

Special issue: *Towards an eco-social pedagogy*

Review

## An eco-social turn in social pedagogy

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## Abstract

Social pedagogy has traditionally been classified into three main paradigms following the theory of knowledge interests by Jürgen Habermas: the positivist, the hermeneutical and the critical paradigm. In this article, we argue that the increased discussion of ecological and eco-social questions in social pedagogy are more than just new perspectives in social pedagogical theory and research: specifically, they are a sign of an eco-social turn and an emerging new paradigm, which presents the whole field with a challenge comparable to the so-called emancipatory turn in 1960s Germany. Back then, the rise of more critical views of society and the increasing role of social pedagogy in maintaining oppressive structures challenged the (at that time) dominant hermeneutical and positivist paradigms and called for a more critical analysis of societal structures. The emancipatory turn led to the development of the critical paradigm, which posed an ontological, epistemological and methodological challenge to the whole discipline and led to new discussions of the worldview and purpose of social pedagogy. We argue that in the 2020s, social pedagogy faces an equivalent transformative turn that challenges the whole field. The article is

based on theoretical analysis of the current discussions in the field and aims to establish a meta-theoretical framework for existing and emerging discussions, which can be labelled eco-social. The concept of the eco-social turn has been presented in Finnish in a textbook published in 2024; this article presents the concept to English-speaking audiences and develops it further.

**Keywords** critical social pedagogy; eco-social paradigm; eco-social social pedagogy; eco-social turn; emancipatory turn; paradigmatic turn; social pedagogy

## Introduction

Throughout history and across various countries and regions, the development of social pedagogy has been closely tied to the surrounding social, cultural, socio-economic and other contextual conditions with the aim of addressing diverse social and educational needs, challenges and shortcomings (for example, Hämäläinen, 2015). In late-nineteenth-century Europe, social pedagogy began to evolve in response to rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, aiming to tackle pedagogically societal problems such as child labour and vagrancy. Since then, it has continued to address a range of social issues, including social exclusion, maladjustment and inequalities, as well as racism and coloniality, that have emerged in discussions of social pedagogy more recently. Social pedagogy has evolved, and continues to evolve, in dialogue with its historical, societal, cultural and – increasingly – ecological contexts.

In the twenty-first century, one of the most fundamental of all problems is the ecological crisis. Climate change, biodiversity loss and species extinction are just a few examples of ecological processes that severely impact on human well-being, exacerbate global inequalities and ultimately threaten the planet's survival. Accordingly, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, social pedagogical responses to this crisis have begun to appear. A variety of academic and professional initiatives emerged to address ecological questions by developing social pedagogical concepts and theoretical frameworks, such as social pedagogy of sustainability (Böhnisch, 2020), social pedagogical environmental education (for example, Caride and Meira, 2020) and planetary social pedagogy (Salonen et al., 2023). Moreover, approaches and concepts such as eco-justice pedagogies (for example, Foster and Martusewicz, 2019), ecophenomenology (Wood, 2001), other-than-human (Cliffe, 2024) and multispecies relationships, critical animal pedagogy (Kozak, 2024) and green social work or environmental social work (for example, Stamm et al., 2024) have been incorporated into discussions of social pedagogy to address the pressing need to find pedagogical solutions to ecological crises.

In this theoretical article, we argue that the recently emerged eco-social discussion in social pedagogy represents more than just a new perspective in social pedagogical theory, research and practice: it signifies an emerging new paradigm. Traditionally, in European analyses, social pedagogy has been classified into three main paradigms following Jürgen Habermas's (1987) theory of knowledge interests: the positivist paradigm; the hermeneutical paradigm; and the critical paradigm (for example, Ryyänänen and Nivala, 2019; Sáez Carreras, 1997; Úcar, 2022). Although the paradigmatic discussion has not been very common in the field in the twenty-first century, the three paradigms continue to manifest in various ways, influencing how we define and understand social pedagogy and its role in society (for example, Eriksson, 2014). The hermeneutical paradigm underpins the relational orientation, which focuses on interaction, relationships and community-based approaches (Eichsteller, 2010). The critical paradigm is the paradigmatic umbrella for perspectives that emphasise the importance of critically examining structural and systemic inequalities, both locally and globally, while striving for transformation and social justice (Ryyänänen and Nivala, 2019). Although these two paradigms are often regarded as dominant, influences of the old positivist paradigm can also be recognised in more technical approaches that prioritise efficiency and evidence-based methods (for example, Cleary, 2019).

