Exploring young people's attitudes and behaviours in relation to the climate crisis: insights from an exploratory survey in four European city-regions

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Executive Summary

Objectives: This working paper presents findings from an exploratory survey that aimed to better understand the gap between young people's pro-environmental values and actions (hereafter the value-action gap) in relation to the climate crisis. The survey was distributed as part of the CCC-CATAPULT research project (2021-2024), which examined young people's experiences of, and learning around, the climate crisis through a mixed methods approach, the first stage being the survey reported here. Members of the project teams were based and conducted the research in four city-regions across Europe: Bristol, UK; Galway, Ireland; Tampere, Finland; and Genoa, Italy.

Methodological Approach: The survey was distributed to young people (15-18-year-olds) to gather their views, experiences, and learning about the climate crisis. The survey was exploratory and was used to inform subsequent stages of the project and to identify key thematic areas that needed further investigation. The 28 survey questions were distributed in schools and further education colleges online through Qualtrics between November 2021 and April 2022. A total of 1,879 young people filled out the survey. This working paper summarises the key findings using descriptive statistics.

Key Findings

Young people who took part in the survey perceived climate change as an important/very important issue, with the majority of them expressing interest in both individual and collective climate change actions. However, while many of the climate related actions were individual in nature (e.g. recycling), most respondents had never been involved in collective actions (environmental initiatives, petitions, writing to politicians, etc), and they felt excluded from decision making processes. Most young people recognised that they needed support and training to be able to engage more with climate actions, including through more dedicated learning through Climate Change Education at schools. Social norms, more than negative feelings such as anxiety and worry, emerged as drivers for .young people's actions.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Climate Change Education must emphasise the importance of climate action in line with young people's values, countering narratives of eco-anxiety with a focus on empowerment and agency. In so doing, it is important to account for the contextual nature of our findings as different countries have different educational practices and different political dynamics.
- Both individual and collective actions should be encouraged, including through training and mentorship for young people and those that support them.
- There is a need for increased Climate Change Education and support for skill-building opportunities.

- There is an opportunity to break down silos between young people and policymakers and create avenues for meaningful dialogue, collaboration and involvement of young people in climate policymaking.

Introduction

There is emerging consensus that lack of effective climate leadership, combined with institutional inertia and confused governance mechanisms, is resulting in widespread climate indifference or extremism. It is important to understand the relationships and disconnects between values and actions, particularly among young people. The 'Challenging the Climate Crisis: Children's Agency to Tackle Policy Underpinned by Learning for Transformation' (CCC-CATAPULT) research project, funded through JPI SOLSTICE, therefore sought to explore this territory from a young person's perspective. This international research consortium worked to co-create new knowledge through the 'eyes and ears' of young people, teachers and other supporters of learning on how they situate and make sense of their lives in relation to the climate crisis.

Using a youth-centred methodology, the CCC-CATAPULT project aimed to critically examine educational, worldview and intercultural influences on children's climate and environment-focused learning and agency at a time when 'eco-anxiety' is starting to become a defining characteristic of the climate crisis. This has ramifications for young people. The project involved working with young people (aged 15-18 years) to examine their and educators' experiences, views and learning about the climate crisis and Climate Change Education (CCE). The focus was on establishing the implications these have for bridging the value-action gap in the climate crisis. This is the gap between young people's declared values and behaviours and their actions, and how transformed places for CCE, and values and practices within them, might help bridge that gap (Portus et al., 2024a).

The project, lasting three years (2020-2024), took place in four city-regions across Europe: Bristol (United Kingdom), Galway (Ireland), Tampere (Finland), and Genoa (Italy). Young people were involved as research participants, with a smaller number involved as co-producers of the research in groups, known as Youth Action Partners (YAPs) (Portus et al., 2024b). The project used a mixed method approach, with each methodological stage replicated in all four city-regions. These stages involved a survey (reported here), focus group discussions, and narrative workshops with young people, along with interviews with educators. This approach was taken to both broadly and deeply understand young people's and educators' perceptions, and the cultural contexts which shape their meaning making. This working paper focuses on summarising the results of the baseline survey of young people.

Survey design

This initial stage in CCC-CATAPULT's methodology involved a large survey which was distributed in the four city-regions. The survey provided a broad approach to gathering views, experiences and learning of young people (15-18-year-olds) about the climate crisis. This aimed to better understand the value-action gap in relation to young people and the climate crisis. The survey was used to inform the direction of the project, and the specific thematic areas that needed to be investigated further within the subsequent methodological stages. This survey was co-developed by the research teams in the four settings, working with each of their YAPs, and was translated with clear researcher guidelines to ensure robust data collection across countries. The initial questions were informed by a comprehensive review of existing surveys and using some established scales (e.g. for investigating worldviews and social norms). This led to a collated survey covering four overarching themes with a set of 28 questions (Table 1). The survey was completed online using Qualtrics and took place between Nov 2021 and April 2022.

