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Using eco-social justice to develop a continuous professional development workshop exploring how education for sustainable development can be embedded into early childhood education and social care courses in South East Technological University, Ireland

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Abstract

Social pedagogy is grounded in the belief that education can drive meaningful and lasting change in society. Traditionally focused on human relationships and mutual care, social pedagogy is now being extended to include our relationship with the planet and its ecosystems. Eco-social justice highlights the dangers of prioritising economic growth at the expense of human rights and environmental sustainability as it leads to

ecological degradation and deepening economic inequalities. We propose eco-social justice as a lens through which climate change, and its broader social impacts, can be understood as a pressing issue for early childhood education and social care work in Ireland. Our initiative responds to the urgent need to reframe the climate crisis beyond an environmental concern to a social justice concern. Increasingly, educators are expected to help students connect global challenges, such as sustainability, inequality and justice, with their future professional roles. This article outlines the conceptual foundation for a continuous professional development workshop developed for academics in early childhood education and social care at South East Technological University. The workshop offered participants a space to reflect on their existing knowledge, attitudes and practices related to eco-social justice and education for sustainable development. It encouraged dialogue around how these themes are currently integrated into course content and their enhanced embeddedness. The workshop was analysed as part of a Master of Arts in Teaching and Leaning, and because of ethical and academic constraints, participant insights cannot be shared at this time.

Keywords education for sustainable development; early childhood education; social care work; social pedagogy; continuing professional development; eco-social justice; planetary citizenship

Introduction

As inhabitants of this planet, humans are in an interdependent relationship with the environment. However, we now live 'in the midst of a planetary emergency of our own making' (Dixson-Declève et al., 2022, p. 1). International organisations, non-governmental organisations and academics have been sounding the alarm about the planetary emergency for decades. Nevertheless, despite increased awareness and education concerning climate change and the destruction of the natural world, we continue to engage in activities that contribute to further significant environmental issues (Sterling, 2011). Human behaviour is changing global weather patterns, depleting freshwater systems, exhausting fish stocks and causing detrimental damage to agricultural land. This results in resource conflicts, mass migration, famine and disease, which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups nationally and internationally (Collins and Garrity, 2023; Stephens, 2024). Addressing our deepening climate crisis will require global political, interdisciplinary, community and individual responses at both the macro and micro levels (Powers et al., 2018).

Since the 1970s, international policy to combat climate change has highlighted the significant role that education must play in addressing the climate crisis. Most recently, Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015) emphasised how education can address climate change and create a more sustainable future. The European Strategy for Universities (European Commission, 2022) positions universities as vehicles to address the climate crisis by equipping students with the skills necessary to create a more sustainable world through green research, technological solutions and social innovations that promote active citizenship.

There are growing calls for academics to adopt more creative and transformative educational approaches to shift the cognitive and values paradigm that brings about fundamental behavioural changes. Schumacher (1997) and Stephens (2024) both suggest educational activities that extend students' awareness of the interconnection between life choices and the natural world, which pushes them beyond surface-level understanding and promotes their deeper connection with nature and the world around them. Currently, there is a research void about how Irish early childhood education (ECE) and social care work (SCW) academics understand the climate crisis and its non-ecological impacts. So, there is uncertainty about how this influences their choice of teaching pedagogies or whether ECE and SCW academics intend to increase their students' awareness of, and need to respond to, the climate crisis.

The *Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development* (Government of Ireland, 2022) provides a framework to support Irish formal and informal education sectors to integrate the principles and practices needed to develop a more sustainable future. To deliver on this framework, South East Technological University's (SETU) *Strategic Plan: Connecting for Impact* (SETU, 2023) has embedded the essence of education for sustainable development (ESD) into its Strategic Objective 5, which relates to the curriculum, and Strategic Objective 9, which relates to sustainable development. The university aims to ensure its courses reflect sustainability, civic responsibility and active community engagement. We wanted to examine how SETU's ECE and SCW courses currently align with these strategic objectives.

