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Transformative Research and Social Inclusion: An Educational Research-Policy Dialogue

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Abstract

This article presents the outcome of an interdisciplinary co-creative research-policy dialogue between senior policymakers in education and scholars in transformative research about what it means to create a caring society in the face of persistent inequalities. The article is based on an innovative collaboration between policymakers in the Department of Education and Youth in Ireland and researchers working on deep whole-of-society transformation. The participating policymakers within the Department of Education and Youth cover a wide range of issues across the Department's policy portfolio, including quality, wellbeing, workforce planning, inclusion, curriculum development, and teacher education. Three key future-oriented ideas with potentially transformative potential were presented by the research group to the policymakers and responses were gathered through a follow-up questionnaire and in-depth conversations. The ideas presented were (a) the idea of the polycrisis, (b) a generative framework for transformation, and (c) social duality and the "sacred ordinary." The article presents the findings of this dialogue, focusing on the challenges and opportunities of implementing such far-reaching ideas in practice, including the deep structural changes needed to address issues of social inclusion in education.

Keywords

education policy; futures thinking; human flourishing; polycrisis; research-policy dialogue; social inclusion; societal transformation

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1. Introduction

The UNESCO report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* by the International Commission on the Futures of Education acknowledges the power of education to bring about profound change. The report calls on education to underpin a transformation in our relationships with each other, with the planet, and with technology (UNESCO, 2021). Such a transformation, it asserts, is necessary to address persistent poverty and entrenched inequalities at both national and international levels, to counter democratic backsliding and growing polarisation, to mitigate against climate change and environmental harm, and to prepare for technological disruption, including that caused by artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies.

This article is grounded in a co-produced research-policy engagement between a senior management group within the Department of Education and Youth in Ireland and a university-based futures-oriented research group working on deep societal transformation. This engagement took place within the context of preparations for a national Convention on Education in Ireland. This national Convention is planned to run throughout 2026 as "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for children, young people, parents, educators and wider society to help shape Ireland's education system for decades to come" (Department of Education and Youth, 2026). The Convention comprises 150 people across four groups: children and young people; parents and guardians; school employees and early years educators; and education stakeholders. The focus is on "primary and post-primary schools, the transitions within education, looking at what is working well, what challenges need attention, and what changes may be needed in the years ahead." The agenda for the Convention is being informed by a National Conversation on Education which comprises a national survey of public views on education, along with school community engagements and regional consultations across Ireland. Recommendations from the Convention will inform a long-term Department of Education and Youth strategy which will set the future policy direction for education in Ireland.

Simultaneously, an interdisciplinary research project—Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing (DSIS)—based in an Irish university, is exploring the challenges and opportunities of formulating and implementing transformative policy, that is, the far-reaching policy changes needed to bring about rapid, deep whole-system transformation to address the myriad challenges currently facing society (Hughes et al., 2024). One of the authors of this article has the unique position of being employed full-time by the Department of Education and Youth while also being seconded two days per week to work within the university on the DSIS project. This arrangement facilitated the presentation of ideas from the DSIS project to senior policymakers in the Department with a view to achieving co-creative research-policy engagement aimed at exploring how futures-oriented research might inform the Convention on Education and the Department's subsequent long-term strategy. Throughout the research-policy dialogue, the dual-role author was guided by the terms of the agreement between the Department of Education and Youth and the research university, which ensures confidentiality of government information where necessary while abiding by the research ethics guidelines of both organisations.

The participating policymakers within the Department of Education and Youth cover a wide range of issues across the Department's policy portfolio, including quality, wellbeing, workforce planning, inclusion, curriculum development, teacher education, education settings inspections, and strategy development.

Three key future-oriented ideas from the DSIS project with potentially transformative potential were considered by the policymakers through group discussion, follow-up questionnaire, and in-depth one-on-one conversations. These ideas were (a) the idea of the polycrisis, (b) a generative framework for transformation, and (c) social duality and the "sacred ordinary." The article was subsequently co-developed to articulate shared insights emerging from this dialogical process.

1.1. Background Context on Ireland's Education System

A short overview of the education system under the remit of the Department of Education and Youth is given here to facilitate an understanding of the terms used later in the article. The education system in Ireland is made up of early years education, primary, and post-primary education. Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of post-primary education. Most children attend state-funded schools. All forms of pre-primary education under age six are optional. In general, early childhood care and education is delivered outside the formal education system by a range of private, community and voluntary providers. In Ireland, all children are entitled to free primary education. Post-primary education consists of a 3-year Junior Cycle, followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle, depending on whether an optional transition year is taken between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle, which culminates in the Leaving Certificate examination. Performance in the Leaving Certificate examination is widely used for purposes of selection into employment, and into further and higher education. The Department of Education and Youth is also responsible for policy and delivery of services related to youth and youth work. Inclusive education is stated as a central principle of Ireland's education and training system, with the aim of meaningfully engaging all learners, including those with special educational needs and learners impacted by disadvantage.