The criteria for inclusion of young people in the research was predominantly based on age but was also conditional on access to schools and consent from participating young people. Purposive sampling was used to engage a broad demographic. The research team worked with schools and colleges with diversity in the socio-economic status of young people, and with a mixture of both academic and vocational tracks. A researcher was present, where possible, to introduce the research team and the general aim of the project, to provide instructions for completing the survey, and to support survey completion. An instruction manual and video were provided to support the educators in schools who distributed the survey where this was not possible.

Table 1: Sections and questions of the survey, with description and question sources.

Section themes	Questions	Description and source
1.Demographics	Country Age Gender Religion/worldview Parent/carers education Parent/guardians birthplace Employment in household	A variety of demographic questions were asked to understand socio-economic background and worldviews of survey respondents.
2. Climate change and me	Importance of environmental issues Importance of changes required in sectors of society Impact of climate change on people and place Engagement in action/pro-environmental behaviour Barriers to action Motivators to action Attitudes Support mechanisms Importance of information providers Social media engagement Importance of climate change to parents/guardians Engagement in climate change discussions Effort to protect the environment	Most of these questions were derived from the Youth Climate Justice Survey of Ireland's Eco-UNESCO that surveyed more than 1,000 young people in Ireland and The BBC's 2020 Newsround survey of more than 2,000 young people aged 8-16.
3. Norms, Worldviews and Emotions	Involvement in social issue campaigning Importance of helping others/altruism Feelings when thinking about climate change Social norms Responsibility of groups in solving environmental issues Potential for human beings to change	This section drew from the above surveys and some well-established psychological research scales.
4.Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Familiarity with goals Importance of each goal	In both questions, young people's knowledge of the SDGs was tested, using a four-point Likert, plus 'I don't know'.

Data were cleaned and then analysed using the statistics program SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive tests (frequencies, percentages, and crosstabs) were completed for all 28 questions, cross-tabulating by location to explore regional differences and similarities.

Demographics

Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents are outlined in Table 2. In total, 2,221 young people filled out the survey, although not all of them responded to all the survey questions. In particular, 1,936 young people indicated their current city-region location (Bristol = 405; Galway = 521; Genoa = 415; Tampere = 585; prefer not to say (PNTS) = 10; missing = 285). A total number of 1923 young people provided information related to their age and gender (missing = 298). This information is broken down by city-region in Table 2.

Table 2: Survey respondents broken down by city-region (age and gender)

		City-region										Total	
		Tampere		Genoa		Galway		Bristol		PNTS			
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age (years old)	**< 15**	1	0.2	2	0.49	10	1.92	31	7.7	0	0.00	44	2.29
	15	46	7.9	3	0.73	213	40.96	95	23.7	2	20.00	359	18.67
	16	340	58.4	130	31.71	282	54.23	147	36.7	1	10.00	900	46.80
	17	112	19.2	187	45.61	10	1.92	71	17.7	1	10.00	381	19.81
	18	54	9.3	67	16.34	1	0.19	36	9.0	0	0.00	158	8.22
	> 18	28	4.8	16	3.90	3	0.58	19	4.7	0	0.00	66	3.43
	PNTS	1	0.2	5	1.22	1	0.19	2	0.5	6	60.00	15	0.78
	Total (Age)	582	100	410	100	520	100	401	100	10	100	1923	100
Gender	**Female**	285	49.0	206	50.37	264	50.77	210	52.2	2	20.00	967	50.29
	Male	266	45.7	185	45.23	218	41.92	171	42.5	2	20.00	842	43.79
	Non-binary/third gender	10	1.7	5	1.22	17	3.27	14	3.5	0	0.00	46	2.39
	PNTS	21	3.6	13	3.18	21	4.04	7	1.7	6	60.00	68	3.54
	Total (Gender)	582	100	409	100	520	100	402	100	10	100	1923	100

Headline results

The CCC-CATAPULT survey was extensive and as such, it is not possible to provide a detailed view of all the results in this working paper. Below some of the main headline descriptive statistics are presented. These provide a snapshot about the views of young people across the four city-regions, highlighting some of the similarities and differences across the settings. If you are interested in findings from the CCC-CATAPULT survey that are not discussed below – but that are included in the questions in Table 1, then please contact the research team for more information.

