

Environmental social work

Implications for accelerating the implementation of sustainable development in social work curricula

Environmental
social work

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Abstract

Purpose – Environmental social work (ESW) is an approach and a perspective in social work focusing on ecological and environmental sustainability and justice within the context of sustainable development (SD). This study aims to analyse students' reflective tasks on challenges for ESW education and practice from a critical theory perspective. The purpose of this study is to discuss the implications of the findings for accelerating the implementation of SD in social work curricula.

Design/methodology/approach – The research participants comprised 49 master level students from four different cohorts studying the course “Social Work and Sustainable Development” at the University of Gävle, Sweden. The sample comprised only those students who had completed at least one of the three non-mandatory reflective tasks that were set within the course. The reflective tasks of the research participants were gathered as data for this study. A qualitative methodological approach with the help of ATLAS-ti V8.4 was used to analyse the gathered data.

Findings – This study discusses three primary results, which are categorised as “Being Boxed”, “Safe and Saviour Sweden” and “Politics and Power”. Based on the results, this study argues for a transformative and emancipatory pedagogy (TEP) in the teaching and learning of ESW to accelerate the implementation of holistic SD within the social work curriculum.

Research limitations/implications – This study is mainly based on the analysis of “problematic” discourses of some of the students. The majority of the students and their respective discourses are not considered. Moreover, it would have been interesting, and probably enlightening to explore the background of the students (such as gender, ethnicity and religion) and any concomitant beliefs or prejudices (whether consciously held or otherwise) that would need to be addressed for an effective social work outcome. For ethical reasons, the background of the students was not recorded and analysed in this study.

Practical implications – Based on the results, this study argues for TEP in catalysing environmentalism within the social work curricula.

Social implications – Social workers have a political mandate from their professional ethics to work for the protection of the planet and for the well-being of all – including non-humans. This study therefore argues for ESW education within social work curricula in promoting SD through social work practice.

Originality/value – Within the context of SD, there is a global call for social work education to shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric paradigm. However, ESW education is still in its infancy stage and very

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This study would not have been possible without the contribution of all the students who have responded to the non-mandatory reflective tasks, which were used as the data for this study.

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few universities are focusing in this particular area. This study therefore brings an important and well-needed layer of empirical evidence in considering the implications for catalysing environmentalism within the social work curricula.

Keywords Critical theory, Discourse analysis, Critical reflection, Sustainable development, Environmental social work, Transformative and emancipatory pedagogy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Sustainable development (SD) is considered as a holistic and integrative concept that interconnects between the essential dimensions and values for progressing towards a happy, healthy and prosperous society for all over time (Boström *et al.*, 2018). The value, importance and popularity of SD as a concept is clearly understood from reading the agenda of international institutions and agencies such as the United Nations' '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (UN General Assembly, 2015), and the International Association of Schools of Social Work/International Federation of Social Workers/International Council on Social Welfare's 'Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development' (IASSW, IFSW and ICSW, 2012). For instance, during the last few years, the three social work organisations – IASSW, IFSW and ICSW – have shown strong commitments in working in partnership with the United Nations and other international agencies towards meeting the goals of the 2030 Agenda (UNRISD, 2017).

Social work is commonly known as an academic discipline and a practice-based profession. The main goal of social work is to promote 'social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' [IFSW as quoted in Ornellas *et al.* (2018, p. 224). Social work is mainly characterized as being transformative and emancipatory in its education and practice. Consequently, social workers are equipped with values, knowledge and skills for making social change – guided by the emancipatory values and principles of social justice and human rights – at individual, group, societal and global levels. In particular, social work is often referred to as a vital agent of social change in society. In this sense, it is argued that social workers have a professional obligation and moral duty for creating conditions and mechanisms for a better living environment for all.

Social work originated with a focus on "Person-in-Environment" perspective. This particular perspective is a practice-guiding principle that highlights the importance for social work practitioners as having a sound understanding of human beings in light of the environmental contexts, in which they live, act and react with others (Kondrat, 2013). In this sense, the professional practice of social work is developed with a holistic perspective that focuses on multiple, reverberating transactions between people and their social as well as biophysical environment (Hare, 2004). However, social work education and practice has mainly dealt with social issues, with some consideration being given to the economic aspects of society; however, it has largely neglected the bio-physical environment (Gray and Coates, 2015; Harris and Boddy, 2017). In a similar manner, Zapf (2010) states:

As a profession with a long-standing declared focus on person-in-environment, social work might be expected to play a leadership role in interdisciplinary efforts to tackle environmental threats to human well-being and continued existence, yet the profession has generally been silent or less than relevant (p. 30).