A snapshot of some of the key areas of Ireland's education system that are the focus of current policy and public discussion include: the need for Ireland's teaching workforce to reflect the changing demographics of Irish society (Keane et al., 2023); the competitive nature of the Leaving Certificate "Points Race" and its influence on second level education; patronage of schools, given that, for example, 88 percent of primary schools in Ireland are run by the Catholic Church (Department of Education and Youth, 2025a); the disruption to education being caused by AI and the possible opportunities and dangers arising from that disruption; and the need to equip children and young people with the holistic knowledge, capacities, and skills to succeed and thrive in a rapidly changing world (Department of Education and Youth, 2025b).

2. Futures-Oriented Conceptual Thinking: Deep Societal Innovation

The research-policy engagement presented here draws on the literature on DSIS (Hughes et al., 2021, 2024). DSIS is a novel conceptualisation of whole-of-society transformation to address the multiple challenges of the polycrisis. As Rakowski et al. (2025) have documented, there is significant variation in the literature with regard to the characteristics of the polycrisis, the specific crises it encompasses, its key drivers, the regions and groups most affected, and the potential interventions to address it. Nevertheless, they conclude that there is a common understanding of the polycrisis as "multiple co-occurring, causally entangled crises with synergistic and cascading effects on multiple systems degrading humanity's prospects." Moreover, proposed interventions to address the polycrisis emphasize a need for transformational change. The DSIS model aligns with Rakowski et al.'s definition as well as their diagnosis of the need for fundamental transformation.

The DSIS model aims to reframe the dominant narrative of societal change from sociotechnical transitions, in which the development and adoption of sustainable technologies will suffice to address the crisis of climate change, to a narrative of deep global cultural transformation whereby deep changes in multiple societal systems will be required to address not only climate change but the whole array of individual crises which make up the polycrisis. The DSIS model posits the urgent need for transformational change through a fundamental reimagining of the major social institutions that together comprise contemporary societies. The social institutions which are included in the model are politics, economics, technology, religion, gender, and education.

DSIS asserts that these social institutions are failing not only because they are unable to address the polycrisis but also because in their present form they are actively contributing to it. In its formulation of the urgent necessity to fundamentally reimagine these social institutions, the DSIS model highlights the need to place care at the core of such deep reimagining. This in turn involves a reexamination not only of the structures and practices of contemporary social institutions and the values that underpin them, but also, more fundamentally still, a reexamination of what it means to be human. In this respect, the DSIS model draws upon the concept of Homo Curans and the principle of care both as a central animating principle in human nature and for ethical directionality in the task of reimagining global society.

The DSIS model has so far been applied to assert the importance of approaches to economics "beyond growth" (Hughes et al., 2021), the need to develop spaces for exploring new forms of democracy involving the supplementing of representative democracy and the growth of direct, autonomous, and communal forms of democracy (Harris & Hughes, 2020), and the need to expand the concept of responsible research and innovation to design effective governance for the ethical development of technology for the common good (Hughes & Winickoff, 2021). As mentioned above, the DSIS model also explicitly includes religion, gender and education as additional social systems in need of deep reimagining. The inclusion of this diverse range of social institutions is aimed at acknowledging the deeply interconnected nature of social systems and demonstrating that such an inclusive approach is essential for addressing the accelerating polycrisis.

Societal transitions or transformations have been classified based on two key dimensions: the speed of transformation (ranging from sudden and disruptive to gradual and protracted) and the scale of the system being transformed (from mega-transformations affecting entire societies to changes in specific systems or subsystems; see Linnér & Wibeck, 2020). While policy discourse tends to emphasise incremental reform of individual sectors or social institutions, the DSIS model stresses the need to focus on rapid, large-scale transformation of our entire global society. Such a focus is not entirely without precedent in policy. The United Nations 2030 Agenda, for example, emphasizes the implementation of 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals and is aimed at rapidly transforming societies worldwide into more ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable entities (United Nations, 2015). However, international research and practice in transformation governance still generally concentrate on specific sectors or topics rather than on the governance of holistic, whole-of-society, and global changes (Patterson et al., 2017). The DSIS model, in contrast, stresses the need for joined-up policy visioning and action at deep structural levels.

