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Beyond theory: arts-based practices and cultural ethos for transformative eco-social learning

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Abstract

Although the need to solve the global ecological crisis is acknowledged, practical solutions remain challenging. Environmental degradation and climate change are not just scientific or economic problems; they are also global issues deeply rooted in cultural and social systems that shape behaviour and ways to exist. Transformative solutions beyond cognitive learning are needed, but applications often remain disconnected from people's lived realities, hindering change. By engaging individuals on emotional, aesthetic and embodied levels, the arts offer a unique path to transformation. Furthermore, understanding these transformation processes requires examining the underlying individual and societal narratives, values and visions that shape learning and socialisation. This article aims to explore and theorise how the arts – within the framework of expressive arts therapy – can facilitate transformative eco-social learning towards planetary citizenship and be scaled up beyond therapy to broader contexts, such as education and communities. It addresses the question: how can arts-based practices and

the cultivation of a cultural ethos foster transformative eco-social learning in the global ecological crisis? Drawing on interdisciplinary literature and expressive arts therapy, this article argues that harnessing the arts' transformative potential requires a specific ethos, including a phenomenological view, recognition of interconnectedness and enabling conditions, with the arts playing a pivotal role in fostering transformation. This article contributes to social pedagogy and transformative learning by integrating the concept of the arts with insights from expressive arts therapy. Further research is needed to explore how changes in cultural ethos influence individuals, and how the arts may shape this ethos.

Keywords arts; cultural ethos; eco-social learning; expressive arts therapy; planetary citizenship; transformative learning

Introduction

Although the need to solve the global ecological crisis has long been acknowledged, practical solutions remain challenging. Environmental degradation and climate change are not just scientific or economic problems; they are also global issues, deeply rooted in the cultural and social systems of the Global North that shape human behaviour (Gergen et al., 2001).

As a transforming tool, education has long been seen as essential in providing the values, information and abilities to deal with these issues and to move towards meaningful actions by re-engaging individuals with the complex, interconnected nature of the world (Sterling, 2010). Over the decades, frameworks such as the Stockholm Declaration (1972), the Belgrade Charter (1975) and Agenda 2030 (2015) have expanded the scope of environmental education to emphasise holistic, interdisciplinary approaches that foster empathy, responsibility and planetary citizenship. The Tbilisi Declaration (1977) further highlighted active participation and systemic change, calling for a redesign of educational approaches to meet the demands of the growing environmental crisis. In Finland, the concept of eco-social education was introduced (POPS, 2014), which highlights that empathy, interconnectedness and systemic thinking are central elements of sustainable learning. These shifts reflect the emerging recognition that environmental education must go beyond cognitive understanding to extend to emotional involvement, cultural sensitivity and transformational agency.

However, while these frameworks have undeniably enriched the discourse, their practical application often remains disconnected from the lived realities of individuals, falling short of fostering the profound, systemic changes required to address the root causes of ecological degradation (Perkiö, 2020). This is mainly due to the challenges in understanding and implementing the complex concepts of sustainability overall (Cotton and Winter, 2010).

Furthermore, environmental education is still approached through cognitive and theoretical lenses (Cotton and Winter, 2010; O'Brien, 2009), which have often been insufficient to inspire the transformative change needed to meet these challenges and bridge the gap between what is known and what is done (Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). This is particularly evident today: even with unprecedented access to information, phenomena such as 'business-as-usual' inertia and denial persist, hindering progress. In other words, merely pointing out that the house is burning is not enough to spur action.

Bourn et al. (2016) have argued that teaching sustainability requires more than increasing knowledge; it demands pedagogical approaches that engage people's lived experiences and socio-cultural contexts. This is particularly critical in a world where dominant social norms – such as consumerism and individualism – shape perceptions and behaviours, disconnecting even more individuals from their natural environment. Furthermore, due to limited exposure to the wilderness, younger generations may fail to recognise first-place ecological loss and the intrinsic value of ecosystems (Kahn, 2002; Kahn and Weiss, 2017). This issue might be further reinforced by the shifting baseline syndrome, where each generation comes to accept the current environmental state as 'normal', as over time this gradual acceptance of ecological degradation leads to a loss of awareness of previous, healthier conditions (Pauly, 1995).

In addition to these barriers, social inequalities act as a major obstacle to the systemic change needed for effective eco-social learning and moving towards planetary citizenship. These inequalities must be addressed not only as a matter of social justice but also as an assurance that all individuals, especially the most vulnerable, can actively engage and contribute to the mitigation of environmental degradation while challenging the systems of colonialism, capitalism and racism, ultimately ensuring a good life for all (Leach et al., 2018; Walsh, 2022). Confronting social inequalities is thus not only a core aspect of social pedagogy, but also a necessary component of learning about sustainability. Therborn's (2013) exploration of existential, resource and vital inequalities offers insights into the dynamics of social structures, which Ryyänen and Nivala (2019) further apply through a social pedagogical perspective. By addressing existential inequalities through fostering belonging and recognition, and by engaging individuals in agency and participation, social pedagogical strategies can help alleviate inequalities and strengthen individuals' roles in communities and society (Ryyänen and Nivala, 2019), ultimately contributing to more inclusive and effective approaches to sustainability.