Within the context of SD, there is a global call for social work education and practice to shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric paradigm through environmental social work

(ESW) (Gray *et al.*, 2013; Rambaree *et al.*, 2019). Thus, 'Working Towards Environmental and Community Sustainability' has been posited as one of the four priority areas in the 'Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development' (IASSW, IFSW and ICSW, 2012). In addition, SD requires a major shift towards sustainability in all sectors of society; moreover, social workers, as agents of social change, are therefore expected to play vital roles in facilitating such societal transition. In this sense, environmental change/climate emergency, and their associated societal impacts such as poverty, migration/displacement and famine make it an obligation for social work to consider environmental sustainability within its education and practice.

Through ESW, social work students need to be prepared for practice in areas such as disasters of natural and human origin (Alston *et al.*, 2019); protection of the bio-physical environment; and proactive engagement with social, human and ecological development in the community (Gray *et al.*, 2013). Essentially, ESW recognizes the inter-twinned connection between human-nature and well-being, and accordingly sets goals to help create sustainable conditions for the flourishing of both human and natural worlds (Gray *et al.*, 2013; Gray and Coates, 2015; Ramsay and Boddy, 2016).

ESW is central in emerging social work approaches such as 'Ecosocial Work' (Matthies *et al.*, 2001), 'Green Social Work' (Dominelli, 2012) and 'Ecological Social Work' (McKinnon and Alston, 2016). In particular, 'Ecosocial Work' relies on ecological arguments and justifications in making demands for social justice, as well as advocating for the respect of human rights and participatory approaches through social work interventions in the communities (Matthies *et al.*, 2001). 'Ecological Social Work' places both humanity and nature at the centre of its education and practice with a view to ensure the sustainability of natural resources for the long term (McKinnon and Alston, 2016). Moreover, 'Green Social Work' aims to coproduce 'transformative social change that creates a living, viable earth with equitable shared and distributed resources and opportunities' (Dominelli, 2018, pp. 18-19). All these different approaches connect the social, economic and ecological dimensions to each other, thereby making a shift from modernist to holistic foundations in social work education and practice (Ramsay and Boddy, 2016).

The global agreements on social work and its commitment towards SD therefore calls for ESW education and practice across the planet (Rambaree *et al.*, 2019; Bowles *et al.*, 2016; Drolet *et al.*, 2015; Gray and Coates, 2015). As a response to this call, several universities – including the University of Gävle – have developed social work education encompassing SD (which includes ESW). Within this context, this study aims to analyse students' reflective tasks on challenges for ESW education and practice to discuss the implications of the findings for accelerating the implementation of SD in social work curricula. The specific research questions addressed in this article are as follows:

RQ1. How do social work students perceive ESW practice?

RQ2. What are the implications of the findings for accelerating the implementation of SD in a social work curricula?

In answering these research questions, this study uses a critical theory framework.

1.2 Theoretical framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual and theoretical framework used in this study. The narrative explanation on this framework is provided below.

Critical theory (CT) draws on a wide range of disciplines to critique society with the purpose not only to understand it but also to advocate for social, economic, ecological and