2.1. Homo Curans and the Multidimensional Nature of Care

The DSIS model places care as central to the reimagining of social institutions for greater sustainability and human flourishing (Hernandez, 2026). As already stated, it adopts the concept of Homo Curans (the caring human) as a more authentic and evidence-based model for what it means to be human than the concept of Homo Economicus which currently underpins many of the contemporary social institutions that are exacerbating the polycrisis.

Over recent decades, socio-political mobilisation of care has gained momentum as a pathway to achieving greater sustainability and human flourishing (Daly, 2021; Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). Psychology has acknowledged its fundamental role in human development, while the disciplines of economics, political science and sociology continue to conceptualise and incorporate care into key areas, including health, work, migration, inequality, power, and climate change (Ley, 2023; Lynch, 2022; Moriggi et al., 2020). In line with this literature, the DSIS model stresses that care is a multifaceted term studied across multiple disciplines, each of which offers distinct perspectives and contributions. The multiplicity of scholarship on care includes perspectives from psychology, which defines care as prosocial behaviour characterized by empathy, compassion, and supportive relationships. Feminist theories, particularly the ethics of care, address care's gendered nature and societal undervaluation. Religious traditions present care as a moral imperative tied to ethical living. In science and technology disciplines, care manifests through ethical innovation, human-centred design, and sustainability practices. Indigenous wisdom traditions provide a holistic and relational approach that complements modernist academic and professional conceptions of care, while the concept of care intersects with discourses on conservation, natural resource management and resilience, highlighting the interdependence between humans and natural systems.

Within the DSIS model, the importance of different ways of seeing is included as an essential element in the reimagining of social institutions. This diversity in definitions of care within the DSIS model is seen not as a weakness, but a strength, enabling disciplinary, cultural, and epistemic diversity. This multiplicity offers valuable entry points for the understanding of care as a central element in human flourishing and sustainability transformation.

2.2. DSIS Futures-Oriented Ideas

The three key ideas from the DSIS literature considered by a group of senior policymakers in the Department of Education and Youth will now be outlined. These ideas individually represent key concepts relevant to deep system reimagining, while together they comprise a coherent narrative for conceptualising whole-of-society change.

2.2.1. The Contemporary Polycrisis

Humanity currently faces a long list of crises, including climate change, ecological destruction, technological disruption, socially destabilising levels of inequality, steeply rising geopolitical tensions, and war. A growing body of opinion views these crises as deeply interlinked and a signal of the necessity for deep systemic change across the whole of society (Kanger & Schot, 2019), as well as for methodologies that allow decision-makers to understand and foster deep structural change. The term polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2022) has been used

to recognise the multiple nature of the crises we face and also to highlight the fact that the deepening of one crisis can exacerbate and accelerate every other crisis. As articulated by Morin and Kern (1999, p. 74): "There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem."

The idea of the contemporary polycrisis, and the need to think beyond climate change as the sole global issue that needs to be addressed, was considered by the policymaker group, represented in the form of a single slide with pictorial representations of each of the major crises which constitute the polycrisis.

2.2.2. Framework for Global Cultural Transformation

A generative framework for conceptualising deep whole-of-society transformation was the second DSIS idea considered by the group. This framework comprises four sides of a picture frame, with the social institution to be reimagined placed at the centre of the frame. The four sides of the frame are: narratives of global transformation; ethical direction; conceptualising transformation; and ways of seeing (Hughes et al., 2024). These four sides of the DSIS framing reflect the underlying premises of the model: that the transformation to sustainability will extend beyond the narrative of techno-social transition (narratives of transformation); that the transformation will be inherently normative (ethical direction); that considerations of the dynamics of transformation must include a diversity of types of change, including changes in culture, practices, and values (conceptualising transformation); and that any model of transformation must be deeply transdisciplinary and inclusive of currently marginalised worldviews (ways of seeing).

The framing is generative in that, rather than presenting answers to each of the questions posed, it invites input from participants on perspectives on each of the four aspects of the frame. The framework was discussed by the group, represented in the form of a single slide showing each of the four sides of the framing, each of which was briefly explained.

2.2.3. Social Duality and the Sacred Ordinary

The DSIS literature also presents the idea of social duality as the basis for societal transformation. This idea is that contemporary society comprises two contrasting but coexisting social templates. The dominant social template operates on values of hierarchy, inequality, coercion, and private gain. The rewards within this template are status, power and wealth. Alongside this dominant template, however, an alternative social template coexists which is based on values of equity, cooperation and public good. DSIS's articulation of this social duality draws upon philosophy (Badiou, 2022), sociology (Eisler & Fry, 2019), feminist theory (Lynch, 2022), and archaeology and anthropology (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021) to articulate the two contrasting social templates.