The question of how individuals and societies can undergo profound shifts in their worldviews has been explored in educational research. One influential concept in this regard is transformative learning, as developed by Mezirow (1978), in the adult education context. Transformative learning has inspired many theories and conceptual understandings of how individuals and societies may adjust their worldviews. According to Morrell and O'Connor (2002), such change involves 'a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world' (p. xvii). Transformative learning is frequently described in terms that are captivating and inspiring. These theories suggest a shift, but they do not always provide clarity on the outcomes or the specific direction of change. To enhance clarity in this article, I ground my understanding within the eco-social education framework (POPS, 2014) and the planetary citizenship theory (Salonen et al., 2024). Both emphasise fostering ethical and responsible individual agency while recognising the interconnectedness of all things. This suggests that eco-social education should aim to encourage individuals to adopt planetary citizenship, transitioning from a paradigm that neglects these principles to one that fully embraces them.

The challenge of attaining this change can seem overwhelming. How can people undergo such a significant transformation, particularly in socio-cultural contexts that might not provide supportive conditions? The arts have been seen as an essential pathway that moves beyond traditional instruction to engage the deeper aspects of human experience that should drive lasting transformation (Moore and Tickell, 2014). But beyond the frequently romanticised and almost mystical assertions that the arts may foster planetary citizenship and profound personal transformation, there is little discussion about their real-world applications and their long-lasting effects concerning eco-social issues. Are the arts enough on their own to instil those changes? How should they be applied, and with whom? To what extent should they be used? Which art forms hold the most potential? These profound questions highlight the difficulty of translating artistic insights into practice, where their transformative potential often proves difficult to realise.

This article argues that to tackle eco-social learning challenges, the arts should be used in a specific framework together with a more profound local or global cultural change, or what I call a *cultural ethos*, to foster transformative learning. Sterling (2004) states that 'sustainability is not just another issue to be added to an overcrowded curriculum, but a gateway to a different view of curriculum, of pedagogy, of organizational change, of policy and particularly of ethos' (p. 50). Here, the challenge lies not merely in delivering knowledge or shaping attitudes but also in creating foundations and a favourable socio-cultural environment for people to engage in meaningful, transformative processes. Without it, even the most sophisticated strategies, such as stand-alone arts-based workshops in a classroom, may end up being theoretical exercises disconnected from the goals they are intended to accomplish or providing short-term fixes without encouraging long-term and in-depth transformation.

Drawing from interdisciplinary literature and the field of expressive arts therapy, which centres on exploring these questions of transformation through arts, I examine this field's potential and scalability within educational frameworks and broader socio-cultural contexts. I introduce the concept of cultural ethos as a foundational basis for transformative eco-social learning, highlighting how expressive arts therapy contributes to shaping this ethos and harnesses the potential of the arts for meaningful transformation. I seek to answer the question of how can arts-based practices and the cultivation of a cultural ethos together foster transformative eco-social learning in the context of the global ecological crisis.

Cultural ethos: building deep transformational foundations

The arts and their effects on individuals are being researched more extensively than ever before. In 2019, the World Health Organization conducted a comprehensive research project on the benefits of the arts for enhancing health and well-being (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). In recent years, the knowledge gained about arts' effects and possibilities, from a consumer or practitioner point of view, has made it evolve beyond its inherent worth to serve a particular purpose, whether that be improving individuals' quality of life or addressing the eco-social crisis. In Finland, for example, there is an emerging field of cultural well-being, a growing number of art projects for social or environmental purposes and an increasing production of research, particularly empirical studies, in this field. Indeed, the arts have started to take on new roles, with artists working in areas such as schools, health care and community projects. Artists collaborate with communities to create art that has a meaningful effect, such as addressing environmental and social issues or strengthening community bonds (Evans and Booth, 2017).

Certainly, art opens up new ways to express and explore ideas, concepts and experiences, sparking dialogue and fostering social change (Zaeri and Roozafzai, 2024). It expands and develops empathy and theory of mind (Goldstein and Winner, 2019), and it can alter how the world is perceived and experienced, offering fresh opportunities for expression and deeper understanding (Bentz and O'Brien, 2019; de Carvalho, 2022). According to Moore and Tickell (2014), the arts:

have a connection to individual and collective experience which can imagine, influence, perhaps even make the world around us. In other words, the arts have a determining effect on culture. As such they should be at the heart of a sustainable worldview. (p. 5)