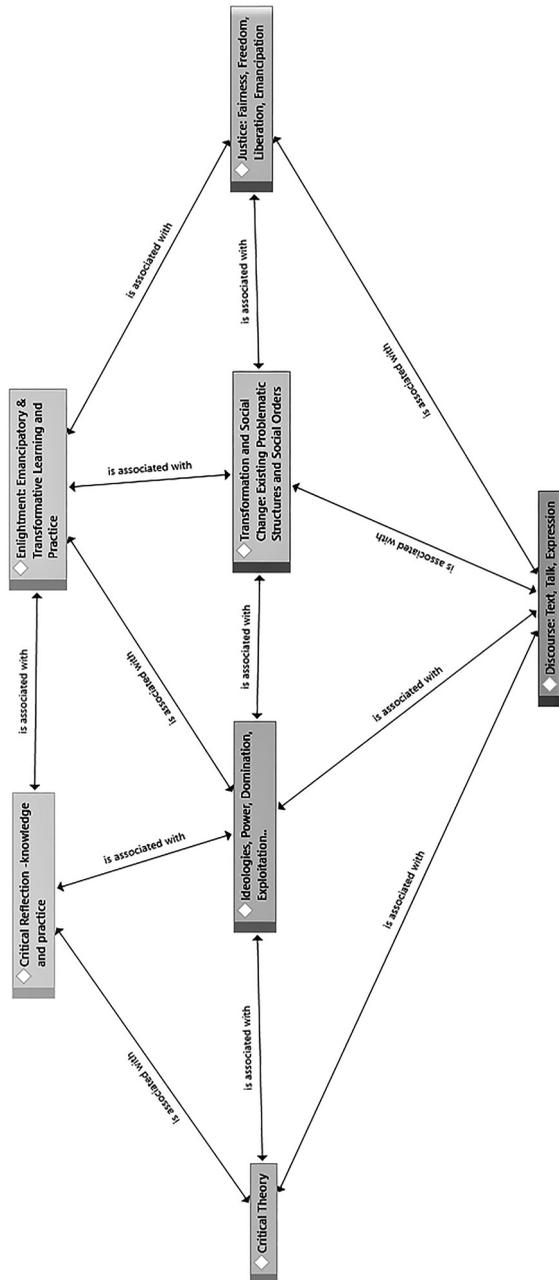


Figure 1.
Conceptual and
theoretical
framework

political changes aimed at achieving justice, fairness and freedom in society (Fleming, 2016; Fuchs, 2017). In particular, CT helps to critically analyse the role of power, domination and exploitation in society by investigating contradictions, structures, practices, ideologies, relations and political praxis (Fuchs, 2017). In this sense, CT is often viewed as an extension of Marxists' criticisms of capitalism in society; however, with the addition of strategies for emancipation. Emancipation is understood as the achievement of freedom from coercive, oppressive and exploitative conditions and forces, based on the principles of human rights and justice. In this endeavour, enlightenment through education – incorporating deep critical understanding and knowledge – is regarded as a critical condition. According to Geuss (1998), enlightenment encompasses the following commitments:

- certain ideals such as, autonomy, non-coercion and happiness;
- 'genuine' knowledge, which is 'objectifying' and based on a clear and strict separation between the human subject and nature (as object of knowledge); and
- a principle of universal criticism; i.e. nothing is to be taken on faith or authority or tradition.

From this perspective, CT plays a fundamental role in social work education, research and practice. CT is therefore found to be suitable for this study because there are several reasons how such perspectives can contribute towards having a better understanding of the factors necessary for the acceleration of SD in a social work curricula. The CT perspective provides justifications and motivations for learners, researchers, educators and practitioners to make deep critical reflections on existing social orders, as well as structural causes of social problems to identify feasible and sustainable solutions for better lives and living conditions for all. In particular, critical theorists reject the view that theory should guide practice. Rather, they argue that the knowledge base for practice needs to be derived from continuous critical reflection. Critical reflection allows the improvement of awareness on how specific conditions and experiences are influenced by certain underlying and sometimes unquestioned assumptions, forces, power and practices inherent in society. In fact, critical reflection is not only considered as an important approach in social work education but also as an emancipatory method for engaging in the creation of knowledge and for making effective changes in society (Whitaker and Reimer, 2017; Wodak and Meyer, 2014). Moreover, critical reflection is an effective social work education approach and method to challenge students' blind spots in their knowledge about society and its inherent social structures and processes (Fogel *et al.*, 2016).

For critical theorists, discourses are an essential element in understanding society. Fairclough and Wodak (as referred in Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 61) state that:

[...] discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices [...] It does not just contribute to the shaping and reshaping of social structures but also reflects them.

Discourse therefore represents ideas and patterned ways of thinking, reasoning and communicating, as well as a system of possibilities for the construction of knowledge based on its interpretations and understandings (Lupton, 1992). All these arguments justify this approach in responding to the aim and the research questions of this study. In particular, this study focuses on a qualitative research methodology that is based on a critical analysis of students' discourses on ESW to answer the set research questions.

2. Description of the study areas and methodology

2.1 Study site and area

This study is based on a master level elective course, entitled “*Social Work and Sustainable Development*” at the University of Gävle, Sweden. The course, which carries 7.5 higher education credits, is delivered completely online on a part-time basis over 10 weeks during the second part of the autumn semester (November to January). The Swedish higher education credits are equivalent to the European Credit Transfer System credits, in which 60 higher education credits are the equivalent of one year of full-time study (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2019). The course is open to postgraduates who have an educational background in social work or any other related disciplines within the field of social sciences. “*Social Work and Sustainable Development*” was introduced for the first time during the 2013-2014 academic year. On an average, the course has annually attracted about 20 students. Over the years, the course learning outcomes, content, literature and pedagogical method have been amended after annual evaluation exercises. Currently, the learning outcomes for the course are framed as follows:

On completion of the course, the student should be able to do the following: explain concepts related to eco-social work; describe theories, methods and practices related to social work and SD; discuss issues related to ecological social work with different audiences and demonstrate the ability to apply an eco-social approach in social work with children, the elderly, disabled people and people vulnerable to violence and abuse (Refer to www.hig.se/4.5202771113a0820145e87d.html?identifier=SAA010 for further information on the course).

2.2 Research methods

2.2.1 Sampling and data collection. Participants for this study comprised 49 students from the course “*Social Work and Sustainable Development*”, representing four different cohorts from academic years 2015-2018. They represent those students who have completed at least one of the three critical reflective tasks found within the course. The reflective questions were developed from a CT perspective, aiming to explore students’ perspectives, ideologies, concerns and assumptions regarding ESW education and practice. Such information is vital for obtaining a better understanding of areas of focus in the process of accelerating the implementation of SD social work. For ethical reasons, some of the background information on the students – such as gender, age and country of origin – was not recorded in the study.

The critical reflective tasks were spread and completed over different units of the course and they were non-mandatory and non-examinable. The tasks were set on the teaching and learning platform – Blackboard. They were framed as follows:

- Why and how social workers in your own country/region need to engage in ESW?;
- How would you like to make a difference in practicing ESW for SD? (What would you like to do?); and
- Make a critical reflection on the effects of climate change in your neighbourhood.