We propose that the emergence of the eco-social discourse in the field represents a new paradigmatic turn in social pedagogy. We have opted to call it the *eco-social turn*, holding it comparable to the emancipatory turn that took place in the field, especially in Germany, in the 1960s (Rauschenbach and Thiersch, 1984), and that not only fostered the development of critical social pedagogy but also fundamentally transformed the entire field. Accordingly, the eco-social turn in the 2020s seems to be

challenging the entire field of social pedagogy by calling for a broader understanding of its purpose, questioning its inherent human-centredness and promoting a more holistic image of human beings and the more-than-human world.

We argue that, along with the paradigmatic turn, a new paradigm is emerging in the field, reshaping understanding of fundamental questions in social pedagogy and challenging the legitimacy of previous paradigms. We term this the *eco-social paradigm*, as it originates from the imperative to recognise the interconnectedness of social and ecological issues. Accordingly, in the (paradigmatic) discussions of social pedagogy, we argue – despite the slightly repetitive nature of the concept – for the denominator *eco-social social pedagogy* to be used along with, for instance, *critical social pedagogy*, instead of the suggested and possibly slightly misleading abbreviation *eco-social pedagogy*.

The concepts of the eco-social turn and the new eco-social paradigm in social pedagogy have been presented in Finnish in a social pedagogy textbook published in June 2024 (Nivala and Ryyänen, 2024). The ideas are based on an extensive literature review that we conducted in multiple languages (English, Finnish, Swedish, Portuguese, Spanish and, to some extent, in German and French). In this article, we present those ideas to English-speaking audiences and develop them further. Our approach is meta-theoretical: we examine the emergence of ecological and eco-social discourses within social pedagogy, analyse them through the lens of the paradigmatic turn, and draw comparisons with the emancipatory turn. In our analysis we focus primarily on social pedagogy in Europe. While there are indications of a similar paradigmatic turn occurring elsewhere, drawing conclusions about Latin American social pedagogy, for example, would require a more in-depth analysis specific to that region, including a historical and context-specific analysis of the paradigmatic formation of the field.

In contemporary social pedagogy, we acknowledge that the practice of distinguishing between paradigms has largely faded from use. However, we advocate for reviving this approach as a valuable tool for highlighting and better understanding the differing perspectives on what social pedagogy is and what it seeks to achieve. The adopted approach serves to identify the main orientations that shape social pedagogical thinking and action both in research and practice. At the same time, we acknowledge the complexities inherent in the concept of *paradigm*, given its varied definitions (for example, Merriam-Webster, n.d.). We use the concept as a loose denominator to refer to the broad orientations identifiable in the field. Each of these is based on a particular set of values, principles, standards, concepts and practices shared by members of the scientific community, which guide their research and practice and are distinguishable from the values, principles and standards of other orientations.

## From emancipatory turn to eco-social turn

Among the three traditional paradigms in social pedagogy, the emergence of the critical paradigm in German social pedagogy in the 1960s bears the closest resemblance to the current developments in the field, which we identify here as a *paradigmatic turn in progress*. We use the German discussion as an example because it has been analysed from the paradigmatic perspective perhaps more than social pedagogy in any other country, and thus gives us a historical point of reflection from which to analyse the situation today.

In this section, we first outline the emancipatory turn and the emergence of critical social pedagogy in Germany to provide historical context and offer a mirror for reflecting on current developments in the field. We then define the paradigmatic turn as our analytical concept and use this in exploring the ecological and eco-social discussions in social pedagogy. It should be noted that the trajectory of development we are about to outline cannot be generalised as the global story of social pedagogy. In Brazil, for instance, the precursors to contemporary discussions of social pedagogy emerged with an already critical outlook through the efforts of many marginalised groups in society, such as Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian movements, as well as through the tradition of *educação popular* with which Paulo Freire (1921–97), among others, aligned his thinking. These initiatives sought to develop a self-directed pedagogy rooted in their own social and cultural traditions (for example, Mota Neto and Oliveira, 2018). By acknowledging this, we advocate for a decolonising perspective on the history of social pedagogy, one that challenges the generalisation of Eurocentric views of social pedagogy – those presented in this article, for instance – as universal.