Moreover, the value accorded to the functions of each system reflects the dominant systems' values and power. While status, power, financial reward, and wealth are accorded to those within the dominant hierarchical social system, this system could not persist if the essential functions performed within the coexisting relational system were not being carried out. These essential functions include having and raising children, educating for social good, caring for the sick and elderly, and providing essential services such as

food and care. Gender norms play a central role in this division of labour and the value ascribed to tasks across both social templates. According to Jablonka (2022), whatever is done by hypermasculine males is seen as highly valuable, and whatever is done by women and "weaker" men is viewed as being inherently of less value. As a result, the very functions which are essential to the survival of humanity, including producing and nurturing life, are denigrated and devalued.

To further explain the concept of social duality, DSIS also introduces the idea of the "sacred ordinary" (McAleese & Hughes, in press). It identifies the loss of "the Sacred," which can be interpreted in either a religious or secular sense, in modern society as one of the deep roots of the contemporary polycrisis. In our materialist, hyper-competitive, and hyper-acquisitive societies, human beings and Nature are seen as resources for exploitation. Human value and meaning are sought through material wealth and hierarchical social status. The essentials that most people truly value as sacred, such as love, care, beauty, meaning, and relationality, are denigrated and undervalued. The DSIS model proposes a narrative of transformation to greater sustainability and human flourishing as entailing a "restoring of the sacred ordinary," through which the rediscovery of the fundamental experiences of relationality, joy, meaning, and beauty, which are found in everyday experience and which motivate and define us as human, can bring about a rebalancing of the dual templates for social organisation.

The ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary were discussed by the policymaker group, presented in the form of a single slide with pictorial representations of the two templates along with a brief explanation of each.

2.2.4. Goals of This Study

The present study has three key aims. First, to test the conceptual basis of the DSIS model (its conceptual validity and overall coherence of the framework) with senior policymakers in a national education system. Second, to gain insights into how the DSIS model, and its vision for reimagining social institutions to address the polycrisis, might be usefully applied in practice to bring about transformative change in education. Third, to use the findings gained from engagement with senior policymakers in education to further develop the DSIS conceptual framework and research engagement process.

3. Methodology

The engagement for this study took place within the context of preparations for a national Convention on Education and was facilitated by the fact that one author of the current article, through a unique secondment arrangement between policy and academia, is both an employee of the Department of Education and Youth and a member of the future-oriented academic research team. The methodology which emerged as a process of research-policy engagement is outlined in greater detail below. It is acknowledged at the outset that the findings of this study should be viewed in the light of the limits of inference from a small sample and a highly specific institutional context, but present a valuable contribution to the literature nonetheless.

3.1. Discussion of Key Ideas by the Senior Policymaker Group

The first step in the process was the consideration of the three key DSIS concepts delivered as a short presentation, outlined above, by the senior policymaker group. This presentation included an explanation of the idea of the contemporary polycrisis, which was depicted in a single slide with pictorial representations of each of the major crises that constitute the polycrisis. The DSIS framework was then presented in the form of a single slide showing each of the four sides of the framing, each of which was briefly explained. Finally, the ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary were presented in the form of a single slide with pictorial representations of the two social templates along with a brief explanation of each.

A discussion session took the form of a 15-minute presentation on these key DSIS ideas by the author of this article who works in both the Department and the DSIS research group. This presentation was followed by 15 minutes of questions and answers and group discussion. The members of the group comprised 10 officials, including assistant secretary, principal officer, and assistant principal officer grades. These grades are the three highest grades in the Irish civil service below the secretary general, who is the head of a government department. The areas of responsibility of the members of the management group covered a wide range of functions within the Department, as mentioned above, and as will be clear from the questionnaire and further findings presented below.

As well as presenting the DSIS ideas, this session also allowed members of the group to clarify their understanding of the concepts and agree to participate in an online questionnaire as the next step of the research.

The number of policymakers involved in the study overall was 10. Of these, all 10 participated in the initial presentation session, nine of whom responded to the online questionnaire, which will be outlined below, and four of whom were involved in the in-depth conversations.

3.2. Reflective Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was co-designed by one researcher in the DSIS research group and one policymaker from the Department of Education and Youth and distributed to members of the policy group. The questionnaire comprised the 11 open-ended questions shown in Table 1.