The students uploaded the responses to the reflective tasks (about five hundred words each) on Blackboard. These responses were transferred from Blackboard and compiled in an excel file. The excel file was then imported to ATLAS-ti v.8.4 (a qualitative data analysis software) for a critical discourse analysis (CDA) using the steps from Rambaree (2014). The responses of the students to the reflective tasks were therefore the qualitative data that have been analysed.

2.2.2 Data analysis. CDA is derived as a qualitative methodological data analysis approach and technique that is related to CT. It is primarily known as an interpretative

methodology, based on the deconstruction of discourses, with an explanatory intent for bringing positive change in society (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). In this particular study, the underlying discourses in the students' reflections are deconstructed during the data analysis process to provide answers to the set research questions. Essentially, CDA focuses on critically analysing the underlying assumptions, ideologies and expressions of power inherent within discourses that are expressed through texts (and talks). Jäger and Maier (2016) argue that CDA requires the researchers to expose the evaluations that are inherent in a discourse to reveal the contradictions within and between discourses, as well as the limits of what can be said, done and shown. Discourse analysis within transformative social work learning therefore involves the critical assessment of beliefs, assumptions, expectations and feelings (not only that of the students but also that of all others within a society) to guide justifiable transformative actions towards SD (Jones, 2016; Mezirow, 2003). In this study, factors affecting ESW education and practice through the deconstruction and analysis of students' discourses, using a critical perspective, were essential in exploring ways for accelerating SD within the social work curricula.

As mentioned earlier, ATLAS-ti v.8.4 software was used to analyse the discourses of the students as revealed in their reflections. Segments of the students' reflections that were linked to the two research questions of this study were coded with the help of the software. For instance, in gathering answers for the research question on how social work students perceive ESW practice, all related responses given by the students in their respective reflective tasks were selected as quotations, and then coded using the different features available in the ATLAS-ti 8.4 software. To start with, open codes, mostly as words or short phrases such as 'Authorities', 'Empowerment', 'Practice Regulations' and 'Climate Refugees' were used. Such codes were then grouped into categories of discourses such as 'Being Boxed', 'Safe and Saviour Sweden' and 'Power and Politics' using the 'Merge' feature in ATLAS-ti v8.4.

In answering the research question on the implications of the findings for accelerating the implementation of SD in the social work curricula, the 'Memo' and 'Network' features in ATLAS-ti v8.4 were used. For instance, analytical memos on implications for 'Being Boxed' were created using the 'Memo' feature, and then linked to its respective category of discourse that is 'Being Boxed'. The analytical memo contained an analysis of the author/researcher. It also incorporated supportive points/arguments/discussions from the literature on critical discourses related to the implications for accelerating SD in a social work curricula through ESW. As mentioned earlier, the discourse analysis focused on the ideologies, beliefs, assumptions and power related discussions inherent in the students' reflections. The results of this article are therefore focused on discussing those main students discourses that need critical consideration in the process of accelerating the implementation of SD in a social work curricula.

2.2.3 Ethical considerations. As per the information from the Swedish law on social research ethics (Svensk författningssamling, 2003, p. 460), social research that does not involve any records of names or other details of interviewees or any details that could connect a specific person to a crime or illegal activity do not need to have ethical approval from a board. Accordingly, this research did not require ethical approval from a review board. Nevertheless, general social research ethical guidelines, as outlined by Hardwick and Worsley (2011), were carefully followed in the research process. At the beginning of the course, students were informed about the possibilities for certain non-examinable course materials, such as the pre-course survey and the reflective tasks, to be used for research purposes by the course administrator. The reflective tasks were non-examinable and non-

mandatory. Finally, the responses of the students are anonymised in the reporting and discussion of the results.

3. Results and discussion

The analytical network generated from ATLAS-ti v8.4 is shown in [Figure 2](#).

3.1 Students' reflections

The main results highlighted from the students' critical reflections are summarised below. Firstly, some students are concerned that they will not be able to practice ESW in Sweden because of the way social work practice is organised and structured. They perceive social work practice as '*being boxed*' for individual/family focused clinical practice with no room for structural social work. Secondly, some students hold the perception that Sweden is '*safe*' and is a '*saviour*' for 'others' in relation to climate/environmental emergency. Finally, most of the participating students perceived ESW as being political in nature; accordingly, they expect to acquire knowledge and skills related to political empowerment strategies and actions. The main findings of this study are discussed in detail below.

