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Who Gets to Understand the Climate Crisis? Socioeconomic Inequality in the Sensemaking of Climate Change Education in Ireland

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Introduction

In recent years, Ireland has substantially expanded its climate education policy architecture (Department of Education, 2022b; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2023, 2025). In September 2025, a new leaving certificate subject, Climate Action and Sustainable Development, was introduced to Irish secondary schools (NCCA, 2025). These activities are supported by ESD to 2030, the second national strategy on Education for Sustainable Development, which sets out Ireland's approach to sustainability across its education system (Department of Education, 2022b). The language in these new policy documents is confident and inclusive, with particular attention to active citizenship, student agency, climate justice, and learning for all.

This study asks whether appearing inclusive on paper and being inclusive in practice produce the same outcomes. A subject that is formally available to every student is not the same as a subject that every student is equipped to make sense of. That process takes time, attention, and a certain amount of stability. Those things are not evenly distributed across Irish students. I set out to examine how Irish climate education is framed in policy, how that framing presents itself in the classroom and whether the capacity to engage meaningfully with the climate crisis is being shaped by socioeconomic contexts.

Background

Two separate bodies of evidence establish the rationale for this research. Firstly, research shows that socioeconomic context shapes how individuals engage with climate change. In England, Edwards et al. (2025) identified significant socioeconomic variation across young people's emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement. Similarly, Kim et al. (2024) found that socioeconomic status moderates whether climate beliefs lead to actual pro-environmental action. In the Irish context, Lynch (2022) has argued that education operates as a mechanism of class reproduction rather than correcting it. There is, however, no equivalent Irish study of socioeconomic inequality in climate education specifically, and Edwards et al. (2025) make it explicit that there is a great need for more qualitative work to explain the disparities their survey identified.

The second body of literature is concerned with what climate education research has historically prioritised. Much of the research has concentrated on climate science and the mechanisms of climate change, with little attention to political or justice dimensions (Trott et al., 2023). Mochizuki and Bryan (2015) contend that climate education should explain to its learners the structural drivers of climate change rather than reducing it to individual behavioural fixes. Additionally, Reimers (2021) argues that policy has the tendency to treat climate education as a technical problem with a universal solution, and that “trickle down” implementation leaves a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice. In Ireland, Morrissey Gleeson and Morrissey (2024) have mapped the barriers and enablers primary teachers face, however their analysis lacks an equity focus.

What is yet to be discussed is the step between the two, not what is taught, but *how* it is interpreted, and by whom. Sensemaking is the process by which people notice something, work out what it means, and fit it into their existing understanding of their situation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a social process that is driven more by plausibility than accuracy and is heavily shaped by which cues are available in a person’s immediate environment. Educators are not neutral conduits in this process. They are sensegivers, actively shaping the interpretation students arrive at, which makes their perspectives a legitimate, if indirect, entry point for examining how young people understand the climate crisis.

Approach

The design comprised document analysis and semi-structured interviews with Irish educators. The document analysis focused on the core texts that inform climate education and educational inequality in Ireland. These included the Leaving Certificate Climate Action and Sustainable Development specification (NCCA, 2025) and the background paper and consultation report which preceded it (NCCA, 2022a, 2022b); the Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023); the second national strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030 and its implementation plan (Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b); the DEIS Strategy to 2035 and its implementation plan for 2026–2028 (Department of Education and Youth, 2026a, 2026b); the Climate Action Plan 2025 (Department of the

Environment, Climate and Communications, 2025); and the EU Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition (Council of the European Union, 2022). Each text was coded against six questions: who is the implied learner and what does the text assume they have; whether inequality is named, and whether as barrier or as content; whether causes and remedies are framed individually or systemically; whether the text mandates or encourages; where responsibility lands; and whether provision is resourced by universal allocation or competitive application. A seventh question ran alongside these: what is absent. In addition to interpretive coding, each text was searched for a fixed set of terms (DEIS, disadvantage, socio-economic, deprivation, barrier, climate, sustainability education, curriculum), with frequencies and surrounding context noted, so that absences could be established systematically rather than impressionistically.