## For comparison: the emancipatory turn and the emergence of critical social pedagogy

Before the Second World War, the hermeneutical paradigm dominated German social pedagogy. This emphasised the importance of understanding historical reality, cultural communities and human experiences as foundational to the theory and practice of social pedagogy, and aimed to foster the personal development of every individual to their full potential in pedagogical relationships (Hämäläinen, 1995; Rauschenbach and Thiersch, 1984). Under National Socialist rule, social pedagogy was co-opted and its humanistic ideals were exploited and distorted by the Nazi regime. In post-war Germany, the need to break away from the frameworks that had been used to legitimise the horrors of the war led to the adoption of completely new influences from abroad. The development of social pedagogy and social work practices relied on functional models from the United States, especially on individualised and psychological approaches (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009; Lorenz, 2008). German social pedagogy shifted significantly towards a more rational, technical and measurement-based form of knowledge production: that is, towards the dominance of the positivist paradigm.

The 1960s became the decade of political activism for societal transformation in Europe and the United States. Various social and political movements advocated for civil rights, gender equality and peace. They sought to address social injustices, promote equality and sustainability, and challenge traditional norms and the old world order based on warfare technologies. Students were at the forefront of this activism, and universities became rallying points for critical reflection. Academics criticised the old ways of making and using science to promote the status quo. Within the social sciences, critical theory began to gain increasing influence (Hämäläinen, 1995; Lorenz, 2008; Schugurensky, 2014).

Critical voices in social pedagogy confronted the positivist social work paradigm adopted from the United States, demanding a more politically conscious and engaged approach to education and social work (Lorenz, 2008). Influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and critical social scientists and educational thinkers like Paulo Freire, many researchers and practitioners began challenging the established power structures, questioning the role that social pedagogical work, among other social and pedagogical approaches, played in upholding them and advocating for social justice (Hämäläinen, 1995; Schugurensky, 2014). The general beliefs, values and norms in the field were on the move. Later, this process came to be known as the *emancipatory turn* (Hämäläinen, 2015; Rauschenbach and Thiersch, 1984).

The emancipatory turn fundamentally challenged the then-dominant ways of understanding and practising social pedagogy. First, it called for a new understanding of knowledge, science and the societal aims of social pedagogy. The positivist paradigm had claimed scientific knowledge to be neutral and objective. It had relied on empiricist research and standardised methods producing information about individual behaviour. The emancipatory turn questioned all this, arguing that both research and practice were inherently subjective and political, and thus could not be neutral. Instead, it blamed the positivist paradigm and the hermeneutical tradition for overlooking the power dynamics and structural inequalities that affect people's lives. The positivist paradigm, on the one hand, had focused only on individual deficits and behaviours and aimed to adapt them into existing societal norms and values (Hämäläinen, 1995). The hermeneutical paradigm, on the other, was considered to be too narrowly focused on interaction in communities and relationships between the educator and the educated (Mollenhauer, 1970). The emancipatory turn highlighted the importance of addressing systemic issues and understanding how oppression operates within society. Social pedagogy should actively transform oppressive structures and work towards social justice, equity and emancipation, empowering individuals and communities to achieve autonomy and self-determination. Empowerment could be achieved through the development of critical consciousness and agency, enabling people to change oppressive conditions (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009; Hämäläinen, 1995; Rauschenbach and Thiersch, 1984).

The emancipatory turn also challenged the field's practical methodological foundations. Social pedagogical work was primarily about providing support and services to needy individuals, with top-down working methods. Educators and social workers acted as authorities who imparted solutions to passive recipients. The critique promoted dialogical and participatory methods inspired by, for instance, Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It encouraged mutual learning and collaboration, joint reflection, collective action, political activism, policy advocacy and participation in grassroots movements, working towards systemic change, addressing social injustices and promoting human rights (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009; Hämäläinen, 1995; Rauschenbach and Thiersch, 1984). The emancipatory

turn paved the way for the emergence of the critical paradigm in social pedagogy and posed ontological, epistemological and methodological challenges to the entire discipline.

### **... but what is a *paradigmatic turn*?**

The emergence of critical and self-reflective perspectives in German social pedagogy in the late 1960s was only later termed the *emancipatory turn*. One could ask whether it is even possible to recognise such a paradigmatic turn at the time it occurs, or if it is only recognisable afterwards. Our claim in this article is that identifying signs of a paradigmatic turn is plausible if we first understand what a paradigmatic turn is, and then look analytically at what is happening in both academic discussions and practices around us.