Climate change and me

Young people responding to the survey perceived climate change to be an important/very important environmental issue (79%, n=1,412, Q8). However, climate change was ranked fourth of the eight environmental issues listed. These were arguably inter-connected while some may be more tangible. Loss of natural habitats and animals was ranked the highest importance for young people (86%, n=1,538), followed by global inequality (poverty) (83%, n=1,473) and reducing waste (83%, n=1,476). Concerning how important young people found environmental issues, Tampere surfaced as the location with the most contrasting views. 66% (n=543) of young people in this city-region said that climate change was an important/very important environmental issue compared to 84% (n=392) in Genoa, 86% (n=441) in Galway and 84% (N=415) in Bristol. Less young people in Tampere considered flooding/sea level rise to be important/very important than young people in the other city-regions - at 56% (n=541) compared to 79% (n=410) in Bristol, 82% (n=393) in Genoa and 84% (n=439) in Galway.

Around half of young people thought that climate change was important/very important to their parents/guardians (48%, n=721; Q18), although 11% (n=158) of young people revealed that they did not think climate change was important to their parents and 9% (n=141) thought other issues were more important to them. Young people surveyed discussed climate change (Q19) with their teacher (daily, weekly, monthly) as part of a lesson (56%, n=813), followed by parents/guardians (54%, n=788) and friends at school (42%, n=57). Half the respondents said that they never discussed climate change with siblings (50%, n= 720), or with friends outside of school (44%, n=615). Young people in Galway were more likely to discuss the topic with teachers on a daily/weekly basis (30%, n=133 vs. 23% average) while young people in Genoa were more likely to discuss with school friends daily/weekly (21%, n=75 vs. 18% average).

Similarities in young people's views were found in relation to climate change's impact on people (Q10), and 64% (n=1,026) of respondents thought they personally were somewhat/greatly impacted by climate change. However, young people perceived others to be those most impacted by climate change with 98% (n=1,628) of young people reporting that they thought people in other countries are somewhat/greatly impacted by climate change.

When young people were asked about the relative importance of different entities in tackling climate change, there was evidence that young people think that there are many changes required by different sectors of societies (Q14). Young people thought change fell upon individual behaviour change (79%, n=1,367), changes in big businesses/corporations (75%, n=1,268), community action (78%, n=1,340), national government policy (73%, n=1,232), climate change education (CCE) at a secondary school level (75%, n=1,315) and local government action (72%, n=1,229). However,

responses from young people in Tampere showed some differences, and indicated that they felt that it was more important/very important that business (79%, n=296) and government (79%, n=300, national; 77%, n=290, local) made changes than school education (58%, n=297, primary; 60%, n=310, secondary), individuals and communities (68%, n=353 and n=345, respectively) (Figure 1).

Young people were asked about how much they agreed or disagreed with a number of political statements. Here they revealed some clear frustrations (Q14). For example, 69% (n=987) disagreed/strongly disagreed that people in positions of power (e.g. policy makers) are listening to their views. 76% (n=1,106) do not trust older generations to tackle climate change and 86% (n=1,265) do not think world leaders are doing enough to tackle climate change. Although high numbers of young people considered themselves to be politically active on broader issues, and many revealed that they had taken part in formal government or local political actions, there was variation across the four city-regions regarding political statements about climate change. For example, young people in Genoa (72%, n=290) and Tampere (71%, n=277) were more likely than Galway (62%, n=274) and Bristol (57%, n=146) to think that those in positions of power were not listening to them. The survey results also suggested that young people in Genoa, compared to the other locations, knew less about how local decisions were made (27%, n=92 versus 40%, n=555 average). Most young people wished to know more about climate change, although this was less strongly felt in Tampere (42%, n=177 versus 25%, n=370 average) (Figure 2).

Young people (78%, n=1,146) are interested in climate action (Q12) and 69% (n=714) of all respondents reported to being actively involved in climate action (Q13). However, most have never been involved in collective action **(Q11)** such as environmental initiatives (51%, n=774), local environmental action (62%, n=950), petitions or protests (67%, n=1,047) or writing to politicians or companies about climate change issues (89%, n=1,435). Most young people also agree/agree strongly **(Q14)** that they have not participated in government decision making processes (e.g., consultations, assemblies; 79%, n=1,123) or a political group (e.g., though campaigning; 82%, n=1,185).

Many of the climate related actions taken daily by young people (Q11) were individual in nature, e.g., recycling (52%, n=851), energy saving (40%, n=553) and using climate friendly transport (35%, n=518). The levels of political action across responses overall were low, however, young people in Bristol reported higher levels of political action for instance, 27% (n=67 vs 21% average) agree/strongly agree they have been involved in government consultations (or similar) and 26% (n=63, vs 18% average) have been active in a political group in some way. Regardless of actions, some young people think they could do more to protect the environment **(Q20)** (51%, n=821) or think they are not doing enough (25%, n=405).