The UNESCO 2024 report on art for transformation has condensed the potential of the arts further, emphasising their capacity to directly support sustainable development goals in multiple ways (Bolden et al., 2024). According to Galafassi et al. (2018), arts-based practices help address climate issues by engaging emotions and values, building trust among participants and encouraging shared experiences. These practices create a sense of collective responsibility and purpose. The arts undoubtedly have tremendous potential, which literature confirms by presenting countless successful projects in instilling what looks like seeds of transformation (Bolden et al., 2024; Curtis et al., 2014). It is, however, essential to comprehend the larger socio-cultural frameworks to improve their impact. These frameworks form a cultural ethos and serve as the 'soil' in which arts potential and arts-based practices can flourish and be sustained with deeper emotional, cognitive and social engagement, psychological safety and social cohesion, towards eco-social transformation. While the success of arts-based methods is often context-dependent, framing them within a broader cultural ethos represents a scalable and systemic approach that acknowledges the socio-cultural complexities of learning environments. This aligns with the principles of social pedagogy, particularly life-space theory, which emphasises that individuals grow and develop within a shared space comprising three key factors: the physical space (where they are), the social space (who they are with) and the psychological space (how they feel), with these factors working together to influence how people grow, learn and interact with each other, and highlighting the importance of creating supportive 'milieu' environments that nurture meaningful interactions (Smith, 2005; Steckley and Smith, 2011). In addition, recognising that the most effective relationships emerge in real-life situations, rather than in controlled environments or during formal interventions (Smith, 2012), suggests that transformation is more likely to occur through authentic, lived experiences of everyday life, underscoring the importance of considering the physical, social and psychological spaces and the cultural ethos that frames and supports them.

Cultural ethos is an inherently broad concept that can be applied in contexts where there is a need to understand or reshape collective values and behaviours. It can be understood as the guiding beliefs and values of a society. In a learning context such as education, it can refer to how cultural norms, values and practices are transmitted, which in turn may sustain the broader social system, including its inequalities and power dynamics (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Cultural ethos is linked to theories of social imaginaries developed by thinkers such as Sartre, Lacan, Castoriadis and Ricoeur, referring to the way reality is constructed within social, political and cultural life, as well as the collective beliefs, ideals, symbols and narratives that shape community practices. These shared mental constructs significantly influence how individuals perceive the world and play a key role in establishing social norms, behaviours and institutional structures (Castoriadis, 1987; Earle, 2020).

How social imaginaries are constructed can be viewed through both individualism versus collectivism and rationalism versus social constructivism lenses. The difference between individualism and collectivism is about whether individuals or groups play a bigger role in shaping reality. Individualism focuses on personal experiences, choices and values, while collectivism looks at how society's reality is shaped by shared beliefs and values, with communities influencing perceptions and behaviours. Similarly, rationalism and social constructivism differ in whether knowledge and reality are based on logic and reason or shaped through social interactions and shared understandings.

For instance, shifting the focus from individual 'imagination' or 'reason' to the collective, socio-cultural processes that construct reality reveals how collective beliefs, social norms and forms of rationality come together to shape socio-cultural reality. This influences areas such as social structures and political life (Editorial Collective, 2022). At the same time, it relates to how individuals imagine their social existence, fit together with others and meet shared expectations, shaped by deeper normative beliefs (Taylor, 2004).

Previous theories on human behaviour have highlighted the interplay between internal factors, such as attitudes, emotions and social norms, and external conditions, such as cultural and environmental influences (Triandis, 1971, 1977). The understanding that most individual actions are shaped by habitual behaviours and situational conditions deeply rooted in our shared cultural background reconciles the perspectives of individualism and collectivism. This insight, within the framework of social imaginaries, shows that while individual views count, the socio-cultural environment plays an important role in fostering collective visions for the future.

However, the concepts of nature or the environment are largely missing in social constructivism literature. While it looks at how knowledge and reality are shaped through social interactions, the focus is mostly on human-centred phenomena. This leaves out the impact of nature and the environment, offering an opportunity to broaden the understanding of how people perceive reality and construct knowledge. Moreover, the idea of aesthetic consciousness – the capacity to perceive and appreciate beauty and the sensory qualities of the world – remains underexplored, particularly in the context of how it connects individuals to the relational world of nature, society and shared experiences. Aesthetic consciousness refers to a type of learning that engages the senses, emotions and imagination – an embodied and emotional experience that stimulates curiosity, reflection and deeper understanding, motivating ongoing learning and enhancing one's capacity to engage with knowledge (Webster and Wolfe, 2013). Drawing from Dewey's (1934/1980) work on aesthetics and his concept of an experience, aesthetic experiences are fully immersive, meaningful and unified moments where a person is deeply engaged – much like experiencing art – reshaping how they perceive and interact with the world. These experiences are transformative because they shift how the world is seen and valued. At the same time, they support cognitive learning, such as science education, which can then be connected to everyday life experiences (Pugh et al., 2017).

The arts, storytelling and symbolic meaning-making offer valuable ways to understand how individuals shape their knowledge and perceptions of reality, with 'imagination to be central to sense-making' (Galafassi et al., 2018, p. 2). Galafassi et al. (2018) have emphasised that visions are central in transformative strategies because they allow the exploration, redefinition and connection of social-ecological realities to inspire hope and guide action. Indeed, they draw on and reshape social imaginaries by introducing new narratives and possibilities, influencing how societies collectively perceive and strive for a better future.

Everyday behaviours and practices are, to some extent, shaped by life visions – by the ideas held about how to exist and coexist. These visions are in constant dialogue and conflict, balancing individual aspirations with collective ones and personal values with dominant societal narratives. This dynamic influences how individuals interact with themselves, others and the world around them. The field of social psychology proposes a theory highlighting that behaviours, attitudes and self-concept are shaped mainly by social influences, suggesting that change requires collective, not just individual, action (Jackson, 2005).