3.1.1 Being boxed. In their reflections, several students wrote about social work in Sweden being very much geared towards individual/micro level/clinical practice, and therefore leaving social workers at municipal level with almost no possibility for ESW practice. These students referred to the Swedish social workers as '*Being Boxed*' (a category used in the analysis) by established regulations and guidelines formulated by local/national authorities. The local/national level regulations and guidelines create boundaries for social work practice. According to these students, as the regulations and guidelines stand, social workers in Sweden have almost no mandate to undertake ESW practice. A couple of reflections from those students are given as examples below:

Student D02: In Sweden today, there is not much room for working on environmental sustainably. The social service has a large individual focus and [...] all the time goes in helping clients on an individual level.

Student D04: [...] how can I from where I am located in the world, help in working towards social work for sustainable development? I reside in Sweden and have worked for a local municipality [...], where the methodological framework is based upon the individual's needs [...].

In addition, although ESW practice can take place at individual level, it mainly requires social change through structural social work. Structural social work considers social problems being inherent in societal structures such as capitalism; therefore, the focus of change is mainly on social structures and not individuals (Närhi and Matthies, 2018). However, the Swedish Social Service Law (Socialtjänstlagen) from 1982/2001 (revised in 2018) requires social work at three levels (individual, structural and general), and the role of structural social work has been largely marginalized and neglected in Sweden since the end of 1980s (Turunen, 2009; Sjöberg and Turunen, 2018).

Student D07: Generally, most social work today is individual based, I believe that one must assume that a change of this is necessary to be able to work actively for sustainable development [...] social services within the municipality and county councils need to change [...] structural social work is not given importance.

With neo-liberal changes, particularly with the introduction of new public management within social services during the 1990s – with its emphasis on the intensification of work, the measurement of performance in service delivery, and cost efficiencies – social work in