In their responses to questions regarding their barriers to climate action (Q12), young people across the four settings revealed that they wanted more climate change education/information in order to take climate action (56% n=836). This was particularly the case in Genoa (78%; n=276) and less so in Tampere (31%; n=136) (Figure 3). Responses also indicated the need to recognise that young people are living with multiple and intersecting issues at different scales and levels, and that one main perceived barrier to climate action was that other things are more important to them (65%, n=906). Other barriers to climate action were that young people do not know how to get involved (54%, n=794); and that they do not have the appropriate skillset to facilitate their

involvement (52%, n=761). However, 58% (n=820) of respondents agree/agree strongly that there are no barriers to climate action. Young people in Tampere were most likely to perceive that they have no barriers to climate action (72%, n=304). There were also lower levels of agreement from young people in Tampere when they were asked if they needed more information/education about climate change (31%, n=300) and about whether they felt that they had the skills to act (41%, n=248).

Young people recognised that they needed support for taking climate action (Q15) with 74% (n=1,085) suggesting easy access to information about climate change was important/very important. Young people also said that opportunities for climate action were important/very important (67%, n=957). Skills training (including communication and politicking) (63%, n= 895), training/workshops on how to get involved in climate issues (57%, n=816) and climate education in schools (67%, n=967) were also considered important/very important. Participants from Galway and Bristol favoured workshops and training (73% and 69%; n=324;163), while Genoan respondents preferred easy access to information (84%; n=302), and climate change lessons/classes/activities in school/college (78%; n=278) and skills training (79%; n=281).

Norms, worldviews, and feelings

Young people view all types of actors and ages as responsible/very responsible for solving these issues, with apportioned responsibility increasing with age (Q25). In addition to seeing public figures, such as scientists, as the most important source of information about climate change and its impacts, young people view scientists as the most responsible for solving environmental issues (94%, n=1241), followed by public bodies/local authorities (92%, n=1,196) and the adult population in general (91%, n=1,150). Teachers and educators rank sixth (84%, n=1,026), behind local business and corporations (88%, n=853). Religious groups are an outlier, perceived as much less responsible (58%, n=665), with Genoans the least likely to perceive them as responsible (43%, n=118).

Young people were asked about their feelings about climate change (Q23), and many (45%, n=615) expressed feelings or a desire to do something (on weekly/daily basis). Grief (48%, n=606) and despair (47%, n=603) were reported as never being felt, although 35% (n=465) reported feeling anxious and frustrated (36% n=477) daily/weekly.

Overall young people (79%, n=1067) reported that thinking about climate change was not stressful and did not keep them awake at night (Q23). Many young people thought that people someday would know enough about how nature works to be able to control it (55%, n=588), although there was acknowledgment that people are treating nature badly (38%, n=511), and that animals have as much right as people (24%, n =304).

Social norms seemed to be key influencers on young people and their views and actions about climate change (Q24). 67% (n=886) agreed/strongly agreed that they would take more climate action if their friends did.

Young people across the city-region thought that helping others was important and value altruism (Q22). Respondents thought it is important/very important to help others (83%, n=1,333), speak up for equality (80%, n=1,272), make sure all people in the world are treated fairly (78%, n=1,244) and make the world a better place (77%, n=1,228).

Sustainable Development Goals

Young people were also asked about their knowledge of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and about the importance of each of the 17 targets (Q27, Q28). Over half (67% n=1257) of the young people surveyed across the project locations were familiar with the SDGs and 89% (n=1383) rated the Climate Action target as important/very important.

Conclusions and key messages

These survey findings revealed broad trends and disparities in the experiences, views, and learning about climate change among young people in four European city-regions. Baseline data from this survey has helped identify themes for further exploration in the focus groups, interviews and narrative workshops and has shaped policy engagements. Some of these themes include climate values and actions, intergenerational learning, and tools for climate education.

To counter narratives of eco-anxiety, climate change education must emphasise the importance of climate action in line with young people's values, with a focus on empowerment and agency. It is also important that climate change is recognised as an issue that is, and will become increasingly become, intertwined with other environmental concerns. As effects and impacts accelerate, inter-generational relationships that promote shared responsibility, stewardship and learning should be cultivated.

