

# **Ecological Identity in Education: Subverting the Neoliberal Self**

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## **Abstract**

The neoliberal ideology that is hijacking educational institutions entails an atomistic, individualistic, and Western vision of self. Students are understood as competitive, economic, homogenous entities. Interpreted as information stockpiles, students collect the data necessary for the regurgitation that enables assuming their role in the marketplace. Alternatively, the ecological conception of self is relational, cooperative, embraces community relations, and reflects the insights of ecology. Students are recognized as diverse in terms of their particular learning needs, interests, strengths, and relevant personal history. The vision of the self that serves as the foundation to neoliberal shifts in education is, I argue, unhealthy, epistemically untenable, and problematically contradictory. Nurturing students' ecological selfhood is one way to subvert the neoliberal conceptualization of self and its attendant ideological constructions and assumptions.

*Keywords:* ecological self, neoliberalism, education, identity, pedagogy

*When the definition of self- changes, the meaning of self-interest and self-serving motivations changes accordingly (Brewer 1991,p. 476).*

## **Introduction**

Neoliberal ideology is being used to hijack educational institutions, and it is widely recognized that a number of serious problems result. William Pinar (2012) calls the trajectory of educational paradigms in the West “school deform,” where historical amnesia is achieved through standardized testing which lacks relevant content and context, where political passivity is cultivated by students being taught to regurgitate rather than to think critically, and where cultural standardization is manifest through a one-size-fits-all curriculum that ignores the need to respect cultural diversity. In what follows I address how deeply formative the vision of self projected onto students is. I highlight self-construction as a site for resistance and nurturing alternatives. In particular, I juxtapose how neoliberal and ecological visions of self shape ways of being and seeing.<sup>1</sup> I begin by looking at neoliberal ideology and exploring the vision of self that

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<sup>1</sup> My characterizations of the neoliberal self and ecological self would better be characterized as neoliberal selves and ecological selves given the diversity within each of these concepts, but for the sake of increasing the ease and flow of reading I've used the terminology of the ecological self and neoliberal self. These are complex terms and although I take the characteristics I outline to be essential elements, these terms are neither reducible to the elements I outline nor are all elements of conceptualizing ecological and neoliberal selves addressed. However, important elements of the constellation of terms that surround each are addressed through my characterization.

grounds it. The neoliberal self is characterized as atomistic, individualistic, competitive, economic, and Western.<sup>2</sup> I then explore an alternative approach to constructing the self, namely an ecological conceptualization of the self. The ecological self is envisioned as relational, reflective of community relations, cooperative, and it reveals a world seen through the clarifying lens of ecology.

I bring the above insights to bear on conceptualizations of students in academic institutions. On the neoliberal model of selfhood students are imagined to be homogeneous, competitive, individual, economic entities. On this view, student development occurs best when students are interpreted as information stockpiles, collecting the data necessary for the regurgitation that facilitates assuming their role in the marketplace. Alternatively, on an ecological model of selfhood, students are treated as cooperative members of ecological communities, and are taken to be diverse in terms of their particular learning needs, interests, strengths, and relevant personal history. On this view student development occurs best through nurturing the liberating growth of uniquely situated individuals in learning communities. The vision of the self that serves as the foundation to neoliberal shifts in education is, I argue, unhealthy, epistemically untenable, and problematically contradictory. Nurturing students' ecological selfhood is postulated as one way to subvert the neoliberal conceptualization of self and its attendant ideological constructions and assumptions.

## **The Neoliberalization of Education**

### **Neoliberalism**

To begin, I situate my analysis of the neoliberal self in David Harvey's account of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a theory that imagines human well-being is best achieved through an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade—such an approach is meant to liberate individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills (Harvey, 2007a). The neoliberal subject best exemplifies their human capacities through private ownership and competition in a context where there is minimal intervention in economic trade. Priority is, therefore, given to economics to construct and manifest key elements of the ideal human life and ideal self-construct. Neoliberalism has become a hegemonic mode of discourse embedded into the basic, common-sense, ways the world is interpreted, lived in, and understood (Harvey, 2007a). Its ideology is so pervasive it is often not perceived as an ideology. Adequate analysis therefore requires consciously recognizing neoliberalism as ideology and specifically as Western ideology.