However, the current dominant cultural ethos is offering visions and narratives that are contradictory. Placing a high value on competition, individual accomplishment, economic achievement and overconsumption conflicts not only with the planet's ecological limits and the well-being of all life forms, but also with scientific knowledge. For example, these narratives can be seen in marketing, which may create needs and wants that were not necessarily aspired to in the first place, as well as an existential model where accumulation is seen as desirable. Even though some are cautious about drawing definitive conclusions on this (Šprajc et al., 2023), other studies suggest that marketing, particularly to children

and adolescents, plays a significant role in shaping consumer behaviours, influencing not only their purchasing choices but also their perceptions of success and happiness (Calvert, 2008; Hoffmann, 2019).

Not only does this dominant ethos create societal and cultural codes, but it also shapes them in a way that makes individuals find them attractive and desirable. This issue becomes even more complex because this dominant ethos encourages people to maintain their lifestyles by adopting, for example, 'green' consumption practices. The underlying problem, however, is the existential question of how to live. While 'green' choices might look sustainable, they generally fail to change overconsumption patterns and may even cause more harm to the planet. In addition, the sole concentration on carbon footprints distracts attention from other significant environmental impacts, reinforcing an impression that 'green' consumption is enough, though broader systemic and ontological change is required (Rau and Edmondson, 2022). This can be illustrated with a short thought experiment: what if humanity found an infinite source of energy that caused no harm to anything? What would remain of the planet, assuming no shift in the socio-cultural ethos? With infinite clean energy, raw materials extraction and consumerism could amplify on an unprecedented scale, meaning that while it might deal with one facet of sustainability, it would not solve the deeper issues rooted in cultural values – such as prioritising growth and consumption over harmony and well-being, individualism over planetary citizenship.

This cultural ethos, which to a large extent shapes the way of life of the Global North population, is closely tied to the lock-in effect, a theory used to describe society's dependency on carbon-based energy systems (Goldstein et al., 2023). This dominance, referring to energy systems, is described by Eitan and Hekkert (2023) as 'a common explanation' for 'the self-perpetuating inertia created by these systems, inhibiting efforts to introduce alternative energy technologies' (p. 1); in this article's context, these narratives are so ingrained in society that they make it difficult for people to imagine or pursue alternative lifestyles that prioritise well-being and find alternative ways of existing.

To fulfil the goals of eco-social learning and reduce resistance to change, this dominant cultural ethos must be transformed into one aligned with the principles of planetary citizenship theory (Salonen et al., 2024). In essence, eco-social education goes beyond teaching environmental issues – it must become embedded within the school's or any community's cultural ethos, as a primary driver of transformation and designed for collective change, much like the cultural embeddedness described by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986). In other words, socially communicated or imposed conflicting visions, messages and narratives should be avoided to sustain congruence and meaningful learning. Instead, efforts should focus on creating a holistic whole where eco-social education principles seamlessly integrate with the everyday lives of people. The concept of 'milieu', as described earlier, captures this idea. The overall atmosphere and feel of a shared environment – shaped by physical space, social dynamics and organisational culture, including hierarchy and power dynamics – significantly influence how individuals experience and grow within that setting (Smith, 2005). Thus, it should be designed to create opportunities for social inclusion, growth and learning, enabling individuals to develop a sense of belonging, regardless of their background (Smith, 2012). Here, the cultural ethos can be understood as offering enabling conditions that shape, foster and sustain collective change.

Building deep transformational foundations requires a multidimensional approach, as described by Cotton and Winter, who have distinguished between learning about, in or for the environment. This includes a "personal environmental ethic"; the values and attitudes that motivate behavioural change in favour of the environment ... participatory and inclusive education processes, transdisciplinary cooperation, experiential learning, and the use of the environment and community as learning resources' (Cotton and Winter, 2010, p. 41). Extending this framework, learning within the environment takes on a more immersive quality, focusing on the creation of intentional 'spaces' that cultivate and encourage togetherness, collaboration, diversity, creativity, emotions, sensitivity and critical thinking. This approach empowers people to engage meaningfully within the world, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity within communities, which is essential for facilitating the deep change necessary to live differently as planetary citizens (de Carvalho, 2022).

In Table 1, I illustrate how the shift towards transformation – using meat consumption as an example – can be supported through cultural transformation by offering an alternative narrative that could be considered preferable, and by providing the enabling conditions to fulfil it with concrete actions – in other words, implementing eco-social values in practice; and if those values are not yet fully developed, the cultural ethos and its enabling conditions can play a role in shaping them. For example, reducing meat consumption could be supported by highlighting vegan-friendly products in mainstream shops,

promoting trendy vegan restaurants or presenting plant-based diets as a preferable option in school cafeterias.