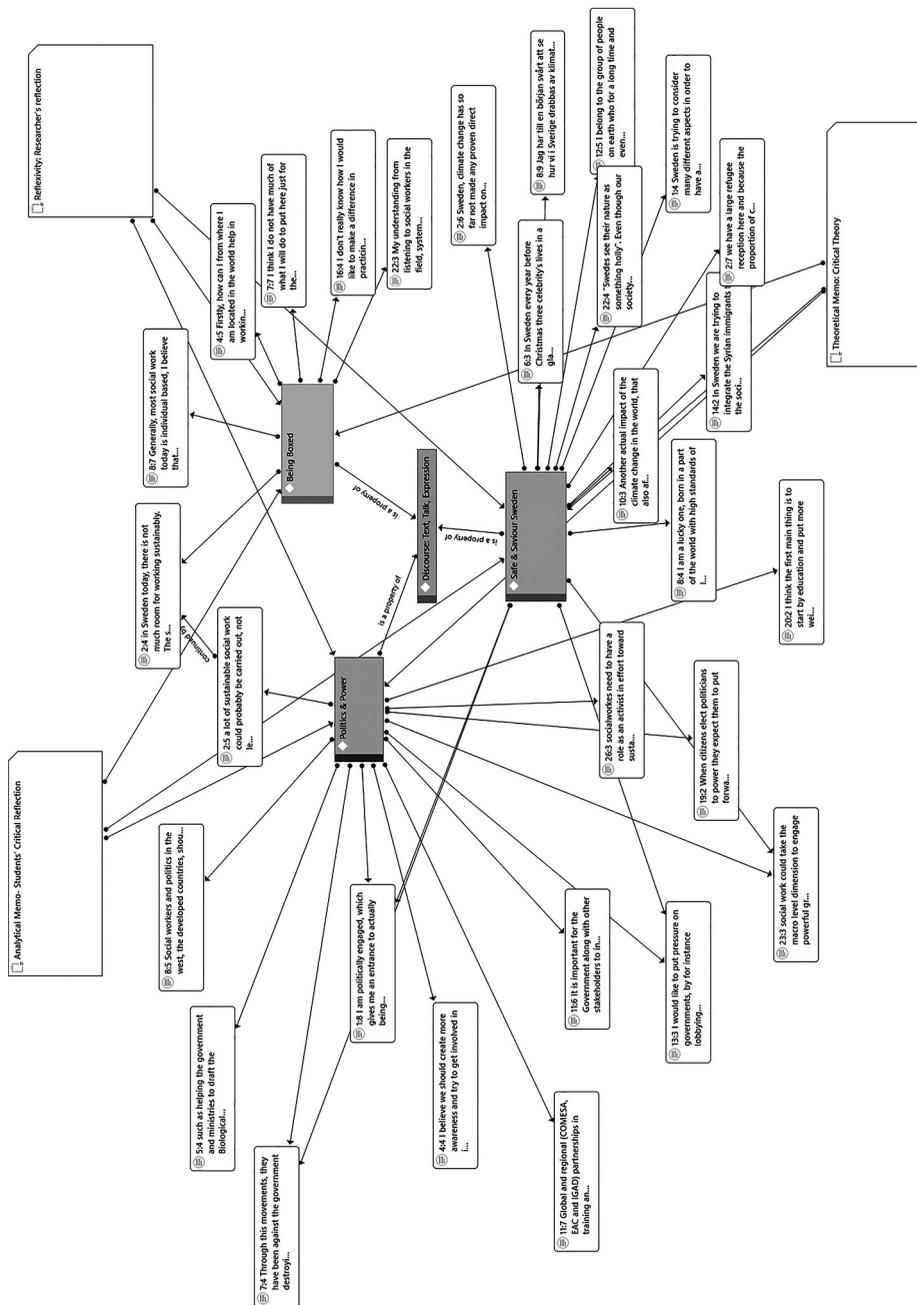


Figure 2.
Analytical network

Sweden has become predominantly focused on evidence-based clinical practice at individual level (Herz and Johansson, 2011; Jönsson, 2019; Righard and Montesino, 2012). In several European countries (such as Sweden, Finland and Germany), social work is therefore 'entangled in neo-liberal and neo-bureaucratic structures of governance which treat people rather as objects' (Matthies, 2009, p. 326). Social services in many Western countries such as Sweden are therefore being designed as rotating doors that focus on individuals in crisis who, when the symptoms of the emergency have eased, are sent directly back to the stressful environment (Truell, 2019). As one student wrote:

Student D39: Why should I bother when more importance are given to individual psychological concern [...] some (authorities) do not know that individual psychosocial problems are linked to environmental problems.

Hayward *et al.* (2013) argue that, despite efforts by educators and students alike, broader market forces continue to demand employment in direct clinical practice at the individual/micro level, which does not create opportunities and possibilities for the integration of interventions – such as ESW – at the structural level. In particular, CT, from the dialectical approach, argues that this is exactly how neo-liberal structural forces control agents of social change in the interest of the dominant capitalist class. In this case, social workers as agents of social change seem to be controlled by state authorities, which are operating within dominant capitalist social structures. This aspect should be a major cause for concern in contemporary social work education and practice. In this sense, a student suggested that,

Student D 07: social workers need to build alliances at national and global levels in calling for structural social work practice within social work services in municipalities.

3.1.2 Safe and saviour Sweden. Moreover, CDA of students' reflective tasks also reveal that some of them see Sweden as being '*relatively safe*' from the impact of climate change. In addition, some students' discourses commonly describe Sweden as a '*Saviour*', taking care of those climate change refugees who come to Sweden. For instance, some quotations read as follows:

Student D06: In Sweden, climate change has so far not made any proven direct impact on the society. On the other hand, we have a large refugee reception here, and because the proportion of climate refugees is expected to increase, I guess we will have a continued high flow of refugees coming to us.

Student D08: I am a lucky one, born in a part of the world with high standards of living, with economic wealth, and protected from most of the major catastrophes and crises in the world.

Student D19: Sweden is trying to consider many different aspects in order to have a good welfare system and in helping other countries. Though I believe that Sweden sometimes is a bit more concerned about how other countries see Sweden and that we have some reputations to uphold.

Indeed, Sweden is a leading example in climate mitigation and SD measures and policies (Sachs *et al.*, 2018). However, similar to many highly industrialised countries in the world, Sweden has a large per capita carbon footprint, particularly compared to the levels recommended for maintaining a stable climate (Dawkins *et al.*, 2019). In this study, only a few students related and discussed climate emergency in relation to the Swedish high consumption and production-based economy and lifestyles. Therefore, some students' discourses mostly mirror what Bell (2014) refers to as '*Damaging Hegemonic Environmental Discourses*' – i.e. discourses based on taken-for-granted beliefs and hegemony (a form of structural power) to the effect that the ever-expanding economic growth based on capitalism

in Sweden is essential and can do justice to others who are disadvantaged and oppressed through current economic systems. As one of the students put it:

Student D22: We require more housing to be built and that the schools, healthcare, welfare - in general, get more resources. (Municipality X) is an old mill where the industries have long since closed down, people choose to move from the municipality and the population ages drastically. For places like (Municipality X), immigration (climate refugees) has a very positive impact, as the municipality is populated, jobs are created, and the business community benefits.

Thus, it can be argued that some students do think in a narrow manner. Issues such as SD and climate change therefore need to be taught and discussed from a global, integrative and holistic perspective. The inter-connected complexities in thinking about the problems and solutions related to SD need to be deconstructed in a more critical manner by the students. For instance, students reading SD need to get more engaged in pedagogical activities to gain a better understanding of issues related to climate and environmental emergency to properly handle the root causes of climate change and identify innovative ways for adaptation to a changing climate (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019).

3.1.3 Politics and power. In their critical reflections most of the students have somehow linked ESW to '*politics and power*'. According to the reflections of those students, ESW needs to deal with political issues through political commitments and interventions. The critical reflections of some of the students also reflect that ESW needs to deal with the power dynamics that prevails in society at different levels – local, national and global. According to them, to make the transition towards SD possible, social workers need to be empowered for influencing powerful people (such as political and religious leaders), structures and agencies/institutions (such as social work organisations, universities and governments). A couple of the critical reflections selected as quotations on “power and politics” are as follows:

Student D20: Then it is important for social workers to get involved in the political arena. I think today and way back in our history we have lacked the opportunity to get involved in political decisions about so many issues around the world and environmental justice [. . .].

