



Teaching for social justice and sustainable development across the primary curriculum

edited by Anne Marie Kavanagh, Fionnuala Waldron, Benjamin Mallon, DCU, Routledge, 2021, 240 pp., €35.46 (paperback), ISBN 9780367434151

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BOOK REVIEW

Teaching for social justice and sustainable development across the primary curriculum, edited by Anne Marie Kavanagh, Fionnuala Waldron, Benjamin Mallon, DCU, Routledge, 2021, 240 pp., €35.46 (paperback), ISBN 9780367434151

The editors of the 2021 publication *Teaching for Social Justice and Sustainable Development Across the Primary Curriculum*, Dr Anne Marie Kavanagh, Professor Fionnuala Waldron and Dr Benjamin Mallon saw the pressing need to engage teacher educators and student teachers with the urgent local and global social justice issues critically hampering society and the planet. This volume highlights the role of agents of social transformation that teacher educators can play, empowering them to view themselves and the children under their guidance, as citizens capable of comprehending complex knowledge and situations regarding social justice and sustainable development. Our youngest citizens need to have a say in what happens, in order to protect Mother Earth and their future.

What we can agree about is that young people all over the world, in any nation lucky enough to be democratic, need to grow up to be participants in a form of government in which the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters and, sometimes, as elected or appointed officials. (Nussbaum 2010, 9)

Teaching for Social Justice and Sustainable Development Across the Primary Curriculum illuminates the idea of education for transformation. Placing a copy of this book on the shelves of the library of every primary school and teacher education department in Ireland would be prudent. The authors and editors could also deliver workshops to teachers and student teachers on how to use the material of this book effectively in their classrooms and they would be valuable consultants in the new curriculum reform process. The volume has immense depth and scope for use in professional development days for teachers and for teacher educators.

There are 22 authors, from varied backgrounds, from primary school teachers to academics, who contribute to the 15 chapters in this volume. The foreword is eloquently written by Uachtarán na hÉireann Michael D. Higgins. Michael D. Higgins encapsulates the importance of this volume when he states that ‘there can be no doubt that achieving social justice, and doing so in a way that is delivered within the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations must be regarded as the great project of our times’ (Higgins 2021, xvii). Uachtarán na hÉireann highlights why this publication is so timely, important and a required read for all teachers and students teachers.

This volume has been divided up into four parts. Part 1 ‘Critical enquiry: A pedagogy for social justice and sustainability’ – the editors have placed four chapters here, varying from ‘Critical historical enquiry for a socially just and sustainable world’ by Fionnuala Waldron, Caitríona Ní Cassaithe, Maria Barry and Peter Whelan, to ‘Education about, through and for the environment: A scientific inquiry approach’ by Sandra Austin. Part 2 ‘Creative and relational approaches to social justice and

sustainable education' is home to three chapters ranging from curricular subjects such as visual arts to music. Part 3 leads the reader to 'Challenging dominant frameworks through critical discourse' which holds five chapters ranging from 'Beginning conversation about difference, race, ethnicity and racism through ethical conversation' by Anne Marie Kavanagh and Niamh McGuirk to 'Global citizenship education: interconnection, social justice and sustainability' by Benjamin Mallon. Finally the volume concludes with Part 4 focusing on social justice education in real contexts where the editors share their concluding thoughts and emphasise the importance of a whole school approach to social justice education.

This book is a critical publication for those who are interested in education and also for teacher educators when trying to demonstrate for students how to meaningfully integrate education for social justice and sustainable development across the primary school curriculum. Using this as a core text in education departments across Ireland would potentially ensure that student teachers become more aware of educational theory, pedagogical approaches and creative ideas for teaching and learning issues of social justice and sustainable development content in the primary classroom. The book is unique and is an exciting read for teacher educators as it connects theory and practice in a creative way, allowing them to learn about different pedagogical approaches in regard to embedding social justice and sustainable development into subjects such as visual arts and mathematics. There are teaching exemplars, activities and resources which are ready-to-use and which connect with issues that are relevant to the children's lives. Issues such as climate change, gender stereotyping and racism are explored and practical teaching resources are provided. The necessity of engaging children in these important conversations is highlighted and tips are provided for educators.

