and Dag Ofstad Kompetansemegleren (Norway). The research presented here is based on qualitative data gathered from 124 participants across all three countries.

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