Given their work with society's most vulnerable citizens, ECE and SCW graduates must understand how economic growth and mass consumerism impact both the environment and disadvantaged communities. Therefore, ECE and SCW academics must think about their role in promoting sustainability and addressing environmental injustice during initial professional education, so that graduates bring these perspectives into their practice. To achieve this, academics must develop key knowledge and skills in areas such as eco-social justice, planetary citizenship and sustainable development (Ketelaar, 2003; Monte and Reis, 2021). We contend that our and all ECE and SCW courses need 'greening'. We see embedding the principles of eco-social justice into our courses as a starting point for this 'greening' (Dominelli, 2018; Powers et al., 2018). To begin this 'greening' journey, we developed a continuing professional development (CPD) workshop that aimed to deepen academics' knowledge and understanding of eco-social justice and ESD. Eco-social justice can be used as a transformational educational framework that encourages people to examine their *Haltung* (Charfe and Gardner, 2020), challenge the current status quo, and move towards a more fair and sustainable society by building connections and relationships with each other and the natural world.

Our work context

For the benefit of our international audience, we will outline our work context – the education of ECE and SCW professionals in Ireland – before presenting the conceptual background of our workshop. We are academics teaching across two full-time initial professional education courses – a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education and Practice and a Bachelor of Arts in Professional Social Care on two campuses of SETU. In Ireland, ECE and SCW education require academic validation by Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI, 2019) and regulatory approval by the Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB, 2021) and Social Care Workers Registration Board (SCWRB, 2017a), respectively. As expected from initial professional education, students are provided with academic and practice learning environments so that they can acquire and use the types of knowledge necessary to succeed in graduate-level employment. The contents of both courses are guided by national educational and regulatory policies (QAB, 2021; QQI, 2019; QQIQAB, 2021; SCWRB, 2017a, 2017b), as well as profession-specific knowledge requirements.

Early childhood education

Around the world, ECE is understood as the learning that occurs before children begin primary school. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2019) views high-quality ECE as a global priority because it helps build the skills people need to reduce inequality and create more peaceful, thriving communities. Target 4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) focuses on ensuring that all children have access to high-quality early education, which prepares them for primary school. To achieve this, Ireland offers a universal early childhood care and education scheme for children aged between two years and eight months old and five years and six months old. This scheme delivers Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2024), a specially developed curriculum for ECE. In addition to emphasising the need for children to connect with and understand their environment, Aistear also highlights the importance of adopting sustainable living practices from an early age. Thus, creating a strong systemic emphasis on social justice, equity and social responsibility.

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Social care work

Irish SCW is not as neatly organised as ECE in terms of state responsibility, nor is its link to ESD as delineated. Social Care Ireland (2025) recognise 'respect for the dignity of clients; social justice; and empowerment of clients to achieve their full potential' as core principles of SCW.

The focus of SCW is on meeting the psychosocial 'needs' of service users (Share and Lalor, 2009). However, over the past decade, there has been ongoing discussions about the need for SCW to look beyond individual care and pay more attention to broader social issues (Byrne-Lancaster, 2014). Maintaining the traditional focus of 'care' prevents SCW from tackling the deeper, systemic causes of inequality in areas such as education, health and social policy, which also allows environmental, structural and ecological dimensions of inequality to be overlooked (Dominelli, 2018; Mulkeen, 2023).

Review of current SCW and ECE qualification and regulatory frameworks concerning sustainability and the climate crisis

CORU is the regulatory body whose responsibility is to oversee health and social care professionals in Ireland. They also play a pivotal role in ensuring that social care degree courses prepare students to become safe, ethical and competent practitioners. This is done via the Social Care Registration Board, which has several key responsibilities, including setting the standards of proficiency. These outline the core knowledge, skills and professional behaviours that graduates must demonstrate to register as a SCW and practise (SCWRB, 2017b). While the standards of proficiency cover a wide range of professional competencies, they currently do not reference sustainability.

This lack of clarity in SCW is mirrored within ECE, where the current qualification criteria (QQI, 2019) focus on a graduate's internalised personal worldview, but does not sufficiently address ESD or climate justice as curricular issues. Collins and Garrity (2023) argue that the lack of clear guidance or frameworks for incorporating ESD into ECE entry-level qualifications in Ireland leaves graduates unprepared to educate young children about the impact of climate crisis, thus making real change more difficult. Considering Giroux (2009) expounded that education should not simply reflect existing structures but challenge them, we contend that current regularity frameworks for both professions reinforce dominant ideologies by focusing on individual responsibility and micro-level intervention. As documents informing current course content fall short on ESD, we suggest that graduates are poorly equipped to challenge environmental injustice or help children think critically about the climate crisis thereby compromising Ireland's capacity to comprehensively achieve a broader range of the sustainable development goals beyond Target 4.2. This highlights an urgent need to reimagine professional education through a more critical, social-justice-orientated lens.