A key principle of the National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (2014–2020) was to 'be an agent for positive change in reorienting societies towards sustainable development' (DES 2014, 4). This volume places emphasis on critical questioning throughout, allowing the children's voice to be heard and empowering our youngest citizens to take a critical stance and to be agents of change in their local communities. Chapter 11 'Critical literacy: Challenging dominant discourses' by Niamh Watkins, emphasises the importance of enacting a critical literacy pedagogy within Social Justice Education (SJE). This chapter demonstrates how the teacher can equip children with vital skills to engage critically with social and political injustices. The engagement of children in their communities and the emphasis on active citizenship is woven throughout the volume. This is perhaps the most exciting element of the publication, the realisation that we need to engage our youngest citizens in complex conversations such as climate change and racism. If we do not engage, social justice and sustainable development will not only be absent from the education system but will also perpetuate a potential lack of awareness in their lives as adult citizens. This book emphasises the importance of higher order thinking, skills development and that children can critically question power and interest, including self-interest and positionality.

The importance of a whole school approach is especially evident in Anne Marie Kavanagh's Chapter 14, 'A whole school approach to social justice education'. Her introduction here is powerful, and interestingly explains why citizens often become teachers. Teachers can drive change, they can empower the children under their guidance to be engaged and conscious citizens working together for a better world. The primary teaching profession is a career that enables adults to positively make a difference in the

lives of our youngest citizens. Kavanagh highlights that if teachers embrace social justice principles and pedagogies in their work, they can enact real change initially in their classroom and then embark upon a whole school approach which will spread into the school community. The impact of this approach has been seen in the inclusion of Education for the first time in an Horizon 2020 call this year ‘Education on the bioeconomy including bio-based sectors for young people in primary and secondary education in Europe’. Horizon 2020 are committed to ‘tackling societal challenges’ and they now recognise the importance and long lasting potential of including young people in research opportunities such as the bioeconomy research, at an EU level (<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/what-horizon-2020>).

To embed social justice and sustainable education is not an easy task for educators; therefore scaffolding is vital in order to steer, encourage and create successful teaching and learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom walls. Teaching for social justice and sustainable development can make us uncomfortable and can also cause uncertainty. It is essential that children do not feel the burden of local and global issues but feel empowered to enact change and be empathetic, active citizens in their local community. It is an opportunity for children to think critically, and to be allowed to question long established structures and imbalances in their society and on a global level. The commitment and passion of the editors is evident in Chapter 15, *Transforming pedagogy for a socially just and sustainable world*. The editors understand the complexity of this and their foresight in providing a space for practitioners and researchers of different curricular subject areas to share how they integrate social justice and sustainable development into the primary school curriculum is timely.

Susan Pike’s Chapter 3, ‘Geography education for social and environmental justice education’ highlights the importance of learning about local and international environments, which will support children to be active citizens in local and global geographical issues. Her exemplars for teachers’ use in the classroom highlight the synergies between geography, SJE and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) along with age appropriate, child friendly lessons for primary school teachers to ensure critical engagement through for example play, storytelling, mapping, photography and collaborate activism.

Chapter 5 ‘Critical thinking, critical pedagogy and climate change education’ by Rowan Oberman and Gabriela Martinez Sainz highlights the necessity of climate change education (CCE) in the primary school classroom. Using a critical pedagogy approach Oberman and Sainz demonstrate how CCE ‘is entangled with global injustices and dominant economic and power structures’ (Oberman and Sainz 2021, 69). They define critical thinking skills in line with CCE and state that ‘identifying and critiquing pre-existing assumptions, norms and power structures and applying learning to rethink and take action’ (Oberman and Sainz 2021, 69) are necessary critical thinking skills in the CCE classroom. The 2 exemplars they have created (exemplar 5.1 utilises the picture book *The Lorax* by Dr Seuss in order to focus on consumerism and environmental damage, and exemplar 5.2 focuses on exploring the impact of relative carbon emissions in the Global South and Global North) allow teachers to explore children’s understanding of the complex scientific content connected with climate change whilst also supporting the children in the self-reflective learning process and through their own emotional and psychological responses to climate change.