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<sup>2</sup> When I speak of these characteristics I am referring to them in excessive amounts and to the exclusion of reflection and celebration of other ways of conceptualizing the self. More literally I am referring to a hyper-atomistic, hyper-individualistic, hyper-competitive, hyper-economic, and hyper-Western conceptualization of self. Such aspects need not be inherently problematic, for example healthy senses of individuation are possible. Rather, my worry is that when such characteristics are taken to either stand for the whole or overshadow or undervalue other aspects of self we face the problems outlined in what follows.

Worrisomely, relations and values on the neoliberal paradigm are often reduced to market relations and economic values. Given the emphasis on contractual relations in the marketplace, market exchange operates as an ethic in itself, which replaces previously held ethical beliefs and guides human action (Harvey, 2007a). Neoliberalism attempts to bring all human action into the purview of the market and maintains that the social good is maximized through capitalizing on the reach and frequency of market transactions (Harvey, 2007a). This highly reductive approach undermines the import of developing rich and thoughtful engagement with various other domains of human life, such as social, ethical, and political domains. As such, it is an impoverished account.

The reach of neoliberal ideology is extensive, penetrating a diversity of realms, including the private realm. Neoliberalization has affected various institutional frameworks and powers such as: the division of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, technologies, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, and at a basic level attachment to the land and habits of the heart (Harvey, 2007a). In other words, neoliberalism not only casts its shadow on broadly construed political, economic, and social relations—it also stretches its dark tendrils into the very core of individuals. Two domains that have suffered greatly as a result of neoliberal agendas and ontologies are those of education and the non-human environment. As with any reductive analysis, complex relationships, values and beliefs are forced to fit the existing criteria of sense-making or else are rendered irrelevant. On the neoliberal paradigm if something is deemed economically irrelevant it is not acknowledged as worth attending to. The application of this theory of social-political-economic practices has had dire ramifications for the welfare of most humans, the health and functioning of the environment, and for Western educational practices (Clover, 2002; Harvey, 2007b; Hirsch & Henderson, 2011). Economic cost-benefit analysis tends to externalize ecological inputs and harms, resulting in consumption with abandon of the “resources” that underwrite life on this planet. So too, the economic cost-benefit analysis of education tends to externalize student and teacher inputs and harms, resulting in consumption with abandon of the “resources” that underwrite the meaningful education of a critically thinking populous. The “resources” are only recognized in so far as they can be used to achieve economic ends. The intrinsic worth of existing relations of support and a history of various community members growing in synergistic, complementary, relation are ignored in an effort to make money. In so doing what is required for a healthy future is destroyed. It is from within this social-political-economic climate that many educators are facing the challenge of education. I will now turn to the vision of the human self that is created and maintained by neoliberal ideology. This deformity of the human self is projected onto humans, and, for the purposes of this paper, onto students in particular.

### **Self-Construct: Atomistic, Individualistic, Competitive, Economic, Western**

Through addressing the conceptualization of the self-underwriting neoliberalism, we are better placed to identify problematic notions of human nature and the ideal form of life being advocated for humans. Freya Mathews (1991) provides a concise historical account of how atomistic, individualistic metaphysics have functioned in Western philosophic thought. Mathews argues that the world has been viewed since classical times in the Western tradition as composed of discrete individual substances; logically

and mutually independent individual objects are taken to be bound in a causal web (Mathews, 1991).<sup>3</sup> The view of the individual as atomistic came into fullness in the liberal tradition (Mathews, 1991). For example, in Locke's political philosophy men live as equal, and separate units in a state of nature and the body politic is an aggregate of consenting individuals (Mathews, 1991). On Locke's view social atomism is a presupposition of political thought, with supreme value invested in the isolated individual whose sacred and inalienable rights limit others from impinging on them and their property (Mathews, 1991).<sup>4</sup> A political theory rooted first and foremost in atomistically construed individuals encourages a particular and limited vision of ideal social, ethical, and political relations (Rowe, 2012). An atomistic ontology lends itself to views of selves as isolated entities in antagonistic relations where competition rather than connection is presumed. Individual humans, like individual atoms, compete for space (Mathews, 1991).