The history and development of social pedagogy and eco-social justice as educational frameworks

Social pedagogy is a social science with a rich history across continental Europe, Nordic countries, and Latin America dating back to the mid-1900s (Eichsteller, 2023). It is 'the ability to recognise and reduce power imbalances and work alongside people more humanely' (Charfe and Gardner, 2020, p. 3). It is frequently adopted within the education sector to highlight and address societal issues that create inequality and dysfunction. As a discipline, it attempts to harmonise individualism and personal autonomy with the needs of society as a collective, and it seeks to empower individuals to take charge of their future (Hämäläinen, 2014). Eco-social justice as a framework emerged within social pedagogy during the 1990s and 2000s as global concerns around environmental degradation and social inequality increasingly intersected (Hämäläinen, 2013).

Eco-social justice as a framework for transformative education and change

In their pursuit of progress, humans have used a 'cycle of domination' (Horkheminer and Adorno, 1944/2002) whereby they dominated each other and the natural world around them. Modern societies have learned to control and use nature rather than living in balance with it, humans treat nature as something to be dominated, exploited and controlled, which in turn severs their connection to the natural world. Such disconnection can lead to feelings of anxiety, hopelessness and confusion, especially when facing large-scale issues such as climate change. By becoming more self-reflective and adopting a more critical perspective about their interconnectedness with the natural world, humans can break the cycle of domination.

Parra Ramajo and Prat Bau (2024) propose that ecological and social injustices disproportionately affect vulnerable communities and ecosystems due to human activity and global capitalist development. Neglecting to take account of the human rights of vulnerable and marginalised people undermines the future of sustainable development. A successful perspective of sustainability must be rooted in equality, inclusiveness and respect for human dignity (Lark, 2023). As a framework, eco-social justice encourages humans to slow the pace of technology-driven industries and focus on valuing traditional knowledge, local cultures and ways of living (Bowers, 2002). Eco-social justice provides an anthropological critical lens for educational policymakers, educators and communities to challenge entrenched power structures and adopt more equitable and sustainable modes of living (Agyeman et al., 2016; Bowers, 2002).

Change: social justice and critical thinking

Although sustainable development has become more prevalent as a concept within education, it remains secondary to the broader economic and political objectives of education that continue to serve the interests of capitalist economies (López-López et al., 2021). Marcuse (1964) hypothesised that capitalist societies have created a 'one-dimensional' mode of thought that suppresses critical and ecological consciousness, thereby limiting individuals' ability to perceive and respond meaningfully to environmental degradation. Wolff and Ehrström (2020) argue that the education system can reinforce inequality based on socio-economic status, race and ethnicity. As a result, the reproduction of dominant ways of living continues, and these become significant contributors to unsustainability and the continued overconsumption of the planet's natural resources (Salönen et al., 2023). To counteract this ideological reproduction, Bowers (2002) calls on educators to support students in developing an understanding of how historically embedded beliefs have led to ideologies and practices that have fragmented human relationships and contributed to the destruction of the natural world thus empowering students to question and transform their reality (Freire, 1970). Transformative education enables students to reflect on their political ideals, ethical frameworks, cultural awareness, and values. In doing so, transformative education significantly strengthens students' emotional connectedness to the dignity of other people and places (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009), influencing their lifestyle and professional choices. In social pedagogical terms, transformative education enriches people's Haltung. For Bowers (2002), an education system that omits climate justice fails to provide a country's citizenship with the critical tools needed to address environmental oppression.