A paradigmatic turn refers to a notable change in the framework of a particular scientific field that causes a redirection in how phenomena are approached or interpreted. A well-known example of such a turn in history is the linguistic turn in philosophy in the early twentieth century, which increased the focus on language and concepts and how they shape human experience (see Glock and Kalhat, 2018; Rorty, 1967). A paradigmatic turn is never a sudden upheaval. Rather, the term emphasises the gradually developing collective awareness of new perspectives on a particular field that creates a need to critically examine the established frameworks for understanding and studying phenomena. As the case of the emancipatory turn in German social pedagogy exemplifies, a paradigmatic turn necessitates both an inward turn towards self-reflection and an outward shift towards a new perspective on how the field sees the world. A paradigmatic turn does not lead to abandoning the old frameworks completely but rather to integrating new perspectives and methodologies into the field. In doing so, it enhances existing frameworks.

The appearance of the first arguments or questions presenting new perspectives is not yet a paradigmatic turn. The new ideas need to be repeated by several researchers or theorists and even from several different angles, and must gain enough publicity and receptive audiences to create a more generalised awareness of a need to re-evaluate the focus of interest and research perspectives on the field. To generate a broader need for self-reflection, the discussion must reach some key arenas, such as important publications and conferences, attract wider attention and be considered relevant. When the discussion grows wide and powerful enough, it can start influencing the ways in which the field defines itself, its research interests and methodologies, and its purpose.

As a concept, the paradigmatic turn resembles the paradigm shift, a concept presented by Thomas Kuhn (1922–96). For Kuhn (1970), a paradigm shift was a fundamental change in a discipline's underlying assumptions, frameworks or methodologies. It referred to a revolutionary change wherein a dominant framework of the discipline is replaced by another; according to Kuhn, there can only be one dominant paradigm in a field at a time. A paradigm shift occurs when the existing paradigm is no longer sufficient to explain new phenomena, leading to the adoption of a new paradigm (Kuhn, 1970). In social and educational sciences, these total shifts of paradigm do not occur. Thus, the concept of a paradigmatic turn that acknowledges the coexistence of multiple paradigms is a more fitting term in the context of social pedagogy.

### **The emergence of ecological and eco-social perspectives within social pedagogy**

Ecological questions began to appear sporadically in theoretical discussions relevant to social pedagogy during the twentieth century, especially the latter half. For instance, Dewey (1859–1952) touched on ecological themes in his educational philosophy, and Freire was planning a book on eco-pedagogy in his final years (Misiaszek, 2023). In Germany, from the late 1970s onwards, social pedagogues such as Wendt (2010) and Staub-Bernasconi (1991) developed views connected to the ecological and eco-social thinking of that time, emphasising systemic thinking, a broad understanding of the human–environment relationship and responsibility for nature.

Ecological and eco-social questions have become more prevalent in social pedagogy discussions in the new millennium, particularly since the 2010s, and researchers and theorists in several countries have started discussing the ecological crisis in the context of social pedagogy. Examples include Caride in Spain, who has been publishing texts on environmental education since the 1980s (for example, Caride and Mosquera, 1988) and written abundantly over the years, together with colleagues, on the need to develop critical educational approaches to the global ecological and social crisis (for example, Caride, 2002, 2020; Caride and Meira, 2020). In Germany, a vibrant discussion has emerged around

the concept of sustainability in social pedagogy and social work (for example, Braches-Chyrek, 2023), sparked by Böhnisch's (2020) work, which explores how sustainability principles can be integrated into social pedagogical practices.

Finland has been at the forefront of establishing ecological and eco-social themes in social pedagogy in Europe. A few prominent researchers have explicitly connected their research on eco-social themes to social pedagogy since the early 2010s; namely, Arto O. Salonen and Raisa Foster. Together with their colleagues, they have published widely on concepts and practices such as eco-social and ecojustice education in different contexts, addressing different, often arts-based approaches (for example, Foster and Martusewicz, 2019; Foster and Sutela, 2024; Foster and Turkki, 2021), eco-social *Bildung* (Salonen and Bardy, 2015) and ecosocialisation (Keto and Foster, 2020). The conceptualisation of planetary social pedagogy by Salonen et al. (2023, 2024) is one of the first more systematic attempts to create a theoretical framework for social pedagogical practice addressing the ecological crisis. Nivala and Ryyänen (2024), the authors of this article, were the first to systematise eco-social discussions as an emerging new paradigm and to include the eco-social perspective as a cross-cutting theme in their widely used Finnish textbook of social pedagogy.