In Chapter 6, Máire Ní Bhroin and Andrea Cleary describe integrating visual arts with education for social justice and sustainability. The reader is reminded of the power of art for social and environmental transformation and the importance of transformational pedagogy when using art making to inspire children's environmental imagination and to develop a sense of agency is highlighted. Exemplar 6.1 for 4–7 year olds is delightful and allows for imaginative play and creativity through storytelling and the artistic process, again further highlighting how thoughtful and reflective the exemplars are in this publication. This particular exemplar highlights how effective environmental observation is in enhancing children's understanding of ESD. Exemplar 6.2 'Making connections with social justice and sustainability through a Fast Fashion art project' indicates to the reader how the authors of this chapter ensure that their resources are relatable to the children's lives and that they are child-centred. This approach is seen throughout the volume which when connected with the different pedagogies intertwined is simply powerful. Transformation is seen here and throughout the various curricular areas through imagination, play and meaning-making.

Chapter 7 by Regina Murphy and Francis Ward, 'Connecting social justice education with the teaching of music', reminds teachers to ensure that their music education is authentic and inspiring and that music plays a vital role in the holistic development of the child. They guide the user through a range of multicultural songs, connecting music and dance and allowing the children to explore themes such as democratic rights and citizenship. These exemplars are vibrant and highlight the importance of a multilingual and multicultural approach to music education. Empowering a child or a community to teach a traditional song in their mother tongue is a powerful way to enhance the learning experience for all learners and to ensure the transmission of native culture.

Chapter 8, Annie Ó Breacháin and Ciara Fagan's chapter *Drama, social justice education and education for sustainable development; Theory in action* explores linkages between drama, SJE and ESD. Their exploration of the theoretical framework; a pedagogy of relational possibility and then its application in classroom is very effective. They position drama as 'a rich context for the exploration of SJE and ESD themes' (Breacháin and Fagan 2021, 129). Their use of exemplars for junior and senior ends of the school give a very clear structure for the educator to embed the ideals of this chapter into their classroom.

Aisling Ní Dhiorbháin celebrates and promotes linguistic diversity in Chapter 10, 'Embedding social justice and sustainable perspectives in language teaching' which uses plurilingual pedagogies in order to enhance language learning for all children. Ní Dhiorbháin uses an explicit – inductive approach to grammar instruction in her second exemplar and her first exemplar highlights the importance of linguistic identity and the essential need for space to use a minority language in written and spoken formats in the classroom is identified. Ní Dhiorbháin has recognised a vital gap in our teaching pedagogies; children and their guardians can collaborate with the school community to enrich the language learning for all the school community.

Chapter 12, 'Meaningful mathematics: Applying mathematical thinking to issues of social justice and sustainability' written by Aisling Twohill and Labhaoise Ní Shúilleabháin explains how mathematics education for social justice empowers children to question current issues related to their lives and to plan and thus act accordingly. Twohill and Ní Shúilleabháin encourage self-reflection for teachers regarding

their current mathematical practice and to really assess if the children they are teaching are using mathematics to understand the world around them in a meaningful way. They have created five sessions for teachers to teach 4–7 year old children called ‘Exploring equity and inequity through number and story’. These plans will help to transform the teaching of mathematics and combine practicality for the teacher with deep scholarship.

Teaching for Social Justice and Sustainable Development Across the Primary Curriculum should impact the composition of the revised primary curriculum currently in progress. This book, if embraced, will transform lives and significantly enhance the education system and culture in our schools and education departments. The pedagogical guidance given throughout the publication strengthens the lesson exemplars and connects theory and practice in a meaningful and accessible way for teacher educators. From as far back as 1992 Severn Cullis-Suzuki founded the Environmental Children’s Organization when she was nine years old, which culminated in her speech to the United Nations at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. When she was twelve, Greta Thunberg and her contemporaries around the world have also insisted on the voice of children and youth being heard. Children are co-leaders in social justice and sustainable development movements worldwide now. Children and the planet not only need but deserve that our teacher educators and those involved in education, read this publication. By engaging with this text, it will empower us to empower school communities and ensure future generations have the benefit of a just society. Through learning from this text and using it to support our teaching, teachers will ensure that school communities acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.

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