An atomistic construal of the self (independent, isolated, impenetrable) remains crucial to neoliberal conceptualizations of the self, in which freedom of the individual remains central. Harvey highlights how founding fathers of neoliberal thought adopted the political ideal of individual freedom as fundamental, but misrepresented individual freedoms as the sort of thing achievable through freedom of the market and of trade (Harvey, 2007a). The "freedoms" embodied by the neoliberal state reproduce the interests of private property owners, businesses, and multinational corporations (Harvey, 2007). This restrictive set of interests fails to reflect the fertile, relational, emotional, dimensions of selfhood so crucial to human thriving. Individual interests are reduced to acquisition of property (Rowe, 2012). On this paradigm we are encouraged to identify as economic selves, vying for existence in the competitive world of corporate capitalism. Individuals are encouraged to adopt the subjectivity of economic entrepreneurs, and the social and economic are constituted as binary opposites (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Selves are construed as rationally only interested in their selfish goals, and the key goals identified are consumption and accumulation (Durning, 1992). As Martha Nussbaum so eloquently puts it, "Distracted by the pursuit of wealth, we increasingly ask our schools to turn out useful profit-makers rather than thoughtful citizens" (Nussbaum 2010, 141-42). Students are conceptualized as consumers rather than citizens (Pinar, 2012). As James Carey (1992) puts it, "Economic man became the whole man, the only man [*sic*]" (qtd. in Pinar, 2012, p. 10).

Neoliberal ideology and the attendant envisioning of the self must be recognized as Western constructs if one wishes to remedy the silencing that occurs via dominant discourse. Ideals touted as universal are often in fact limited to Western cultural assumptions regarding "individualism, industrialization, economic growth, free markets, and institutionalized education"; these are then taken to be "foundations upon which social and education policies are built in national and regional contexts. . . ." (McKenzie, 2012, p. 167). Madhu Suri Esteva and Gustavo Prakash (1998) contend this is so marked that the underlying assumptions of "economic globalization, human rights, and

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<sup>3</sup> While Mathews draws on various examples, including the work of Thomas Hobbes, Sir Isaac Newton and René Descartes, I will be focusing on her comments regarding John Locke below.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of how gender problematically functions in Locke's account see Carole Pateman (1988).

individualism are working together to further a ‘western recolonization’ of the majority of the rest of the world (qtd. in McKenzie, 2012, p. 167). In terms of selfhood it is useful to recognize, for example, the wisdom contained in diverse Indigenous self-concepts in relation to nature (Glazebrook, 2011; Whyte, 2014). Another example can be derived from African conceptualizations of self that invert the individualism of predominant Western notions of self. Worries about Wade Noble’s oversimplification of a European ethos and an African ethos aside, his account of the extended self found in African self-concept calls attention to this inversion. Noble’s notion of an extended self is meant to reflect that at the heart of the African self-concept is the “we” rather than the “I” (Noble, 1976, p. 20). The self is taken to come into being, and is only possible, through the ontologically prior community. These are just two of a plethora of alternatives to the neoliberal construct of self.

Mark Olssen and Michael Peters (2005) outline core principles of neoliberalism, which include viewing individuals as economically self-interested subjects; individuals are construed as rational utility maximizers. The predominance of rational actor theory supports a view of self that is consistent with the neoliberal method of categorizing, and thereby reifying, a particular conceptualization of selves and relations. Yochai Benkler (2011) argues that if we are educated and socialized to think in terms of universal selfishness, and if we habituate and internalize this conception of humans, we will then tend to interpret the information we encounter to fit our existing assumptions. It is for this reason I opened this paper with a quotation from Marilyn Brewer that highlights how a shift in self-definition changes the meanings of self-interest and self-serving motivations (1991). As will be seen shortly, an ecological perception of the self generates community interests and community-serving motivations. Benkler amasses evidence contrary to the underlying assumptions of rational actor theory (that we are solely calculating, rational, self-interested, actors) showing humans to be caring, decent, and kind (2011). This suggests a more benevolent model of who we are as human beings (2011).

Contrary to the neoliberal envisioning of the self, evidence continues to build showing that reducing humans to merely rational actors is not an apt description of humans. Challenges to instrumental metaphors of humans as rational economic calculators continue to develop (Jasper, 1998, p. 398). Peggy Thoits (1989) hypothesizes that the growing interest in emotions in sociology “is likely due to the recognition that humans are not motivated solely by rational-economic concerns. Emotional attachments to others and affective commitments (e.g. desires, attitudes, values, moral beliefs) influence a significant portion of human behavior. . .” (p. 317). One conceptualization of self that I contend can generate more room for diverse dimensions of selfhood is the ecological self.