In addition to these, we could mention many examples of social pedagogical researchers with an eco-social perspective. Thus, the eco-social discussion has clearly started and gained ground in the field. It is also evident that it calls for meta-theoretical systematisation, which this article seeks to provide.

## An eco-social turn in the making?

Next, we analyse the developing ecological and eco-social discussions in social pedagogy within the framework of the paradigmatic turn. We have been examining ideas, perspectives and questions raised in these discussions, considering whether they could indicate an eco-social turn in the field instead of being merely a new thematic strand. We have identified perspectives that represent notable shifts when compared to traditional frameworks, ideas that challenge some of the basic definitions and even the fundamental principles of social pedagogy. We argue that it is justified to assert that, taken together, these are signs of an eco-social turn in the making.

The first major challenge for the field levelled by eco-social discussions concerns the scope of social pedagogy. Specifically, can we continue working only with social issues if well-being is fundamentally intertwined with ecological questions? Eco-social discussions have broadened the focus and redefined the purpose of social pedagogy. They speak of the necessity to address both social and ecological issues, to understand the interconnectedness of these and to recognise that human well-being is intrinsically linked to the planet's health. Eco-social discussions broaden the purpose of social pedagogy to include the well-being of other species and the whole planet, stressing their intrinsic value instead of seeing them just as a precondition to human well-being (Salonen et al., 2023, 2024).

Another notable challenge concerns the worldview and concept of humanity within the field. Traditionally, social pedagogy has followed a humanistic worldview, specifically highlighting human dignity and the value of every individual. The focus has been on personal and social growth, problems in human relationships and society as a human-made environment. Some strands of the eco-social discussions question the human-centredness of social pedagogy and argue for the urgency to shift away from anthropocentrism in order to recognise the equal rights of other animals and nature to flourish. This involves rethinking the role of humans in the ecosystem and fostering a sense of responsibility towards all forms of life (Keto and Foster, 2020). Accordingly, the focus of social pedagogical practices should not be the strengthening only of social relations and communities but also of the relationship between humans, other species and the ecological environment as a whole (Cliffe, 2024; Kozak, 2024; Salonen et al., 2023). In addition, eco-phenomenologically orientated researchers emphasise the need to broaden the human image to include the person as an embodied whole in harmony with one's environment (Foster and Turkki, 2021).

The third sign of a paradigmatic turn is the application of new theories to understand the reality in which social pedagogy operates. Systems theory, eco-phenomenological, eco-feminist and post-humanist theories, and different combinations of biological and social sciences, are just a few examples of the new theoretical perspectives presented in recent discussions (Foster and Martusewicz, 2019; Keto and Foster, 2020; Salonen et al., 2023). Theories in social pedagogy have traditionally been broad and versatile, but eco-social perspectives open up even more dynamic, holistic and interdisciplinary theoretical constellations.

The fourth set of new perspectives concerns research methods and practical working methods. The eco-social discussion seems to be a breeding ground for new methods and practices that draw inspiration from different art forms, creative, embodied and nature-based methods, and pedagogical theories that highlight education as a transformative process (for example, Foster and Sutela, 2024; Foster and Turkki, 2021; Gallagher and Stobbs, 2023). New methodological and practical approaches aim to include not just head, heart and hands, but the whole body as a source of knowledge and a means to create a stronger connection with the more-than-human world. They aim to foster, for instance, critical thinking, growing self-awareness, a stronger relationship with other animals and nature, and action towards a more sustainable future. They do not necessarily profoundly challenge the old ideas about social pedagogical practices and research methods, which have always been open and multifaceted; still, they broaden the range of research and working methods and ground them in new theoretical frameworks.

Based on our analysis, we claim that eco-social discussions shake the old frameworks of social pedagogy in such a profound way that it is justified to consider them a sign of an ongoing paradigmatic turn. Taken together, they prompt a shift in how phenomena are approached and understood. Following the established logic of paradigmatic turns, the eco-social turn is not a sudden upheaval. Rather, it has been in the making for at least a decade, and even longer if we consider the very first instances of ecological perspectives in social pedagogical discussions. In the mid-2020s, awareness of the new perspectives finding their way into social pedagogy seems to be increasing, and a perceived necessity to critically reflect on the established ways of understanding the world is growing.