The interviews were conducted online, via Zoom with educators and practitioners working in climate and sustainability education across Ireland. Overall, there were eight semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The participants included primary teachers, among them a senior leader in a DEIS Band 1 school; a post-primary teacher working in affluent areas; an educator working in alternative outdoor and enrichment settings; and three participants involved in designing and delivering sustainability teaching in higher education. Recruitment was by purposive and convenience sampling via professional and academic networks. Interviews were anonymised and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were developed from the first transcript and reused on the remaining interviews so that patterns were comparable between participants rather than specific to one interview.

This combination of methods was intentional and necessary to achieve the study's core objectives. One point of precision: because educators report on students, these results concern perceptions of student engagement rather than student sensemaking directly. This is a conscious design decision, given the ethical limitations of research with minors within a six-week study, and it is justifiable because educators shape the interpretations they observe.

Findings

Inequality is on the syllabus, not in the design

In terms of substance, the new Leaving Certificate specification is ambitious regarding its treatment of inequality. Strand 2 requires students to grasp how disparities in social position and power affect capacity for action, to identify root causes of climate injustice, and to engage with the intersectional character of that injustice as influenced by ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status (NCCA, 2025). The specification names wealth inequality, colonialism, environmental racism and the imbalance of corporate power as topics for study.

Yet across the whole specification, the terms "DEIS" and "disadvantage" do not appear at all. "Socio-economic" appears twice, both times as subject matter. The term "barrier" is used twice, first as a facilitation skill that removes barriers to participation in classroom dialogue, and once in relation to reasonable accommodations in assessment (NCCA, 2025). The document does not examine whether socioeconomic circumstances may shape which schools offer the subject or which students are positioned to take it up.

The pattern is repeated in the second national ESD strategy and its implementation plan, neither of which contains any reference to DEIS, educational disadvantage, deprivation, or socio-economic status, and the word "barrier" does not feature in either (Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b). Equity and inclusion are commonly discussed as values to be taught and as global conditions to be studied, rather than as conditions of Irish learners.

The reverse test is more dramatic. The DEIS Strategy to 2035 and its implementation plan are the state's flagship response to educational disadvantage. Yet, each document contains only one instance of the word "climate", and in both cases it means school climate, in the sense of institutional atmosphere. Neither document mentions environmental education, sustainability education, or the Green-Schools initiative (Department of Education and Youth, 2026a, 2026b). Meanwhile, the Climate Action Plan 2025 makes no mention of "curriculum", "climate education" or "Leaving Certificate". In it, schools are mostly presented as buildings to be retrofitted, and its 67 references to just transition are about regions and occupations, not learners (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2025). None of these three policy architectures references the others. In this context, inequality is taught as a feature of the world and not treated as a feature of the classroom.

Delivery is encouraged, never required

The ESD implementation plan is expressed almost entirely in the language of encouragement. Across the document, "support" appears 55 times, "promote" 27, "consider" 17 and "explore" 10. "Must", "required to", "mandate" and "compulsory" do not appear at all (Department of Education, 2022a).

This is not an oversight and was flagged during consultation. The NCCA's consultation report on the new subject warns that the level of interest and uptake of external programmes and resources varies between schools and can depend on the interest and voluntary commitment of teachers and school management. Specifically, it cautions that over-relying on the non-formal sector could lead to inequities (NCCA, 2022b). The warning was acknowledged, but the ensuing specification did not include DEIS or educational disadvantage.

Interviews consistently corroborated the voluntarism. A post-primary teacher described climate education as still not "a huge priority", and reliant on the presence of a "passionate individual" on staff. A DEIS Band 1 primary school had no standalone programme at all, working through a Green-Schools committee and integration into SPHE. A primary teacher in a non-DEIS school reported that neither the school nor the Department provided any standardised packs or activities, leaving teachers to curate their own resources. This school's environmental provision rested substantially on one special needs assistant who had built a garden and pond. Another described relying on textbooks, and in their absence, on older materials that often contained outdated information, supplemented by well-received but one-day external sessions with no continuity.

Preparation was thin across the board. One participant's post-primary teacher training devoted a single day to the topic at the end of a two-year programme, described as a "tick-box" exercise, though the day itself was well delivered. Another recalled one double lecture in first year, focused on nature walks rather than climate change. The same rationale applied in higher education at the institutional level. Participants noted that academic freedom makes a compulsory sustainability requirement difficult to enforce across a university's constituent schools, so coverage remains partial.