Table 1. Stages of cultural ethos transformation and their connection to social imaginaries, grounded in planetary citizenship theory, using meat consumption as an example

Stage	Cultural ethos	Underlying social imaginary	Justification/reasoning	Enabling conditions	Concrete examples	Theoretical grounding	Consequences
Status quo	'Eating meat is natural and the only way.'	Dominated by anthropocentric worldviews: humans are separate from and superior to nature.	Meat consumption is normalised through tradition, cultural identity and the perception of necessity.	Cultural reinforcement through tradition, lack of awareness of ecological consequences.	Traditional meals centred on meat; cultural celebrations with animal-based dishes.	Reflects a pre-planetary citizenship perspective, where ecological interdependence is unrecognised.	Continued environmental degradation, normalised unsustainable practices.
Eco-social crisis awareness	'We must transition to other eating consumption models and reduce animal products because we can no longer eat meat.'	A shifting social imaginary that recognises ecological interdependence, planetary boundaries and shared responsibility.	Ethical and environmental awareness drives the transition, framed as a necessary response to planetary crises.	Scientific evidence of ecological and ethical harm, public awareness campaigns, policy interventions and advocacy.	Labelled products in stores (for example, vegan, cruelty-free certifications), vegan challenges, influencer-led movements and new vegan food options in restaurants and schools.	Grounded in planetary citizenship theory: awareness of global interdependence and shared responsibility.	Growing public consciousness around sustainable food choices.
Transformed vision	'Other consumption models are inherently more beneficial and attractive.'	A new social imaginary that reimagines relationships with nature, rooted in ethical responsibility, harmony and well-being.	Plant-based diet is embraced as part of a sustainable and ethical lifestyle aligned with planetary well-being.	Cultivation of new social norms, values and practices, with widespread access to and prioritisation of plant-based alternatives.	Vegan-friendly products highlighted in mainstream shops, trendy vegan restaurants.	Embodies planetary citizenship theory: builds the necessary capacities, values and practices.	Widespread adoption of plant-based diets, systemic shift towards more sustainable, ethical food production and consumption.

One field of expertise, expressive arts therapy – a specific branch among the many art therapy approaches – focuses on exploring how the arts can drive transformation at both individual and societal levels, offering valuable insights for deep transformational foundations with potential for scalability. While traditionally centred on therapy, the principles and practices of expressive arts therapy have also been applied to engage communities, inspire social action and support meaningful social transformation (Levine and Levine, 2011). It is important to distinguish this from therapeutic practices, as the focus here is not on healing or clinical intervention, but on leveraging the insights from this field to deepen the understanding of social and transformative learning, as well as societal change.

As has been discussed, the dominant cultural ethos maintains a status quo through which meaningful change does not usually occur; therefore, there is a need to explore mechanisms that can challenge and reimagine this cultural framework. Furthermore, the role of nature and the arts in shaping our collective cultural narratives has often been overlooked. The theoretical framework of expressive arts therapy holds interesting potential in this regard. In the following section, I will discuss the knowledge and practices that can be applied in eco-social learning and planetary citizenship, giving an actionable model for translating these concepts.

Insights from expressive arts therapy on using the arts for transformation

In the 1970s, expressive arts therapy emerged as a distinct field, founded by pioneers such as Shaun McNiff and Paolo Knill, through the skilled integration of insights from psychology, anthropology, sociology, ecology, philosophy, neuroscience and psychopathology, supported by a growing body of empirical studies that continue to enrich its practices and development.

By integrating the best insights from these diverse fields, a comprehensive approach that harnessed the transformative potential of the arts was developed. This approach has since been applied across various domains, including therapy, education, supervision and research, gaining international recognition. More recently, the field has expanded through the incorporation of ecotherapy, leading to nature-based practices that further enhance the connection between individuals and the environment, as well as into the social field (Atkins and Snyder, 2017; Levine and Levine, 2011; McNiff, 2009).

The arts in this context are employed within a specific framework to facilitate transformation, leading to change in individuals, situations or socio-cultural contexts. According to expressive arts therapy, creating change through the arts requires integrating and combining several key elements, such as poesis, rituals, phenomenology, space, enabling conditions and a well-grounded philosophical and theoretical foundation (Levine and Levine, 1999, 2011).

The processes of change in individuals remain under-researched and are still difficult to understand fully, much like in the field of psychotherapy, where outcome research has been more focused on measurable results to inform policy (de Witte et al., 2021). Change in therapeutic settings is multifaceted – spanning cognitive, behavioural, emotional and physiological dimensions – and can occur at various levels, from individual to socio-cultural (de Witte et al., 2021). This complexity highlights the difficulty in identifying the exact mechanisms of change. However, by understanding transformation through the lens of ‘morphogenesis’, we can view change not as a single event, but as an ongoing, dynamic process that unfolds over time, driven by a variety of cultural and social factors that interact and evolve through a continuous process of adaptation and learning (Vandenbroeck, 2017). Furthermore, change can also occur through ‘aha moments’ or ‘epiphanies’ – moments of lived experience in which sudden awareness and revelation lead to transformation (McGovern, 2021), both of which happen in expressive arts therapy (Knill et al., 2005). Despite the challenges in understanding the nature of change and transformation, the potential of expressive arts therapy offers valuable insights that could be adapted and scaled up for broader applications, which I will outline in more detail below.

Expressive arts therapy’s approach connects to planetary citizenship theory and eco-social education by promoting an understanding of individuals as part of a larger, interconnected ecological system where individuals can explore and embody the values essential for planetary citizenship. This approach encourages a shift in awareness, fostering sensitivity, empathy, a sense of shared responsibility and of belongingness (de Carvalho, 2022). The arts alone are not sufficient to foster meaningful transformation; the integration and combination of the different elements of the framework, along with its underlying philosophy, enables lasting change. This holistic approach helps individuals and communities navigate the complexities of socio-cultural dynamics, transforming perceptions and behaviours in ways that make the arts more than just a means of expression. Without delving deeply into the philosophical and theoretical framework of expressive arts therapy, I will highlight the key points that are relevant to this article.