Student D48: Social work is a profession that is steered by politics. This creates an issue when the political stance on certain social issues aren't compatible with the values the social work profession is supposed to stand for [. . .]. We need to empower ourselves (social workers) to face the powerful institutions [. . .].

In particular, social work is understood as a critical, emancipatory and political activity that aims to remove unequal and oppressive structures through collective alliances with citizens (Närhi and Matthies, 2018). In this sense, it could be argued that not only ESW but social work in general is political in nature. Moreover, it is known that SD requires a profound understanding of the politics of sustainability transitions, which involves critical thinking/analysis of power bases and the relations between the different societal actors (Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016). Power, which is used and created through positions, structures, and social interactions (Fook, 2002), is essential in mobilising resources to achieve SD goals. Social work students therefore require knowledge, skills and techniques for building alliances with the citizens for creating and using power through social movements for transiting towards SD. As one of the students put it:

Student D47: For social workers to be able to create change in regards to sustainable development in their practice, I believe there need to be an organizational change and a wider change in the priorities of the social work practice. Based on this, I would like social workers to be more active in their communities and be a part of social movements that advocates for sustainable development and environmental justice [. . .] this is a good way to empower [. . .].

According to [Staub-Bernasconi \(2016\)](#), social work as a profession has triple mandates:

[...] the first one given by the clients, the second one by the state or agency as representatives of society, and the third one by the organised profession itself (p. 44).

She argues that the third mandate is less well known in European countries like Sweden [Staub-Bernasconi \(2016\)](#). The responses of the students support her claim. Social workers, therefore, have a professional mandate to politically organise themselves based on their professional ethical obligation to intervene for achieving environmental justice and for the respect of environmental rights in society. Similarly, [Reisch and Jani \(2012\)](#) opine that the profession's ethical imperative to pursue social justice, and the application of this principle to practice and advocacy legitimise social work as a political profession.

3.2 Implications of findings

The findings from this study have several implications for accelerating the implementation of SD in social work curricula. Previous studies, based on their respective findings, have called for integrating ESW within the core curricula of social work education ([Drolet et al., 2015](#); [Harris and Boddy, 2017](#); [Miller and Hayward, 2014](#); [Nesmith and Smyth, 2015](#)). However, the findings from this study point out that simply adding ESW units or courses is not enough for accelerating the implementation of SD in social work curricula. The research participants' discourses imply that the ESW curricula need to be designed with 'Transformative and Emancipatory Pedagogy' (TEP). ESW requires a shift from "the banking" pedagogy ([Freire, n.d.](#)), which continues to support a self-defeating social order, to a TEP that facilitates and enables developing collaborative skills, methods and approaches for structural changes towards a just and sustainable society ([Coates, 2003](#)).

As this study highlights, there is a need for liberating students from the feelings/fear/concern of 'Being Boxed'. In this sense, an ESW curriculum needs to promote critical knowledge and perspectives based on TEP to accelerate the implementation of SD in the social work curricula. In particular, the ESW curriculum requires a deep examination of how political economy is linked to environmental/climate emergency through the current socio-political-economic structures of society. It is apparent that the current arrangements of capitalism to deliver sustainable solutions for eco-social problems such as famine, poverty, inequality and environmental crisis have failed ([Peeters, 2017](#)). To accelerate the implementation of SD in the social work curricula, there is a need for ESW with TEP for making the shift towards 'a good life' for all.

From a critical theoretical perspective, education can be seen as an explicitly political activity that serves to critique and challenge the way knowledge is constructed and propagated ([Jones, 2016](#)). ESW education has therefore an important mission to tackle the 'Damaging Hegemonic Environmental Discourses' as referred to in [Bell \(2014, pp. 43-50\)](#). In this particular task, ESW education need to include critical reflection and dialogue on how social work knowledge emerging from the context of industrial capitalism relates to global and environmental problems for the world's least-advantaged citizens ([Boetto and Bell, 2015](#); [Jones, 2010](#)). The transition towards sustainability requires revisiting the Western/Eurocentric social work curricula because SD requires an holistic and global perspective on problems such as climate change and related environmental crises.

For instance, in relation to the notion of a 'safe and saviour Sweden', a critical perspective is essential for students to recognise the consequences of the Global North's disproportionate consumption and exploitation of natural resources on developing countries, and its impact on climate refugees ([Dominelli, 2014](#); [Fogel et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, ESW within the context of SD requires political activism, as has been reported by most of

the research participants from this study. A curriculum oriented towards political activism empowers both educators and learners to make the shift from being passive knowledge recipients/sharers to become '*Transformative Intellectuals*' (Giroux, 1988). The profession of social work is often described as being emancipatory and transformative; therefore, it is obvious that its education requires theory, approaches and methodologies based on TEP.