Another key message from these findings suggests that both individual and collective actions among young people should be encouraged. This will allow the role of positive social norms to be promoted in driving climate action forward. This includes being aware of the importance of peer and friendships relationships particularly at younger ages, and their potential for influence. Young people stressed the need for support mechanisms in their climate action endeavors. Hence, a further key message from the data is to ensure that climate education strategies and plans include providing quality research-informed resources, training and mentorship for young people and those that support them, along with platforms for collaboration and tangible actions.

Our findings suggest that there is a potential for curriculum change and that emphasis should be placed on the need for increased CCE, as well as the provision and support for skill-building opportunities among young people. This would enable them to effectively navigate and address environmental challenges. CCE should empower young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to drive meaningful change and contribute to sustainable solutions. This also includes the need to support young people emotionally in navigating the complexities and uncertainties of the climate crisis

The results of this stage of the research support the case for raising awareness and acknowledge that young people are frustrated with policy makers perceived lack of responsiveness. Responding to this is urgent, and strategies, training and initiatives are required to support the meaningful engagement and incorporation of youth perspectives. The emphasis here should be on breaking down boundaries and bridging the gap between young people and policymakers by creating avenues for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and more opportunities to be involved in climate policymaking. Measures such as these need to be carefully crafted, pay attention to power

imbalances and tokenism, and work harder to incorporate youth voices, suggestions and actions in decision-making processes for climate mitigation and adaptation.Reference List

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Figure 1: Sectors of society seen as important/very important in tackling climate change

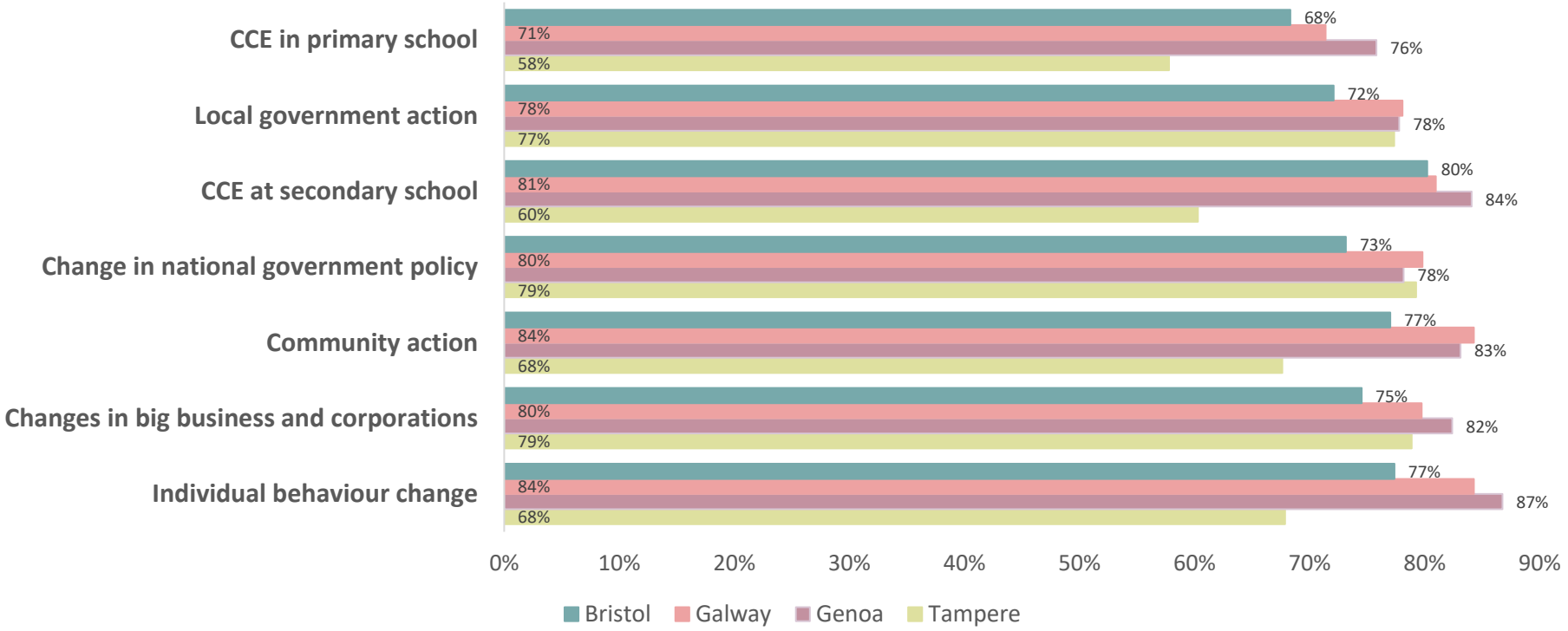

Figure 2: Percentage of young people who disagree/disagree strongly with attitudes about climate change