## Eco-social social pedagogy – an emerging paradigm?

To summarise the ideas discussed in the previous section, we propose that the ongoing eco-social turn holds at least two significant implications for social pedagogy. First, it marks the emergence of a new paradigm, which we refer to as eco-social social pedagogy and the eco-social paradigm. Second, the eco-social turn presents cross-cutting challenges to the whole field, much as the emancipatory turn did after the 1960s. In this section, we outline the characteristics of the emerging eco-social paradigm, while acknowledging that it is still in its formative stages.

### From social to eco-social

In the context of social pedagogy, the term *social* or *sociality* has traditionally encompassed three perspectives that together provide insight into the pedagogical thinking and practices inherent in the field. First, social has referred to interpersonal relationships, relationality, interaction, communal life, communities and a sense of community. Second, it has been understood in terms of society and societal relations, highlighting the societal dimensions of pedagogy and education. Third, social has denoted societal disadvantage, challenges and efforts to address them (for example, Hämäläinen, 2012). These definitions remain central to the essence of social pedagogy as both a discipline and a practical field. Social pedagogy examines and supports interpersonal interaction, communal life and a sense of community; seeks to understand and strengthen the relationships between individuals, communities and society; and addresses, prevents and alleviates societal disadvantage through pedagogical approaches.

The emerging eco-social paradigm broadens the scope of discussions in social pedagogy by introducing a fourth dimension to perspectives on the social: the eco-social. This dimension encompasses the more-than-human world, the ecological environment and the entire planet as the context for social pedagogical thinking and practices. It emphasises the fundamental interconnectedness of social and ecological issues, while also presenting a profound ontological challenge. It prompts reflection on humanity's place and role within the whole and questions the traditional hierarchies that have historically placed humans at the top.

The new perspectives introduced by the eco-social paradigm can also be examined through the lens of its three domains of purpose: socialisation, subjectification and *Bildung*, understood as a comprehensive process of education in its broadest sense (Nivala and Ryyänen, 2024; Siljander, 2014). In general theories of education and schooling, the term *qualification function* is typically used instead of *Bildung* (for example, Biesta, 2020). In social pedagogy, its essence is more accurately captured

by the concept of *Bildung*, which embodies the idea of holistic support for human capabilities to be and act in the world, both individually and in connection with others, rather than merely concentrating on knowledge and skills. As Cleary (2019) has argued, 'without *Bildung* as a value and as a tradition, social pedagogy becomes something else' (p. 6). The socialisation function of social pedagogy refers to the process through which an individual becomes a member of society and a part of the world. This process is rooted in mutual interaction, in which the individual not only receives influences from others but also contributes to shaping those others and society. Third, the subjectification function pertains to the understanding a person develops of themselves, both as a unique individual and in relation to others.

Traditionally, the three domains of purpose in social pedagogy have been grounded in an anthropocentric and society-centric understanding of the world, with a primary focus on the triad of individual, community and society. The eco-social paradigm expands this perspective, shifting the focus from society alone to include the more-than-human world and a planetary scale. This introduces new layers to the three domains of purpose. Keto and Foster (2020) have proposed the term *ecosocialisation* as an ecologically conscious counterpart to the traditional concept of socialisation. It encompasses the idea that, alongside human-human and human-society interactions, we are and should be eco-socialised through our interactions with other beings and the ecosystem. Accordingly, eco-subjectification (or eco-individuation) encompasses the idea of individual growth as becoming a life-sustaining part of diverse ecosystems (Pulkki, 2021; Pulkki et al., 2020). Eco-social *Bildung* leans towards the adoption of a social-ecological worldview grounded in systems thinking (Salonen et al., 2023).

Alongside examination of the meanings of the term *social* and the three domains of purpose in social pedagogy, a third perspective on the significance of the eco-social paradigm can be introduced by analysing two partly overlapping fields of social pedagogy, which stem from its two historical lines of development: one focused on social care and welfare activity, the other on citizenship education (for example, Hämäläinen, 2012). Traditionally, the former has been understood to refer to pedagogical approaches for addressing specific challenges and problems, while the latter has been associated with supporting the social growth of all individuals within society.