Questions 1 to 6 were designed to ascertain the level of interest and practical policy relevance of each of the 3 key DSIS ideas. Questions 7 and 8 aimed at assessing the resonance and practicality of the overall narrative and framework of the DSIS model taken together. Question 9 asked for views on the opportunities and challenges for implementing the future-oriented ideas that DSIS espouses. Question 10 specifically asked about the relevance of these ideas for policy aimed at creating a caring society in the face of persistent inequalities. Finally, Question 11 allowed respondents to add any comments they feel are not covered elsewhere.

Nine out of ten of the policymaker group responded to the questionnaire. Feedback from participants showed that several took up to two hours to record their views, reflecting a very high level of commitment on the part of participants.

Table 1. Online questionnaire.

1	Is this idea of the contemporary polycrisis of interest to you in your role within the department? Please explain why (or why not).
2	Is this idea of the contemporary polycrisis of direct practical relevance in your role in the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
3	Is this framing of deep global cultural transformation of interest to you in your role within the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
4	Is this idea of deep global cultural transformation of direct practical relevance in your role in the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
5	Are the related ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary of interest to you in your role within the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
6	Are the related ideas of social duality and the sacred ordinary of direct practical relevance in your role in the Department? Please explain why (or why not).
7	Do these ideas resonate with you? (i.e., the polycrisis, the framework for global cultural transformation, and the sacred ordinary)
8	Could they inform the far-reaching policy changes needed to address the polycrisis?
9	What are the challenges and opportunities of implementing such far-reaching ideas in education in practice?
10	With regard to social inclusion, could these ideas improve our understanding of what it means to create a caring society in the face of persistent inequalities?
11	Would you like to add any final thoughts that have not been covered?

3.3. In-Depth Conversations Between Policymakers and Transformation Researchers

As a third step in the process, two senior members of the DSIS research group met one-to-one with four members of the Department of Education and Youth's policy group for one-hour in-depth conversations to further explore the themes that had emerged from the process thus far. The selection of policymaker participants in the conversations was based on balancing two principles, namely seniority and coverage of critical policy areas. The selection criterion of seniority was included as the more senior policymakers in the group can be expected to have a wider systemic view of the Department's policy activities as well as direct personal experience of the challenges and opportunities involved in system change. The criterion of coverage of critical policy areas was included as it was deemed important to capture as wide a range of views from across the Department's activities as possible to inform the research findings.

Two of the in-depth conversations were held in person; two conversations were held online. While in-person conversations were deemed preferable, logistical reasons dictated this mix of in-person and online conversations. Conversations were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed for analysis. Recordings and transcripts were offered to the participants and, following analysis, the copies were destroyed.

A number of themes which emerged from the research team's analysis of the questionnaires were used as a guide for the in-depth conversations. These themes were: (a) highlighting the potential and need for systemic

policy responses; (b) naming everyday realities in education; (c) highlighting necessary/holistic educational outcomes; and (d) naming (and empowering) potential agents of change. While these themes were used as a guide, in practice the in-depth conversations diverged to cover a wide range of issues.

This article was subsequently co-developed by both researchers and policymakers to synthesise and reflect upon their shared insights, positioning this contribution as a conceptual and reflective account of co-production between research and policy, rather than as an analysis based on data collection from human subjects.

4. Findings From the Research-Policy Engagement

This section presents the findings from both the questionnaire and in-depth conversations under each of the three aims of the study, as outlined in Section 3.

4.1. Testing the Resonance and Key Conceptual Basis of DSIS

The findings from the research-policy engagement strongly confirm the overall coherence and validity of the DSIS model as a framework for engagement with policymakers in education. The three ideas presented and the overall framing met with a high degree of enthusiasm for their novelty, holistic nature, and resonance with a wide range of issues facing policymakers across the education policy system. A key finding from the research-policy engagement therefore is that potentially transformative future-oriented ideas, such as those developed within the DSIS literature, do meaningfully resonate with policymakers.

The difficulties of translating research into policy and practice are well documented (Head, 2022), particularly in environments characterised by tight timelines, operational pressures, and competing priorities. In this context, it is entirely plausible that future-oriented conceptual work would be perceived as abstract or of limited immediate relevance.

However, this study reveals a strong alignment between the DSIS conceptual framework and policymakers' lived policy concerns. Across the exchanges, the three future-oriented ideas introduced from the DSIS model (polycrisis, framing of global cultural change, and social duality and the sacred ordinary) were consistently taken up as useful lenses for sense-making. Participants engaged with these ideas not as distant theoretical constructs, but as tools that help articulate existing challenges, surface tensions within current policy approaches, and open space for reflection on alternative trajectories for education policy.