Embodied dialogue and aesthetic engagement: bridging phenomenology, the arts and eco-social transformation

As a foundational philosophical framework, expressive arts therapy grounds its view of human existence within phenomenology – a non-dualistic approach in which humans are seen to exist in a relational realm, one of embodied experiences (Knill et al., 2005). In this view, human beings do not exist in isolation but are part of an interconnected web of relationships with their environment, others and themselves, experiencing and communicating with the world through the body and the senses, as it is through sensory existence that individuals respond to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

The approach emphasises the importance of engaging in dialogue with the 'otherness' – whether that be nature, different perspectives or aspects of the self – fostering a sense of 'presence', 'openness' and 'acceptance' (de Carvalho, 2022; Knill et al., 2005). This deeper awareness of interconnectedness is essential for shifting the mindset towards eco-social transformation. It involves recognising that transformation occurs through the understanding that otherness is an integral part of the self, fostering acceptance and understanding of oneself and of others. This view supports those from eco-socialisation theory, where ecology and phenomenology intersect in socialisation processes (Keto and Foster, 2021); planetary citizenship theory, where the separation between humans and the rest of nature dissolves (Salonen et al., 2024); and research showing that human health and the environment are tightly interconnected (Tyrväinen et al., 2024).

In this framework, an ontological perspective is proposed, fostering awareness of interconnectedness by offering a way to relate to and connect with life's phenomena, and also providing a means to communicate through the arts. Here, the arts offer a sensory approach to being attuned to the world in a dialogical manner, where each art form and expression engages the individual holistically and in its entirety. This idea is central to the concept of intermodality, the use of different art forms that highlights how artistic practices activate multiple senses, allowing the body to serve as a dynamic centre of perception, expression and connection (Levine and Levine, 2011). For example, to write a poem, one must first be open and present to life's phenomena without judgement and be 'willing to let go of ... [an] initial idea' in order to 'be open to what will arrive' (Levine, 2005, p. 40). This openness in turn enables exploration and a deeper connection to the phenomena through emotional and sensory engagement. The poem produced from this encounter and dialogue is referred to as *poiesis* in the field – a way of knowing through making. It brings new knowledge to the world that could not be attained through any other means, serving as 'an extension and development of the basic capacity of human beings to shape their world' (Levine and Levine, 2011, p. 23). This process through the arts facilitates the integration and activation of diverse forms of knowledge, allowing individuals to expand their ability to understand and actively shape the world around them (Leavy, 2015; Sullivan, 2010). Here, the process of socialisation is extended by incorporating imaginative and creative capacities that enable individuals to engage with complexity, embrace life phenomena and develop deeper emotional and sensory connections to the world into a meaning-building dialogue.

Drawing on the works of Dewey (1934) and Berleant (1991, 1992, 2010), Schröder (2017) has argued that human experience is deeply embedded in the environment through a constant exchange between the perceiver and perceived. Furthermore, she points out that this exchange is not just cognitive but also aesthetic, with the perception of the environment influenced by sensory and emotional experiences. Schröder underscores the importance of environmental aesthetics in bridging the gap between nature and humanity, suggesting that viewing the world through an aesthetic lens fosters a closer, more profound connection, which in turn influences decision-making and ways to exist. This aesthetic consciousness and engagement may help individuals become attuned to the beauty and intricacies of the world, which is critical in cultivating a cultural ethos that values the environment not just as a resource, as an issue or as being 'outside', but also as an integral part of life's beauty and meaning that must be protected and cherished.

Scaling up expressive arts therapy: enabling conditions for transformation

In expressive arts therapy, enabling conditions are necessary for an individual to engage in transformative processes. One such condition is a safe environment where individuals feel free to explore new ideas, emotions and identities. This space is also referred to as a 'good enough space' or a 'holding environment', as introduced by Winnicott (1965, 1971/2005) and Rogers (2007), and emphasises the importance of an empathetic relationship between the patient and the therapist. In a therapeutic context, creating space for individuals to engage without fear of judgement is essential. A good enough space is directly tied to social justice and inclusion, where everyone has the opportunity to belong and engage equally within a group, community and society. Someone struggling to meet their basic needs will find it difficult to listen to a privileged group member lecturing about environmental issues. In eco-social learning, creating such spaces on a broader societal scale is key to fostering both personal and collective transformation (de Carvalho, 2022). Just as expressive arts therapy empowers individuals to navigate

challenges and build resilience through peer support, the socio-cultural framework must provide spaces that foster inclusivity and social empowerment, ensuring not only that individuals are heard but also that they actively engage in shaping their realities. The focus is not art for art's sake, but a socially engaged arts approach that connects creativity to social change, as Hatton (2020) points out, deepening frameworks such as critical race theory, intersectionality and gender studies.