Where policy encourages rather than requires, and resources through opt-in rather than allocation, provision becomes a function of discretionary staff capacity, which is not evenly distributed. A policy that is neutral in wording is therefore stratifying in effect. This is the "trickle down" gap between rhetoric and practice that Reimers (2021) describes, arriving here as a gap between schools rather than between policy and classroom.

When survival is the more plausible story

In underprivileged environments, educators consistently reported a hierarchy of priorities. One teacher in a DEIS Band 1 school expressed it most directly stating that the school is "focusing a lot more on their wellbeing as humans rather than the wellbeing of the planet around them". Additionally, a post-primary teacher observed that in poorer communities, climate change is often a secondary concern next to food security and housing. At third level, a participant described students from DEIS backgrounds and access routes working 25 to 30 hours a week, for whom sustainability is a "luxury of time" against the pressure to secure internships and immediate employability.

This is a sensemaking finding rather than a motivational one. Sensemaking is directed by plausibility and the cues an environment makes available (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Climate change is a slow, diffuse, global phenomenon competing for attention against demands that are fast, concrete and local, and it loses that competition more often where those demands are heavier. This is not a deficit of interest. What varies by socioeconomic status is not whether people believe in climate change but whether that belief converts into action.

Additionally, teachers described students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds arriving with more "nourishing" books and documentary knowledge, enabling higher engagement, and students whose parents discuss the news are more "tuned in" and were more engaged overall. The home environment was highlighted as a dominant factor, with one participant stating that where parents do not practise sustainable habits, students do not sustain them outside school. This is close to the mechanism by which Lynch (2022) argues schooling reproduces class position rather than correcting it.

The picture is not, however, a simple deficit. One participant perceived DEIS schools as attracting more external support and visibility on climate initiatives than affluent schools,

which were seen as needing less help, while a teacher in a non-DEIS school reported receiving less funding for specialised initiatives and relying instead on staff talent. Direct environmental experience can also run the other way. One teacher observed that pupils in underprivileged communities face pollution as a daily reality on their doorstep, whereas more affluent students often notice it only as an external issue.

What emerges is that the unequal resource is neither exposure to climate content nor raw environmental experience. It is the conditions for sustained sensemaking: continuity, time, adult expertise, and a surrounding context that reinforces rather than crowds out. Notably, the provision that offers those conditions most fully, forest school programmes, university enrichment schemes, is largely private and fee funded.

Teachers soften what they were not trained to hold

Emotional management ran through almost every interview, though not uniformly: one post-primary teacher reported never having witnessed acute anxiety, only overhearing worry about water scarcity. One teacher found responses roughly "fifty-fifty", some students thinking they are "untouchable" and unlikely to be affected, others "more on high alert", with children already anxious about other things most affected. This teacher acknowledged that this makes them "a bit more hesitant" to teach the topic, requiring more time and effort to plan a lesson and to prepare for the questions students might ask. A teacher in a DEIS primary school described children becoming genuinely upset at species extinction, recalling one autistic child for whom the scale of the idea was overwhelming. A participant delivering a new sustainability module at third level described its lessons as "stark" and "really gutting", and a first year that "ended on a real low note". Another identified fearmongering as a primary cause of disengagement and climate anxiety.

The Leaving Certificate specification is, to its credit, ahead of the other documents here. It asks that a holistic approach consider students' emotions alongside their thinking and life experiences, and states that it's important to "strike a balance between optimism and realism" (NCCA, 2025). Yet the word "anxiety" does not appear in the document. Emotion is addressed in the register of hope, resilience and solidarity, and the specification assumes a teacher equipped to hold that balance, which the training architecture described above does not supply.

So, educators soften, and several described the mechanism precisely. A third-level participant resolved that every class had to end on a positive note: they would not fake content but would "spin it as a positive way" to avoid disengaging students. The DEIS primary teacher described having to "simplify it down", not "make it so scary", and reassure children that it is not going to happen within the next ten years. But softening operates on scale and immediacy. Read alongside the finding that students in disadvantaged settings carry heavier immediate pressures, this suggests, though the present data cannot demonstrate, that softening may be most pronounced where students are already most stressed and teachers least supported.