The eco-social paradigm introduces to the first line of development the interconnectedness of social and ecological problems, thereby broadening traditional understanding of the types of issues social pedagogy should address through pedagogical solutions (for example, Salonen et al., 2023). For the second line of development, the eco-social paradigm emphasises that, alongside society, the broader context of the more-than-human world and the entire planet must also be considered; for example, through supporting planetary citizenship (Moraes and Freire, 2017).

In sum, the emerging eco-social paradigm seeks to integrate both ecological and social dimensions into the theory, research and practice of social pedagogy. It introduces new ideas, concepts, theoretical frameworks, research initiatives and practical developments to social pedagogy, while also maintaining the familiar aspects that differentiate social pedagogy from other pedagogical and educational approaches. However, as is typical with the emergence of a new paradigm, discussion surrounding the new themes in the field is diverse. This is what we aim to explore next.

## The breadth and diversity of eco-social social pedagogy

Outlining an emerging eco-social paradigm in social pedagogy does not imply that eco-social social pedagogy could – or should, for that matter – be described as a homogeneous whole. We view it as an umbrella term, much like critical social pedagogy. Within critical or critical-emancipatory social pedagogy, various orientations and schools of thought can be recognised, such as reformist and radical currents of traditional critical pedagogy (Schugurensky, 2014), as well as more recent approaches such as decolonial social pedagogy (Mota Neto and Oliveira, 2018), antiracist social pedagogy (for example, Aguilar-Idáñez and Buraschi, 2021) and feminist social pedagogy (see hooks, 1992). These perspectives often present differing, sometimes even conflicting, views on the objectives of social pedagogy, the nature of knowledge and other fundamental issues, while still sharing the fundamental principles of critical social pedagogy.

Accordingly, the umbrella of the eco-social paradigm encompasses approaches and orientations that do not present a univocal view on how ecological and eco-social aspects could and should be integrated into the theory and practice of social pedagogy. Instead, the eco-social paradigm can be presented as a continuum of approaches, with one end representing perspectives that simply



incorporate an ecological dimension into social pedagogical thinking and action, and the other end advocating for a fundamental rethinking of the ontological foundation of social pedagogy. In other words, it is already possible to recognise both more 'reformist' and more 'radical' approaches taking shape within the emerging eco-social paradigm, much like those found in German critical social pedagogy and elsewhere from the 1970s onwards (see Schugurensky, 2014).

In critical social pedagogy, the dividing line has been the approach to societal transformation and its means, leaning towards reformist (for example, Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009) or revolutionary (for example, Freire, 1972) approaches. In eco-social social pedagogy, ontological questions are perhaps the best way to grasp the differences between various eco-discussions and eco-conscious perspectives. By ontological questions, we mean the way the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world is understood in the process of finding solutions to the ongoing ecological crisis.

Approaches rooted in ecophenomenology, ecofeminism, post-humanism and similar theoretical foundations advocate for transcending established ontologies based on subject–object dichotomies (see, for example, Foster, 2017). An example of such a dichotomy is the division between humans and nature, which portrays them as ontologically distinct entities and places humans in a hierarchically superior position. In contrast, the aforementioned approaches challenge the notion of humans' special status in the world. Instead, humans are placed alongside the rest of nature by emphasising connection instead of domination (see, for example, Kozak, 2024). The traditional human-centredness and anthropocentric thinking inherent in social pedagogy's humanistic roots are seen as reproducing destructive hierarchies with humans always at the top, in a dominant position. This is seen as perpetuating the ecological crisis rather than contributing to its resolution.

The more reformist approaches within the eco-social paradigm do not aim to shake the ontological foundations of social pedagogy or society. Instead, they add an eco-conscious layer in social pedagogy by stressing the interconnectedness of social and ecological issues and by advocating theories and practices, such as environmental education, that aim to increase the connection between humans and the more-than-human world. Whichever way these ontological questions are understood, in the eco-social paradigm ecological questions are brought to the forefront of social pedagogical thinking and practice in a new way.

## Discussion: eco-social challenge for the field

In this article, we have used critical social pedagogy and the emancipatory turn of the 1960s as historical equivalents and mirrors for what is happening in the field in the 2020s. In the 1960s a need for new theories and practices in social pedagogy emerged, driven by the critique that social pedagogical practice was perpetuating oppressive structures rather than fostering societal transformation through pedagogical means. In the twenty-first century a similar critique has appeared, this time targeting the ways in which the practices of education – also those inherent to social pedagogy – are implicated in the ecological crisis: specifically, that they advocate an ecologically and socially unsustainable way of life and societal order by maintaining and reproducing an unhealthy relationship between humans and the more-than-human world (for example, Värri, 2018).