Engaging in transformative processes can be particularly challenging when individuals struggle emotionally or mentally. Emotional instability and stress are significant factors that can disrupt the learning process (Córdova et al., 2023). Today, sources of stress are overwhelmingly present in daily life, ranging from global issues such as wars and environmental catastrophes to more immediate social factors, such as the unequal distribution of power and resources (Hess et al., 2014). In therapy, the holding space is created to be accessible and especially designed for healing and transformation, helping individuals face the outside world with greater resilience – something the external environment often fails to provide.

In the expressive arts therapy framework, enabling conditions include both physical and intangible elements. The physical conditions involve a space adapted for creativity and inspiration, offering opportunities for imagination, creation and the letting go of 'habitual ways of seeing and becoming sensitive to other materials and parameters of shaping' (Knill et al., 2005, p. 98). The intangible conditions include empathy and acceptance, which allow individuals to be themselves and explore freely. This space fosters vulnerability, diversity and even oddness, embracing these qualities as essential to the creative process, where freedom and security lay the foundation for authentic expression and being. These conditions are further facilitated through various practices, one of which is the use of rituals.

Rituals are integral to individuals' and communities' everyday lives, serving as the fabric of social life (Boström, 2021). While these rituals vary based on cultural background, they can include practices such as brushing your teeth in the morning, removing your shoes when entering a home or shaking hands when greeting others. Rituals can also take a more emotional and spiritual stance, such as formal ceremonies. Rituals are essential in framing one's life in a safe and meaningful manner and creating shared experiences and collective meanings. Boström (2021) discusses how rituals contribute to a sense of belonging and social solidarity and how the need for social connections often outweighs the environmental impact of these practices. For instance, people may continue engaging in consumption rituals, such as buying new clothes for social events, because maintaining relationships is seen as more important than ecological consequences.

In relation to expressive arts therapy, rituals help regulate emotions by providing structure and focus, emotional support and safety, healthy ways to cope, community and group cohesion, a sense of purpose and meaning, and support for individuals during grief and transitions, and they facilitate recovery and resilience for trauma survivors (Ward, 2022). Ward (2022) uses the concept of threshold ritual to refer to structured actions that mark the beginning and end of a session, guiding the transition between everyday reality and the therapeutic space for healing and transformation. These rituals can range from simple acts, such as lighting a candle, to creating personalised rituals through creative practice that hold meaningful significance for the individual.

In the context of eco-social learning, rituals (for example, community activities such as tree planting or environmental events) can create a deeper connection to ecological issues with a sense of social cohesion. Such rituals not only encourage a mutual sense of commitment towards sustainability but also help forge closer community bonds through meaningful, shared experiences that connect people to the environment and each other. Individuals develop a deeper understanding of their role within the broader ecological system by engaging in such rituals, promoting collective action. These rituals must be supported by a socio-cultural ethos, where cultural values and social norms shape and reinforce the collective commitment to sustainability, while letting go of outdated narratives and values that are no longer suitable.

In Table 2, I summarise the scalability of expressive arts therapy to broader socio-cultural and educational frameworks.

Expressive arts therapy's emphasis on phenomenology, rituals, aesthetic consciousness and safe spaces offers a compelling framework to build a broader cultural ethos that can support eco-social learning and enable transformation towards planetary citizenship. The knowledge from the field offers valuable insights into the different elements needed to bring about this change, where the arts on their own might not be enough.

Table 2. Scalability of expressive arts therapy principles in eco-social learning for shaping a new cultural ethos

Concepts from expressive arts therapy	Application in eco-social learning	Contribution to new cultural ethos	Potential impact for transformation	Concrete examples
Phenomenology	Focuses on lived experiences, sensing the world in an embodied way. Encourages deep reflection on the interconnectedness of all life forms and ecological systems. Encourages dialogue with life phenomena with openness and no prejudice.	Reconnects individuals with their environment; fosters empathy and understanding through personal and collective experiences.	Cultivates a sense of belonging to the planet, supporting transformative learning that nurtures a deeper connection to nature.	Choices based on the understanding of planetary citizenship (political, institutional, educational, etc.).
Space	Creates a supportive, non-judgemental environment where individuals can explore new ways of thinking and being. Safe spaces allow for vulnerability and openness to new ideas.	Encourages freedom to explore and imagine alternative ways of living, offering a sanctuary where people in their diversity can challenge deeply ingrained norms (for example, consumerism, individualism).	New norms and practices may emerge, including ethical ways of living.	Places/possibilities allowing people to gather in their diversity, be together, share ideas and have opportunities to be heard and have the power to influence.
Arts	The use of art forms as a way to express and process emotions, stimulate new perspectives and explore solutions. Art as a dialogue and path to bring up new knowledge. The arts as a way to be touched.	The arts fosters innovation in addressing eco-social problems and helps break down conventional thinking. The arts provide symbolic, meaningful and practical solutions.	Empowers individuals to create and act in the world in more sustainable, ethical, community-oriented ways. Enables individuals to see, feel, understand and learn differently.	Enhancing the use of arts and artists across various sectors, with increased funding focused on this, for example, arts-based workshops with politicians to help decision-making.
Aesthetic consciousness	Engaging with beauty and harmony through art fosters deeper emotional connections to environmental and social issues. Encourages seeing the world in more sensitive and aesthetic terms.	Heightens awareness of environmental aesthetics, making nature more emotionally resonant and relatable.	Inspires individuals to advocate for sustainability through a profound appreciation of beauty in nature and culture.	Designing spaces such as classrooms or cities accordingly, for example, banning or reducing advertisements.
Rituals	Help to mark transitions, celebrate change and strengthen collective identity and cohesion. Rituals help establish new cultural norms.	Help in creating community-based eco-social practices, reinforcing sustainable and collective behaviours through symbolic and meaningful acts.	Can embed sustainable practices into daily life, fostering a culture of eco-social responsibility.	Earth Day rituals, such as tree planting. Collective art-making processes that celebrate environmental change, such as festivals. Rituals around seasonal changes.