Another educator, however, calibrates rather than simply softens. With nine- to twelve-year-olds they shift the focus away from individuals actions and towards "what these five companies are doing to destroy the planet", on the grounds that taking blame and responsibility off children makes them less anxious, not more. Structural honesty, on this account, is a response to climate anxiety rather than a cause of it.

Discussion

Is Irish climate education reinforcing, rather than combating, inequality? On this evidence, a qualified yes, but not by exclusion and not by anyone's design. The mechanism has three parts. Policy identifies inequality as content but designs delivery as if all learners come on equal footing. It then leaves that delivery to schools without making it compulsory. So, provision follows whichever schools have the time, finances and inclination to take it on, which is itself unequally distributed. And teachers, who receive little support with material that unsettles pupils, tend to soften it. Softening it means losing the structural analysis that allows a student to view their own circumstances as tied to the issue, rather than as a reason they can't afford to care about it. A subject that teaches wealth inequality and environmental racism is delivered through an architecture that never asks who is positioned to take it up.

The sensemaking approach, when applied here, highlights a contrast that the policy itself obscures. Irish climate education strategy seems good on the topics specified, and actually

progressive in parts. Looked at in terms of who can make sense of the crisis in relation to their lives, it's uneven. The single most actionable discovery is the silence between the DEIS and ESD designs. Ireland has a national ESD strategy with no reference to educational disadvantage in Ireland, and a ten-year educational disadvantage strategy with no reference to climate change and sustainability education. Taken together, none of the policy papers studied here takes responsibility for the question this study asks.

This leads to three practical implications. The DEIS status should be used to track uptake of Leaving Certificate Climate Action and Sustainable Development from the first cohort as the question of equity cannot even be posed without that data. Delivery needs to be mandated rather than encouraged, because a policy phrased in the language of support, promotion and exploration only reaches schools with the capacity to volunteer it. It is also important to consider training in the emotional dimension of the subject as core and not optional, because a teacher's emotional confidence shapes whether structural content survives contact with the classroom.

The broader stake is straightforward. Those most affected by climate change are least responsible for it and have the fewest resources to cope with it. Education can either break or perpetuate this double injustice (Mochizuki & Bryan, 2015). When pupils who are already best placed to make sense of the crisis are also already best resourced in every other respect, climate education becomes one more mechanism through which existing advantage accumulates.

Limitations

As eight individuals were chosen using purposive and convenience sampling techniques for this six-week study, findings are indicative rather than representative. The participants were educators speaking about students, so the findings concern perceptions of student engagement rather than students' own sensemaking. This was a conscious design decision given the ethical limits on research with minors within the given timeframe. It is coherent given that educators shape the interpretations they observe, but still a step removed. The sample is also skewed toward educators already invested in the topic, which likely

understates disengagement. All three participants in higher education were based at one university, recruited through the researcher's own institutional networks.

The document analysis carries its own limits. It analysed national policy texts rather than classroom materials in use, and its absence assertions are based on keyword searches, which establish that a term does not appear, but not that a concept is wholly unaddressed. The coding structure was established from the first transcript and applied to the rest, which helps comparability but risks importing the emphases of one interview. Finally, there are no data on uptake for the new Leaving Certificate subject yet as the first cohort will not sit the examination until 2027, thus assertions of uneven access are inferential.

Conclusion

Who, then, gets to understand the climate crisis? On this evidence, those whose school contains a teacher with the time, training and inclination to make it matter, and whose own circumstances are stable enough for a slow emergency to register as the most pressing thing in the room.

Ireland treats climate injustice with great seriousness in one document and omits climate change from another. Its implementation plans are framed in encouraging language, with delivery left to the discretion of individual staff. The outcome is not exclusion but something much more difficult to observe and easier to ignore: the depth of a student's engagement with the defining crisis of their lifetime depends on resources the policy never accounts for.

Joining these architectures together, and measuring who actually takes up what is offered, would be a modest reform with significant consequence. Until then, Irish climate education risks teaching inequality while quietly reproducing it.

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