Citizenship for a sustainable future

The United Nations (2015) describes sustainable development as a balance between economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. To truly achieve this balance, there must be a revaluation (or re-evaluation) of what it means to be a citizen, and the obligations attached to citizenship. According to Monte and Reis (2021), education plays a pivotal role in bringing about change and nurturing the development of environmental citizens. An environmental citizen possesses the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes needed to be a change agent (Hadjichambis and Reis, 2020). For students to become agents of social change, they must develop critical thinking skills, communication skills, tenacity and creativity. They must also believe that their actions can change the world and empower others (Monte and Reis, 2021). Salönen et al. (2024) suggest that citizenship must include a sense of responsibility for

the planet and the ethical use of natural resources. This way of thinking calls for an education system that not only teaches facts but also helps students develop critical awareness and confidence to participate in shaping a fairer and more sustainable world (Sterling, 2011; Tilbury, 2011).

Within eco-social justice, citizenship is framed as 'planetary citizenship', which is concerned with helping people to see themselves not just as individuals or members of a town or country but as part of a global community living on one planet with limited resources that we all need to share and care for (Salönen et al., 2023). Being a planetary citizen means understanding interdependence and recognising that our actions affect not just our local communities, but also people and ecosystems around the world. A planetary citizen values all life, not just human life, promotes justice and works towards creating a world where resources are shared fairly. To promote planetary citizenship, Sharma (2023) advocates for education that moves beyond knowledge-based learning to include value-based learning.

Embedding collective action via planetary citizenships into curriculum design

Traditional educational approaches often emphasise individual achievement and national identity; however, planetary citizenship focuses on the interdependence between humans and all forms of life on this planet. Sharma (2023) and Salönen et al. (2024) both offer practical steps that educators can adopt to begin this journey towards planetary citizenship and collective action. Both emphasise the importance of encouraging students to be critical thinkers and call on students to act with the fundamental essence of Haltung: compassionate relationship building (Charfe and Gardner, 2020; Eichsteller, 2023).

Salönen et al. (2024) encourage educators to reframe the goals of education to include care of the planet and all its life forms, along with a sense of intergenerational responsibility. Cultivating this sense of belonging and teaching students to think in systems, enables them to develop a clear understanding of how local actions can have a global impact on different environmental and economic systems. Sharma (2023) highlights the need for students to understand nature as something that they are part of, not separate from or superior to. Our CPD workshop attends to the call for a physical opportunity and psychological space for reflective learning, deep thinking about our values, our place in the world and the consequences of our actions.

Our proposed capacity gaining workshop

We believe eco-social justice is a valuable concept for ECE and SCW academics to establish the inclusion of ESD into our curriculum as required by national (Government of Ireland, 2022) and local (SETU, 2023) policies. Our project adopted a social-ecological worldview emphasising how individuals, communities, cultures, societies, and economies are interconnected to the planet's ecosystem and biosphere. In Vygotskian terms (Vygotsky, 1978), our proposed workshop is a scaffolding opportunity to share our knowledge with colleagues and to co-construct ways to embed ESD into our ECE and SCW courses. We want to cultivate a liminal and sense-making space (Gray and Phillips, 2023) to collectively explore eco-social justice.

We end our article by providing an overview of the structure of the CPD workshop and outlining the workshop's evaluation methods. The CPD workshop aimed to give our colleagues a conceptual framework and designated time to consider the relevance of eco-social justice to their academic practice and explore how to embed it in course delivery. For us, the workshop had four key outcomes:

(1) Introduce the concept of eco-social justice to ECE and SCW academics.
(2) Identify academics' knowledge around sustainability and environmental issues.
(3) Examine current teaching strategies and how they address sustainability and environmental issues.
(4) Explore how eco-social justice and ESD can be embedded into ECE and SCW course content in a way that aligns with both professions' registration requirements and ethical guidelines.

The three-hour workshop included activities (art-based and interactive) and discussions. While this required a lot of planning and preparation, the creative approach taken in the workshop and the contemporary nature of the subject matter made it easy to recruit participants. The workshop was collaboratively designed and co-facilitated with an international social pedagogy expert. We used Inmark's (2010) three Ps – proper prior planning – to organise workshop content. Co-facilitators held

three preparatory meetings: two were conducted online via Teams and one in person. During this first meeting, we discussed the aims and objectives of the workshop and brainstormed potential activities that would create discussion. A PowerPoint presentation was developed before the second meeting which included key learning points and possible visual aids to use during the workshop. During the second planning session, we developed the schedule (Table 1) and finalised activities to be included on the day. A list of the resources and materials needed for the session was developed, and during the final meeting, we reviewed the workshop's running order and confirmed logistical details.