We have demonstrated that it is already possible to recognise the rapidly increasing theoretical and practical responses to ecological crises in social pedagogy as an eco-social turn. As well as having initiated the formation of a new paradigm, this challenges the entire field to reflect on its purpose and practices through an ecologically and eco-socially conscious lens, prompting re-examination of its ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations. Moreover, the eco-social turn raises ethical questions about the role and responsibility of social pedagogy in addressing ecological issues and finding pedagogical solutions for addressing the ecological crisis. This calls, among other things, for methodological innovations that can capture the interconnectedness of ecological and social dimensions in creative and holistic ways; for example, by adopting interdisciplinary, arts-based and participatory research methods.

The emancipatory turn in the 1960s did not lead to the disappearance of the older paradigms, and the eco-social turn will be no different. In many countries, from the 1970s onwards, critical social pedagogy, with its emphasis on emancipation, social justice and critical analysis of structural and systemic inequalities, became the dominant paradigm, at least in theoretical discussions. Following the challenge of the 1960s, the hermeneutical tradition recreated itself during the 1970s and 1980s

and found a more critical angle for understanding social contexts and people's life experiences. The new critical-hermeneutical orientation combined the hermeneutical interpretation of reality with emancipatory awareness of oppressive societal structures (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). In the twenty-first century, the hermeneutical paradigm is still very much alive in theories and practices of relational social pedagogy highlighting relationships, dialogue, working with communities and understanding people's life-worlds (Eichsteller, 2010).

A different kind of example is the positivist paradigm, which was reborn as a technical paradigm in the 1990s with help from neoliberal government agendas (Lorenz, 2008). It can be seen more as a counter force to critical social pedagogy than as a fruit of the emancipatory turn. In the 2020s, it is visible in the evidence-based approach to addressing social problems at the individual level. In social pedagogical discussion, the technical paradigm has not been as widely accepted as the other two paradigms, but it is nevertheless very much alive in the field of practice (Eriksson, 2014; Nivala and Ryyänen, 2024; for critique of the evidence-based approach see, for example, Cleary, 2019).

These examples show that responses to a new paradigm can be manifold. The three traditional paradigms can – and in our view, should – be expected to respond to the challenges posed by the eco-social turn by widening and realigning their perspectives, as happened with the hermeneutical paradigm in the 1970s. However, as the example of the technical paradigm shows, a paradigmatic turn does not necessarily change the whole field.

Nevertheless, the historical examples are comparable with the current situation only up to a certain point. The ecological crisis poses such a profound threat to humanity, civilisations, the more-than-human world and the whole planet, that there is nothing comparable in modern history. There is not, or at least there should not be, any good argument for not responding to the call of the eco-social turn advocated by researchers and practitioners at the forefront of eco-social thinking. We argue that the whole field should hear the call of the eco-social turn to be able to address the complex and interconnected challenges of the twenty-first century and to promote a more just and sustainable world for all, including the more-than-human world.

From the perspective of social pedagogy, the changes in the field in the twenty-first century also require global analyses, not only because social pedagogy has developed differently in different regions, but also because the scale of the threat is global. In the twentieth century, social pedagogy was characterised by region-specific and even local lines of development for which the paradigmatic approaches provided broader points of reference. In the twenty-first century we share the same pressing issues and threats globally – and they need to be tackled together. In this article, our analysis was mainly restricted to European social pedagogy. An important next step would be to explore the development of social pedagogy in the Global South and to see what we could learn from there; for instance, from Indigenous thinking that has influenced social pedagogy in many countries.

Last, but not least, the role and possibilities of social pedagogy in addressing ecological crises should be considered. Critical social pedagogy has been criticised for stepping outside the pedagogical realm in trying to tackle structural issues (Úcar, 2011). From a certain perspective the same critique could also be posed here: it can be argued that ecological crises are also structural issues, much like inequality. However, this reasoning does not apply in the reality of the twenty-first century. It is specifically through eco-socially conscious pedagogical approaches that our relationship to the more-than-human world can change; and conversely, social pedagogy can also be part of the problem. Which side do we choose?

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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