The following comments capture this overall openness and enthusiasm to engage practically with the ideas presented:

> These ideas could offer a lot to the discourse about what an inclusive society actually means and how policies promote…a shared vision for inclusive participation in a society where all can belong and flourish.

> These ideas are really provocative—in a positive way. We need to make time and space for further reflection on them and on the practical ways in which they can shape and influence educational thinking, policy, practice and pedagogy….This is really important work.

A number of participants strongly identified with the concept of social duality and the sacred ordinary as reflecting and naming the social reality within which education operates. The following comments reflect this theme:

> These ideas resonate because they name something that is often felt but not always articulated in education policy: that our systems are caught between two competing logics—one that values status, competition and measurable outputs, and another that values care, relationships and the quiet, everyday work of holding communities together, especially in times of crisis.

> [The sacred ordinary could offer] an alternative roadmap for how teachers might navigate the challenges already presenting in their classrooms as a result of the polycrisis….I suspect that the philosophy of the sacred ordinary already permeates the classrooms of our best teachers, though the term may not be known to them.

From the researchers' perspective, one particularly striking reflection captured how the three DSIS ideas presented functioned together as a movement from diagnosis to agency—from recognising the scale of the polycrisis to identifying spaces for individual and collective responses:

> It's almost like there's a wide canvas adopted initially conceptually and it lands down in the frame of reference of the individual.

While the sample size is small, the overall findings from the engagement strongly point to the high degree of relevance of ideas on transformational thinking to contemporary education and the utility of the DSIS model for facilitating productive conversations on reimagining education in the context of complex societal challenges.

4.2. Insights on How DSIS Could Be Applied To Education in Practice

A key practical application that emerged is how the DSIS framing can be used to highlight the need for a systemic approach to policymaking, particularly for implementing deep structural change. The DSIS framing was seen by policymakers as useful in highlighting the need for systemic responses that involve a whole-of-government approach, on the one hand, and the need for an acknowledgement that schools are part of a much broader context of communities and society (which also needs to be mobilised to address many of the challenges which education is tasked with addressing), on the other hand.

As one illustrative comment stated:

> This type of framing may be useful in terms of providing a scaffold around educational policy development. It can help to define issues and problems facing our education system and build momentum behind possible approaches—societal and political. This form of framework can also be useful in terms of evaluation of successful implementation or otherwise.

This systemic interconnection of issues in education across government departments is reflected in the following comment:

> For those of us who work in government ministries, charged with specific remits and specific domains in which to exercise those remits, it seems to me essential that we educate ourselves collectively on an ongoing basis on this idea of a polycrisis.

The DSIS ideas also solicited multiple responses regarding the need for a focus on holistic educational outcomes. Responses included:

> Political and ecological consciousness on a global scale should form part of children and young people's learning experiences from their earliest years.

> Assessment methodologies need to measure and evaluate [children's] capacity to critically assess societal "noise" that they are exposed to through technologies and an ever-growing acceptance of open hate speech against minorities and women….[Curricula frameworks] can help children and young people to develop respect and understanding for the sacred ordinary and its importance for social cohesion.

Although it was only mentioned explicitly by two respondents, the importance of both children and teachers as agents of change is highlighted due to its importance in considering the dynamics of how deep transformative change might come about. The role of children and young people in advocating for more urgent policy action on climate change in the form of the youth-led "Fridays for Future" movement, for example, is illustrative of this potential:

> [We should consider] children and young people as a potentially very significant force for change.

> [The DSIS ideas have] the potential to inspire teachers to inspire students to become agents of change.

To summarise, the DSIS ideas were found to have immediate practical relevance across a wide range of policy areas, including: workforce planning and development (with particular focus on a workforce that itself represents an inclusive system); future school leadership and future school governance; values-based leadership (highlighted as relevant to policymaking for school leadership and for high quality inclusive education); Initial Teacher Education policy; curriculum development and assessment methodologies; the facilitation of teachers/educators as curriculum makers; holistic educational outcomes; school inspections; and the formulation of the Department's strategic vision and strategy.

The following comment reflects the positive views of respondents to these practical opportunities:

> The opportunities of implementing such ideas in education range from, in a best-case scenario, providing a solution to the polycrisis, or to better preparing students to endure the polycrisis. But even if the polycrisis disappeared in the morning, I believe that implementing these ideas would result in a far better society with happier children.