### **An Ecological Shift in Education**

#### **Self-Construct: Relational, Reflects Community Relations, Cooperative, Ecological Relational, Reflects Community Relations, Cooperative, Ecological**

With his proposal of the ecological self, Norwegian philosopher and environmental activist Arne Naess fundamentally questions Western historical notions of the human self. There is an historical trend in Western philosophy to assume the

separation and superiority of some human beings over and above nature. This is evident in traditions of Greek humanism, the Great Chain of Being in the metaphysics of traditional Christian monotheism, and Cartesian dualism (Taylor, 1986). Naess attempts to remedy this division by initiating discussion about human self-concept and how nature ought to fit into it. Naess (1987) introduced the concept of the ecological self, which is meant to acknowledge that humans' self-constitutive relations are not limited to those with other humans; therefore, all humans necessarily have ecological aspects of selfhood. Humans are constituted, in part, by nature. The relevant question then becomes whether humans consciously acknowledge their ecological selfhood or not. There are multiple interpretations regarding what represents an ecological self, but the concept gained a foothold in Western environmental philosophy because of Naess. Naess' account is a holistic view where humans identify strongly with nature; as such, he presents an ethical orientation that emphasizes interdependence, relationship, and concern for the community in which we are embedded as opposed to an overemphasis on individual rights and independence (Cheney 1987; Naess 1985).

Ecofeminists have developed critiques of, and enhancements to, conceptualizations of ecological selfhood. In what follows I align myself with the work of Val Plumwood. Karen Warren (2000) contends that "one's views about capitalism and the role of market remedies for environmental destruction probably will (and logically should) differ depending on whether one views humans as individual, rational, self-interested pleasure maximizers, or as ecological selves who are co-members of an intrinsically valuable biotic community" (p. 87). Cooperation, as opposed to competition, is essential for healthy relating. Val Plumwood (2002) notes "liberalism assumes at the individual level, the atomistic, autonomous, self-contained self with no essential ties to others and no imaginable motive for cooperating with other atoms," while alternatively, for cooperation, one requires "a relational self, not an atomistic or self-enclosed one, and a matching economic vision of interdependence" (p. 78).<sup>5</sup> Relational selves are conceived as gaining their existence from complex webs of relations, not in spite of them.

Chris Cuomo (2005) highlights that ecological and feminist ontologies generally "take identity and selfhood to be fundamentally relational" (p. 203). Ecofeminists stress connection and the importance of relationships and interdependence (2005). Joan Tronto (1993) argues convincingly that dependency is a "natural part of the human experience," and she critiques liberal models for their limited view of dependence (p. 163). Strong, necessary, life-sustaining dependency can be readily traced to all facets of human life when one is sensitive to how (inter)dependent humans are, and the ways in which we are continuous with others (Kretz, 2009). At the most fundamental level of basic survival humans inescapably depend on a life-supporting environment directly for sustenance. Dependency, interdependency, connectedness and continuity ground human existence.

Plumwood (1993) advocates a feminist relational view of the self. This is contrasted with an account of self as distinct, autonomous, and hyper-separated by sharply defined ego boundaries that work to support theories based on enlightened self-interest and the instrumental treatment of others (1993). When one is hyper-separated

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<sup>5</sup> Although liberal visions of the self are referred to above, the critique offered applies equally well to the neoliberal self as I have outlined it.

from an other the other is not encountered as akin, the other is taken to lack “essential (as opposed to accidental) relations to others, and its ends have no non-eliminable reference to or overlap with the welfare or desire of others” (1993, p. 144). If the ends of others are perceived at all, they are perceived as accidental and contingent; they are seen in terms of enlightened or rational self-interest (1993).