Table 1. CPD workshop schedule

Time	Content	Method
10.00	Welcome	Invite participants to say a little about themselves and something they are curious about learning today.
10.15	Outline of the session	Explain the workshop context for the session, reiterate ethical approval and consent. Explain what we are planning to explore and why we are talking about eco-social justice (donut).
10.30	Why does eco-social justice matter to you?	Curious questions – revealing mental models: 'When I am thinking about sustainability, I am thinking of …' Invite participants to position themselves in one of three corners that most reflect their association with sustainability: environmental, economic or social. Highlight that we all have different perspectives on sustainability. Draw out that eco-social justice matters because of the interconnection between these three perspectives.
11.15	Participant networking – Tea and coffee	
11.25	Participant-led reflection Free-writing exercise	Free-writing exercise: Reflect on what has been done before the break. Has this changed your thinking in any way? Do you feel any different about environmental issues?
11.30	Why eco-social justice matters to early years/ social care	Picasso: Divide into groups of three. Ask the groups to visualise why eco-social justice might be important to early years/social care professionals, and the people/communities that they support. No words allowed! After five minutes, change canvases. Spend three minutes on the second canvas and then spend three minutes on the third canvas. Reflection on how groups approached the task. How did they make sense of other groups' artwork? How did they feel about leaving their artwork to others? What were you talking and thinking about with regard to early years and social care?
12.20	Implications for what we teach students	Value continuum (position between *not at all* and *totally*): 1. Having explored this theme, do you see this as important for your curriculum? 2. To what extent are environmental issues integrated into your course/modules, learning outcomes, teaching strategies? 3. Do you see a place for this in your module? 4. Do you know the requirements of the *Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development* for third-level institutions and educators? 5. How familiar are you with Objectives 5 and 9 of SETU's strategic plan 2023–8? 6. Do you feel that you have a responsibility to these objectives in your modules? 7. Do you feel equipped to embed eco-social justice into your module?
12.35	Rosebud activity	In three groups, use the rosebud analogy to reflect on where is this integrated (blossom)? How could this be more integrated (buds)? Challenges for integration (thorns)? No reflection
12.50	Dice game for feedback round	Throw the dice and answer: 1. What is the most significant thing that you have learned? 2. List two things you can apply immediately. 3. What did you learn that surprised you? 4. Which part did you enjoy most? 5. What did you learn about yourself? 6. Throw again or choose a question to answer.
13.00	Thank you, next steps, lunch	

In line with the ethical approval given to the project, the lead author co-facilitated the workshop with the international expert and the second author acted as a note-taker, recording insights as they emerged. Evaluation of the workshop was gathered via Post-it notes, art, photographs, group activities and field notes. Interactive participation and emergent ideas promoted open dialogue between participants (Ørngreen and Levinsen, 2017). Workshop insights and evaluation were used as primary data in an Action Research project being undertaken by the lead author as part of the fulfilment of their master of arts in teaching and learning. It is intended to report on these in full in a subsequent publication; however, we can report that the workshop did provide participants with time and space to consider ways of responding to the call to action that the climate crisis demands. Its interactive nature allowed participants to be open and honest in their responses, which provided rich and detailed insights into their lived experiences. Sharing personal knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the climate crisis created a segue for participants to discuss their teaching practices and how unintentionally and indirectly ESD is attended to in the courses. From acquiring foundational knowledge and understanding of eco-social justice, participants recognised the accessibility and relevance of it as a conceptual framework to guide decisions about how and where ESD could be intentionally and directly embedded into course structure. This highlights how the workshop facilitates the co-construction of knowledge between participants and workshop facilitators (Lain, 2017).

It is important to note that all insights gathered are ideas from a small cohort that attended a single workshop, they were rich and detailed and provide direction about how to structure an ongoing community of practice. The community of practice would provide staff with a forum to share ideas, resources and reflections in a structured manner, helping to build confidence and consistency while fostering a collective sense of educational purpose. Together, these steps may deepen ESD understanding, improve educational practice and strengthen the role of eco-social justice in ECE and SCW courses in SETU.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by SETU ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

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

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