4.3. Further Developing the DSIS Model and Research Engagement Process

Alongside the opportunities, participants also identified challenges in implementing the DSIS ideas for deep systemic transformation. These challenges included resistance from vested interests who benefit from the status quo, accusations of being ideological in advocating for "normative" systemic change, and public sensitivity and potential charges of indoctrination around advocating for the values represented by the idea of the sacred ordinary. These different aspects of challenge and resistance are reflected in the following response:

> [These ideas could make a difference] but our system would require an overhaul, so it doesn't simply reward the visible, hierarchical achievements [grades, exam results, economic output, employability, PISA scores, etc.] but also values the relational, caring and community-based work that makes education humane and sustainable."

In our analysis of both the questionnaire response and the in-depth conversations, some structural elements emerged particularly as potentially contributing to exclusion in Ireland's education system, namely: early years education, patronage, school workforce, and the selection system for entry into higher education. This analysis does not claim, of course, that these are the only structural elements that potentially contribute to an exclusionary aspect of the education system. The following comments reflect participants' thoughts on these structural issues.

Concerning early years education:

> We know really high-quality early years absolutely transforms children's outcomes, like, particularly children who are disadvantaged. I mean, the research is just absolutely unarguable on that.

On the school workforce:

> A quarter of our education budget [is] spent on inclusive measures, particularly special education. But then when I look at the workforce, I see—and it's not just the teaching workforce, but if you look at our psychologists, you look at the teachers, and you look at…the inspectorate. We have a very homogeneous profile for the workforce, so we have, in the main…very few people from, like, differing socioeconomic backgrounds, very little diversity now in terms of race [and gender].

On school patronage:

> [88 percent] of primary schools are Catholic, you know, they're run by the bishops and the diocese in a situation where, you know, I think people might identify as Catholic, but they're not practicing as Catholics.

On the selection system for entry into higher education:

> And you ask any parent, they'll say they're all about the welfare of their child…all the way through to fifteen, and then it becomes what [exam] points are they going to get….Teachers will say, the children

> themselves in fifth and sixth year will say: "Why are you teaching us about that [if it's not going to be on the exam]?"

The following comment reflects other general concerns that emerged in the policy engagement:

> Traveller and Roma education is a huge issue, you know, in terms of inclusivity. And the prison populations, like we know they're being fed from the areas, the pockets of deprivation they're being founded from….But because of these growing pockets of intergenerational [disadvantage] where nobody has had a job in four generations. Like we're seeing that in Ireland. We're seeing that very, very deep rooted deprivation, which we shouldn't be seeing…what you really need to do is have a laser target on those areas of highest deprivation.

On care and belonging:

> We engage with the perspectives of children and young people in primary and post-primary schools. We are finding, and I think this resonates with some academic research as well, that I think it's one in four primary pupils and one in five post-primary pupils….But what we're finding is that number, that, that those percentages of pupils…feel they don't belong. They feel they don't feel connected.

In summary, the research-policy engagement surfaced a wide range of policy areas where the DSIS model could be of immediate practical application, but deep systemic barriers were also identified that stand in the way of transformative change within the education system. The difficulties in addressing the deep-seated structural issues such as those identified above, and the potential of applying a care-based approach such as the DSIS model for transformative change, will now be addressed in the final section of the article.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has presented a research-policy engagement between senior policymakers in education and scholars working on transformative futures research. The engagement explored whether future-oriented conceptual frameworks, such as those from the DSIS literature, could meaningfully inform reflection on long-term educational transformation. Three interrelated ideas were introduced and discussed: (a) the polycrisis, (b) a generative framework for transformation, and (c) social duality and the sacred ordinary.

Rather than treating these concepts as abstract theoretical constructs, the dialogue revealed their capacity to resonate with policymakers' lived policy challenges. Policymakers engaged with the DSIS ideas as sense-making lenses that helped articulate systemic pressures facing education, surface implicit values and tensions within existing approaches, and broaden understandings of what educational success might entail beyond narrowly defined academic outcomes. The dialogue highlighted the interpretive and strategic value of DSIS' future-oriented concepts in opening space for reflective policy imagination.

The research-policy engagement also illuminated a wide range of opportunities for further development. Participants identified avenues for practical application of the DSIS concepts including: using the frameworks presented to shape future curriculum and assessment reforms; to inform updates to inspection/quality frameworks; to scaffold policy development and evaluation questions; to inform initial

teacher education and continual professional development; to inform values-based leadership practices; to identify aspects of the system which contribute to exclusion and inequality; and to create shared language and communities of practice that help different actors co-design systemic responses.