A model of self in which the self is conceptualized as an isolated, atomistic, and self-contained individual—which Plumwood (2002) calls the separative self—leads to unethical and irrational forms of “rationality.” It is an irrational form of “rationality” because the individual is inevitably harmed insofar as the separative self fails to take into account its interdependency. It is unethical because such “rationalizing” is defined in terms of “a calculus of maximizing self-interest;” the “rational” person is taken to pursue prudential-egoist “virtues” in opposition to ethical altruistic ones (2002, p. 33). Moreover, construing selves as hyper-separative gives a misleading account of the world, which omits and/or impoverishes the most significant dimensions of social experience (Plumwood, 1993). A more representative account of the world acknowledges significant dimensions of social experience, including treating individuals as having interdependent interests and needs (Plumwood, 1993).

Healthy human relationships with non-human others are essential to well-being. A social-political-economic view of the self that fails to recognize this is premised on a falsehood. Humans are embedded and embodied in ways that necessitate addressing the varied relations had with non-human others (Kretz, 2009; Suzuki & McConnell, 1997). I argue elsewhere that we benefit from exploring dimensions of open continuities, namely the variety of instances in which boundaries between self and other blur and reveal diverse moral relationships and obligations (2009, p. 121). Through openness to the existing continuities with human and ecological others the plethora of ways we are connected and constituted can be addressed and reflected in self-concept.

Innovative teacher-learners are already addressing ecological identity in classrooms. Notably, environmental educator Mitchell Thomashow (1996) takes ecological selfhood to be essential to his pedagogical approach. Thomashow invites his students to consider how their own actions, values, and ideals are framed by their perceptions of nature. Ecological identity work utilizes direct experiences of nature to frame personal, professional, political, and spiritual decisions/choices/actions/inquiry (1996). For Thomashow, at root ecological identity refers to how we extend our sense of self in relationship to nature and how it is manifest in personality, values, actions and sense of self (1996). Attentive to context, Thomashow wisely builds in diversity, noting that ecological identification must address unique cognitive, intuitive, and affective capacities and perceptions of ecological relations (1996). A defensible articulation of the ecological self requires care in attending to how oppression functions. Ecological selfhood varies based on culture, geographical location, socioeconomic status, age, educational experience, gender and so on (Wilson, 2011).

Thomashow gives a variety of exercises meant to awaken awareness of ecological identity with adult learners and is explicit that ecological identity always emerges in particular social-political contexts (1996, p. 105). Some examples include recalling memories of childhood places, recollecting perceptions of disturbed places, generating an environmental tree as a portrait of ecological identity, participating in meditative hikes, journaling, cataloguing personal property, creating a community network map, drawing a

power flow chart, and making a political genogram.<sup>6</sup> Thomashow maintains that as an approach to environmental studies ecological identity work can be utilized with students at any level, in any setting. Ecological identity work is an educational process that integrates personal growth *and* citizenship. It involves reflective environmental practice and collective introspection to awaken ecological citizenship, personal awareness to help promote responsibility, and mindfulness so as to expand understandings of human/nature interactions. To this end it requires reflective practice that deals with real-world problems.

To complement philosophical analysis, ecological selfhood can be explored from an explicitly psychological perspective. In writing about early childhood education, Ruth Wilson discusses the ecological self as “an individual’s connections with and attitudes toward the natural environment...our individual ecological identities are determined by how we extend our sense of self in relationship to the world of nature” (1996, p. 121). Wilson worries that the unique affinity children have with nature usually decreases as children get older, especially in Western culture (1996). Ecological identity, or the lack thereof, has an impact on psychological health and ability to achieve self-realization and self-actualization. Research indicates that experiencing nature plays a crucial role in shaping personalities and achieving self-actualization. In particular Wilson appeals to the work of Robert Young and Rick Crandall (1984) who explored the relationship between wilderness use and self-actualization. Using Abraham Maslow’s conceptualization of self-actualization, wherein self-actualizers develop positive human capacities to the fullest and thereby experience a more enriched and fully functioning life, the actualization levels of wilderness users were compared with the general public (1984). They found “significant differences ( $p < .03$ ) between the self-actualization scores of wilderness users and nonusers,” confirming the hypothesis that “wilderness users as a group are more self-actualized than nonusers” (1984, p. 156). Although they took the study as a whole to indicate that an overall positive relationship between the two is weak (though not non-existent) they recommended further study that attends to motivations for using wilderness, hypothesizing the difference between wilderness used by escapists vs. those looking to commune with nature might help clarify meaningful relationships between wilderness use and self-actualization (1984). More recently psychologists Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow (2003) write that ecopsychology “represents a therapeutic orientation which holds that humans need to rediscover their ties to the natural world in order to experience full mental health” (p. 7). Concern about increasingly limited exposure to nature, and its impact on selfhood, is likewise reflected in the work of Richard Louv (2008).

