

Who gets to understand the climate crisis?

Socioeconomic inequality in sensemaking of climate change education in Ireland

Jodie Ryan | Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin | Laidlaw Scholars 2026 | Supervisor: Dr. Graham Dwyer & Chris MM Gordon

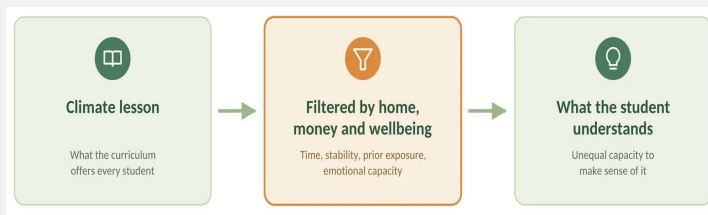
Introduction

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.

What is sensemaking?

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.



Methodology

1. Policy and curriculum analysis

The document analysis focused on the core texts that inform climate education and educational inequality in Ireland. 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



2. Interviews with 8 educators

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.

Findings

Inequality is on the syllabus, not in the design

The new Leaving Certificate specification is substantively ambitious on inequality, requiring students to analyse how social position and power shape capacity for action (NCCA, 2025), yet it never uses "DEIS" or "disadvantage", and neither does the second national ESD strategy (Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b). The reverse holds too: the DEIS Strategy to 2035 uses "climate" only to mean school atmosphere (Department of Education and Youth, 2026a, 2026b), and the Climate Action Plan 2025 never mentions curriculum (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2025). None of the three references the others, so inequality is taught as a feature of the world rather than treated as a feature of the classroom.

When survival is the more plausible story

Educators in underprivileged settings described a hierarchy of priorities. One DEIS Band 1 teacher said the school focused "a lot more on their wellbeing as humans rather than the wellbeing of the planet", and university students working 25–30 hours a week treated sustainability as a "luxury of time". This is a sensemaking finding rather than a motivational one. Sensemaking follows available cues (Weick, 1995), and a slow, diffuse issue loses out where immediate demands are heavier. What varies by class is not belief but whether belief converts into action (Lynch, 2022). The unequal resource is the conditions for sustained sensemaking: continuity, time and expertise.

Delivery is encouraged, never required

The ESD implementation plan uses "support" 55 times, while "must" and "compulsory" never appear (Department of Education, 2022a). This was flagged by the NCCA when it warned that reliance on voluntary staff commitment and the non-formal sector could produce inequities (NCCA, 2022b). Interviews bore this out: climate education depended on a "passionate individual", a DEIS Band 1 school had no standalone programme, and one school's provision rested on a single SNA who had built a garden and pond. Where policy encourages rather than requires, provision follows discretionary staff capacity that is unevenly distributed, producing the "trickle down" gap Reimers (2021) describes.

Teachers soften what they were not trained to hold

Emotional management ran through almost every interview. One teacher found responses "fifty-fifty", with some students "untouchable" and others "more on high alert", which left them "a bit more hesitant" to teach it; a DEIS primary teacher described children genuinely upset at extinction. The specification asks teachers to "strike a balance between optimism and realism" (NCCA, 2025), yet never uses the word "anxiety" and assumes a training architecture that does not exist. Educators therefore soften, ending classes positively or reassuring children it will not happen soon. This softening is plausibly greatest where students are already most stressed.

Themes raised (number of 8 educators)



Conclusions

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.