Fostering inclusive communities of transformation as a vehicle for deep systemic change emerged as a key challenge and opportunity for policymakers. In this regard, the ongoing national Convention on Education and the Department of Education and Youth's newly established "Fíorú" educational research network, which brings together policymakers, researchers and practitioners (teachers and school principals) to focus on future-oriented research and knowledge mobilisation, were both highlighted as opportunities to progress such potentially transformative conversations.

This study links care as an ontological a priori of human nature; vulnerability, interdependency and mutual responsibility as fundamental features of human and other-than-human relations; and the recognition of care, compassion and empathy as fundamental principles in redesigning social institutions. This vision of compassionate futures as a new paradigm for addressing the myriad challenges that human societies face is a core feature of the DSIS model, which has formed the basis for the present research-policy engagement. DSIS aims at reimagining social institutions with care as a core redesign principle. It places an absence of care as the root cause of the contemporary polycrisis, includes ethical directionality centrally within its conceptual framing, and has developed the concept of the sacred ordinary as highlighting those things we humans care deeply about and towards which social institutions must be reoriented.

This study's vision of compassionate futures is also central to education in the context of the contemporary polycrisis. Education has the potential to protect and promote greater social cohesion, address deeply entrenched social stratification and persistent inequalities, overcome the exclusion of marginalised social groups, promote greater gender equality, and play a part in promoting awareness of the need for and enhancement of social inclusion worldwide.

In its present form, education is, of course, addressing all of these issues to a greater or lesser extent. The challenge for education, in the context of the polycrisis, is to make this reimagining systemic, multisystemic, global, and purposeful. These are also challenges for the DSIS model as to how these crucial elements can be better incorporated into its conceptual framing.

With regard to systemic response, the research-policy engagement presented here has highlighted the awareness of policymakers for joined-up and coherent policies aimed at addressing the myriad challenges faced. Addressing social inclusion in its multiple dimensions, for example, requires changes in teaching methodologies, curriculum, workforce composition, initial teacher education and ongoing professional development, as well as policies regarding school meals, school transportation, and resource allocation, among other policy areas, that align with the overall goal. Policymakers in the present study reported that the DSIS model assisted them in gaining such a systemic view. Using the model as an input into future stakeholder engagements could increase awareness among actors of their agency within the system and how more holistic responses could be designed and implemented.

The present study also highlights how the issues that education is tasked with—from addressing entrenched hierarchies and persistent inequalities to greater gender equality, protecting democracy, responding to

health emergencies, and playing a role in mitigating climate change (to name just a few)—are not within the sole purview of education. They are also greatly impacted by issues beyond the classroom and require multisystemic responses. The embedded nature of education within all other social institutions has been demonstrated multiple times in recent years when the education system has had to respond to crisis, for example, in economics (the 2008 financial crisis), geopolitics (the Russian invasion of Ukraine), global health (the Covid-19 pandemic), and technological disruption (social media and AI). Understanding and articulating the need for, and dynamics of, multisystem change (Lawrence et al., 2024) is a key area where further development of the DSIS framing could help inform future development of strategy and policy in education.

As the root causes of the polycrisis are global, so too must be our responses. Our contemporary planetary crises require both planetary solutions and planetary ethics. Hanusch and Leggewie (2026), for example, describe how existing framings of planetary thinking range from a "Planet First" anti-anthropocentrism (Hayward et al., 2019) to "interaction first" demands for humans to take responsibility for their relations with the planet (Dryzek & Pickering, 2019), to "humans first" calls for placing the planet entirely at the disposal of humans (Servigne & Stevens, 2020) to, finally, a "technology first" posthumanism (Lovelock, 2020). In response to such radical normative divergence, they point to the twin principles of planetary habitability and planetary citizenship, both of which are predicated upon principles of care, as the basis for planetary thinking that can enable human, more-than-human, and planetary flourishing. Such discourse finds resonance, of course, in the curricula of global citizenship education being taught in many education systems, including in Ireland. The DSIS ideas could potentially be applied in this context to further encourage global responses.

Finally, the polycrisis imbues education with existential purpose. The polycrisis presents a threat to the lives of billions of people and to non-human life and is degrading the life support systems of planet Earth. The purpose of education in this context is increasingly being vocalized in ways both secular and spiritual. Such articulations include, for example, "education for survival" (Aldrich, 2010), education for "moral imagination" (Bristow et al., 2024), education for "future-building" (Facer, 2011), and education for dignity, meaning, and purpose (Vatican.va, 2026). The present study demonstrates that the DSIS care-driven model can facilitate just such policy discussions focused on education for purpose and care in the polycrisis.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLM tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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