Louv (2008) coined the term “nature deficit disorder”; it identifies the costs of alienation from nature such as diminished use of the senses, difficulties with attention, and higher rates of physical and emotional illness. Decreases in exposure to nature are even more worrisome given the data regarding how crucial early childhood positive experiences of nature are for generating adults that care and act on nature’s behalf.<sup>7</sup> Joya

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<sup>6</sup> For those interested in examples pertaining to young learners see, for example, the work of Rita Wilson.

<sup>7</sup> To quote Wilson: “Frequent, positive experiences in the out-of-doors during childhood can promote positive attitudes towards the natural environment. Such attitudes help individuals view the natural world as something good, desirable, and refreshing (Chawla & Hart 1985; Tanner, 1980). As research indicates, without such experiences children tend to develop a wide range of fearful response to and misconceptions about the natural world. One study, for example, found

Palmer et al. (1999) found that consistently across the UK, Canada, and Australia that experiences of nature/outdoors were a central factor in establishing concern for the environment. Concern for the environment reflects a sense of connection with, and moral responsibility to, members of ecological communities.

Above I have focused specifically on neoliberal and ecological conceptualizations of the self. Ecological selfhood highlights the environmental connection, cooperation and community that is present but ignored or denied by neoliberal accounts. The conception of self that grounds the vision of neoliberalism discussed at the outset is thereby exposed as being premised on a falsity. The belief in the atomistic individual is predicated on a denial of the fundamental connectivity, dependence, and support required for even the most simplified, rudimentary existence of a self.

### **Neoliberalism, Education, Identity**

There is no shortage of worries regarding how neoliberal agendas shape education. To build on existing critique, I will address the vision of self projected onto students. It is a vision that shapes students through cultivating particular traits while minimizing or atrophying others. Neoliberalism moves education in the direction of conceptualizing students as competitive, economic individuals, who are homogenous receptacles for stockpiling information. After articulating these problematic manifestations of the neoliberalization of education through highlighting the underlying conceptualization of self at work, I turn to what an eco-imaginary of the self might offer.

#### **Students as Competitive Economic Individuals**

Ken Robinson (2013) notes that current, dominant, formal, Western, educational systems were conceived in the economic circumstances of the industrial revolution—driven by an economic imperative. Thus, they are modeled on the interests of industrialism—schools are organized on factory lines (ringing bells, separate facilities, specialized into subjects), and students are organized by batches according to age. Mechanisms of control serve to discipline the minds and bodies of students so as to generate docile workers (Foucault, 1995).<sup>8</sup> Schools modeled after the assembly-line factory are being remodeled after the contemporary corporation; both the “organization and culture of the school are linked to the economy and structured by ‘business thinking’” (Pinar, 2012, p. 37). Business remains a crucial driver of education. David Hirsch and Joseph Henderson contend that educational institutions reflecting neoliberalism value learning “primarily in terms of its contribution to economic growth” (2011, p. 171). Schools are being converted into businesses where the goal of instruction is generating skills for the corporate sector, and the bottom line is the maximization of profits (Pinar, 2012). Students learn how to process information rather than how to raise

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that urban students tend to view wildland areas as places to be feared and that they felt uncomfortable (i.e., incompetent, anxious, and disgusted) around natural elements (plants, animals, dirt, etc.) typical of wildland areas (Bixler, Carlisle, Hammitt, & Floyd, 1994)” (1996, p. 121).

<sup>8</sup> When one has internalized dominant power structures, and monitors oneself accordingly, the exercise of those structures over time can become invisible even to oneself (Foucault, 1995).

questions and how to think critically about what they are being told to process (Pinar, 2012).

Here the student is often reduced to an economic self, a being who is either a contributor to economic growth (thereby indicating a successful education and version of self) or a failure (Lynch, 2006, p. 1). Their wants, needs, and interests are reduced to economic competition, consumption, and accumulation. Teaching in ways that re-instantiate the industrial-economic conceptualization of the self serves to shape students to fit this mold. Rather than conceptualizing students as possessive individuals “associated with capital accumulation, or the rationalistic self-interested hedonist associated with economics” students could be seen for the “actually existing, culturally variegated, historically sedimented” human beings they are—people for whom questions of academic knowledge and self-knowledge cannot be separate (Pinar, 2012, p. 57).