TEP is underpinned by moral/ethical values that support educators and learners as 'beings-in-relation' (both to the natural environment, and to each other?) as well as 'beings-in-becoming' (active in the process of transformation) (Farren, 2016). In particular, social work is commonly known as a value- and ethics-based profession. In this sense, the ESW curricula require critical pedagogical methodologies that allow students to make critical reflections on different value systems (own, professional, institutional and societal). In fact, TEP is deeply rooted in the notion and value that education should play a role in creating a just and democratic society (Nouri and Sajjadi, 2014). Incorporating such an approach in the ESW curricula is essential in challenging the hegemony of eurocentrism within SD policies and practices. TEP in ESW enables educators and students to challenge their own and societal core assumptions, values and practices about SD (Kubanza *et al.*, 2015; Mezirow, 2003). In catalysing environmentalism, TEP-based ESW involves teaching students how to read and write in relation to the awakening of their consciousness about their social reality (Nhapi and Mathende, 2017) and developing transformative pathways for responding to SD issues, concerns, policies and practices.

Some good examples of TEP-based methodologies for ESW such as '*World Café/Gurteen Knowledge Café*', '*Mind Mapping*' and '*Doomsday Clock*' can be found in Powers and Rinkel (2018). In addition, contemporary educational facilities in many countries, such as Sweden, offer a panoply of innovative technological tools for catalysing environmentalism through a TEP-based ESW curricula. For instance, electronic educational platforms such as '*Blackboard*', '*Moodle*' and '*Canvas*' are inbuilt/linked with several functions that could be used for promoting and enhancing TEP. Some electronic tools for critical reflection, which are popular among many students, are '*Wikis*', '*Blogs*', and '*Padlet*'. Some universities, including the University of Gävle, Sweden, have invested in '*Digital Learning Labs*' that include technological facilities for having '*Flipped Classrooms*', '*Zoom-based Webinars*' and '*Virtual and Augmented Reality Studios*'. Such facilities have huge potential for catalysing environmentalism within the social work curricula. For instance, the use of virtual and augmented reality in ESW enhances critical learning through experiential situations that allow observation, knowledge construction, reflexivity and reflectivity. Virtual and augmented reality is also believed to play a significant role within the affective domain of learning, allowing ESW learners to get involved with feelings, values and emotions in their interaction and engagement. Such tools and pedagogical methodologies are essential for having a deep critical understanding on environmental conditions from all around the globe, and thereby formulating appropriate holistic policies and pathways for transformative ESW practices.

However, the implications from this study need to be considered with few limitations. It is mainly based on the analysis of 'problematic' discourses of some of the students. The majority of the students and discourses are not considered. This was purposely done for looking at the challenges of teaching and learning ESW as part of the process in accelerating the implementation of SD in the social work curricula. Moreover, it would have been interesting, and probably enlightening, to explore the background of the students (such as gender, ethnicity and religion), as well as any concomitant beliefs or prejudices (whether consciously held, or otherwise) that would need to be addressed for an effective social

worker outcome. Perhaps, future study with ethical approval from a board could explore this particular aspect with the view to enhance the quality of teaching and learning of ESW.

4. Conclusion

ESW within the social work curricula has remained at the margin in many countries, including in Sweden (Bowles *et al.*, 2016; Drolet *et al.*, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2013). Within the context of SD, there is a global call for social work education to incorporate ESW. Within this context, this study analysed some students' reflective tasks using a CDA methodology to report some of the main challenges for ESW education and practice. Based on the results, this study argues for TEP in accelerating the implementation of SD in the curricula.

For long, the teaching and learning of environmental concerns has been neglected in social work curricula. Social work as one of the vital agents of social change in society and needs environmental education to prepare practitioners for working on all the three main dimensions of SD, i.e. social, economic and environmental. The current state of the environment is a major global cause of concern and worry for all. For decades, several political leaders and professionals (such as social workers) have failed to consider societal transformation towards SD in a comprehensive and more holistic manner with a high degree of seriousness.

Consequently, millions of school children from all around the world are going on strike and demanding more action in relation to the climate/environmental emergency. The children on 'climate strike' are feeling insecure and unprotected by policy-makers. For instance, social workers in Sweden are supposed to play a central role in 'child protection' within their mission, termed '*barnen bästa*' (in the best interest of children), and these children are pointing out that professionals, such as social workers, among many others, have failed to guarantee protection for them. Instead, the children, by going on climate strikes, have decided to take practical social action into their own hands to demand for social change and transformation (Reed, 2019). This is perhaps one of the concrete outcomes of a TEP. TEP creates the conditions and synergies for positive societal change and transformation of problematic structures and systems. Here is a popular quote from Greta Thunberg – a well-known Swedish student and climate activist – supporting the view why TEP should not be neglected in accelerating the implementation of SD in the curricula. The quote reads:

You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes [...] We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis [...] if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, then [...] we should change the system itself (Thunberg, as quoted in Regitano, 2018).

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