Conclusion and discussion

Questions of narratives, values and visions are essential to addressing the eco-social crisis, but they are too often excluded from global discussions. However, the dominant cultural ethos forms the foundation that influences our behaviours and decisions – how to live on the planet. Without critically questioning

this underlying ethos, there is a risk that future decisions – whether political or institutional – may fail to address the crisis adequately. While current debates often focus on improving existing practices and technologies, they frequently overlook profound existential questions (Heikkurinen, 2019) about what constitutes a good life and how to live within the planet's ecological limits. For example, practices aimed at 'greening' our actions to preserve current lifestyles are shown to be unattainable, even incompatible with the preservation of our planet (Laininen, 2019; Parrique et al., 2019).

Furthermore, social inequalities are as urgent a problem as environmental limits and are deeply connected to sustainability. Only by confronting these disparities can a truly sustainable world be possible. However, there is a risk that these transformational practices may remain exclusive to privileged settings, reinforcing Global North perspectives and excluding marginalised communities. The Global South must be involved in these discussions. Planetary citizenship is about belonging, embracing diversity and strengthening communities to create a just and sustainable future for all. Social pedagogy has much to offer in fostering inclusion, participation and community-building. Equally, it should also recognise sustainability as a social issue and understand that ecological and human well-being are intrinsically connected. The socio-cultural ethos must reflect these values, not only in rhetoric but also in concrete actions, beyond tokenism (Hatton, 2020).

The fundamental question of what is desirable must also be explored in order to shift from an individualist, consumerist and extractivist cultural ethos to one where alternative ways of existence can be explored. One simple yet powerful example can encapsulate this: is it preferable to see stars in the night sky or have the night skies polluted with artificial advertisement lights? Shifting away from this dominant ethos is not easy, as individual and societal transformation is a complex and multifaceted process. At the same time, the intentional removal of those advertisements may contribute to changing the societal cultural ethos in ways that can motivate a new way of being in which stars take their place and value. Such questions raise the need for cultural introspection and a change in values to guide our decisions and actions, in which the arts and enabling conditions play a significant role.

In this article, I aimed to create a new understanding and theoretical perspective on how the arts, using the framework of expressive arts therapy, can facilitate transformative eco-social learning towards planetary citizenship and how this framework can be scaled up beyond therapy to broader contexts. My question was: how can arts-based practices and the cultivation of a cultural ethos together foster transformative eco-social learning in the context of the global ecological crisis?

Insights from expressive arts therapy highlight that fully harnessing the transformative potential of the arts requires combining specific elements into a specific ethos. These include a phenomenological view of existence as a foundation where the interconnectedness of all things is recognised, enabling conditions characterised by a safe and convivial space where everyone's voice is heard and valued, as well as practices such as rituals to guide concrete actions. The arts play a pivotal role in fostering transformation by enabling embodied dialogue with life phenomena and cultivating sensitivity and aesthetic consciousness, inspiring alternative narratives.

This article highlights that learning and socialisation processes are not only cognitive but also emerge through emotional, meaningful and aesthetic connections to life phenomena, thereby expanding the understanding of eco-social learning. This connection fosters deeper engagement with the world, which in turn facilitates a transformative shift towards planetary citizenship. The role of the arts, with their sensuous, aesthetic and holistic dimensions, should be further explored and considered in our understanding and making of the world.

This article contributes to the field of social pedagogy and transformative learning by offering a new theoretical perspective on the role of the arts, particularly in the framework of expressive arts therapy. It provided insights into how this approach can be scaled up beyond therapeutic settings to broader socio-cultural contexts, advancing knowledge on eco-social learning and its potential for promoting systemic change. However, even with insights into the scope of transformation needed, problems and limitations remain, such as resistance to change and institutional constraints. Transformation also depends on shifts in policy, economic structures and social frameworks. Finally, a critical question arises: who decides what change looks like? Enabling conditions must be democratically created in an inclusive manner beyond privileged spaces.

Further research might be done through empirical studies on how changes in the environment and shared narratives, whether in a city or a school, influence individuals and collective behaviours, values and the greater cultural ethos – for instance, exploring the effects of removing advertisements in urban spaces and showcasing instead something that supports planetary citizenship values, and whether these

actions foster planetary citizenship. Alternatively, the effect of the arts in creating an ethos compatible with the planet could be studied by exploring tools or methodologies to better understand and measure the emotional, aesthetic and embodied dimensions of transformation and learning through the arts.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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