### **Homogenous Students**

Students are identified as homogeneous in terms of capacities for reaching identical learning goals at the same age regardless of the particularities of their lived context. Schools and students organized along economic lines lead to standardized curricula and testing, which Robinson notes is essentially about conformity (Robinson 2013). David Gruenewald and Bob Manteaw (2007) call into question neoliberal trends toward standardized testing wherein higher scores in fragmented content areas are taken to be indicative of learning. High-stakes standardized testing continues to be pushed in spite of evidence that standardized testing does not improve student achievement and narrows the curriculum (Hursch & Henderson, 2011). Nor is it an honest reflection of student performance. In one report it is estimated that that as many as one in five public middle and elementary schools have altered tests results (Dewan 2010, 1, qtd. in Pinar, 2012). Pinar (2012) takes standardized testing to “foreclose originality, creativity, and independence of mind” (p. 30). Robinson (2013) contends we should be moving in the opposite direction of standardized testing and curricula if divergent thinking (which is an essential capacity for creativity) is a key goal. Divergent thinking involves the ability to see many possible answers and interpretations of questions; it is to think laterally as opposed to in linear and convergent ways (2013). Divergent thinking is inherently creative and unique, and thus not generalizable in the ways required for standardized testing.

Linear and convergent thinking is secured by the narrow set of interests and goals permissible on the neoliberal model of self. The ecologically and psychologically destructive discourse of neoliberalism is dominating economic, environmental, and educational decision-making and generating limited conceptual resources for imagining alternatives (Hursch & Henderson, 2011). Robinson’s research helpfully illustrates this concern. In testing divergent thinking in a longitudinal study Robinson (2013) found the capacity for divergent thinking decreases with age, showing a) we have the capacity for it and b) that the capacity for it deteriorates with age through schooling on the above model. Rather than encouraging the creative thought of teacher-learners in conversation with their peers, rather than inquiring about and developing the unique capacities of each student who brings a distinctive constellation of talents and capacities to the learning

community, neoliberalism seeks to snuff out such creativity so as to generate homogenous individuals with limited creative, divergent, thought.

### **Students as Information Stockpiles**

Dominant educational paradigms highlight the importance of finding “the” answer as opposed to thinking of various interpretations of questions and answers (Robinson, 2013). Neoliberalism represents education as an input-output system, which is reduced to an economic production function (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Michael Bonnet (2006) critiques forms of environmental education that generate pre-specified outcomes to be achieved by students and schools—implying a systematic action policy by “knowers” which is then imposed on those who do not yet know. Such an approach assumes that relevant knowledge is generated by subject experts and is consistent with the status quo regarding the existing moral/social/political structure of society. This sort of approach renders constructivist notions of education unnecessary, reducing education to simplistic transmission-based learning theories. “Content” dissemination is thereby taken to replace the importance of teaching (Kelsey, 2003). A didactic, as opposed to a dialectical/dialogical, model of education is presumed. This method of conceptualizing education incorrectly suggests that learning is passive and that knowledge acquisition happens with little effort on the part of the learner (Kelsey 2003). This is the banking model of education Paulo Freire (2012) warns against. It turns students into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher; education thereby becomes an act of “depositing.” Such a view of education lacks creativity and negates knowledge as a process of inquiry (2012). Students as storing houses for stockpiled information are taken to be “educated” if they can regurgitate the right data when prompted by a standardized test.

### **Ecology, Education, Identity**

#### **Students as Cooperative, Ecologically Connected, Community Members**

Calling into question the existing economic system—through, for example, ecological identification that demands reorientation to ecological health as a goal *rather than, and recognized as being in conflict with*, perpetual economic growth—is often taken to be failure on the neoliberal model where a passive, uncritical, worker is taken to be ideal. The very self that survives and thrives in neoliberal constructions of the world is the one that privileges atomistic, individualistic, rationalistic, and economic ways of being. Success within the neoliberal paradigm is premised on a version of self, which either ignores or denigrates the value of a life of essential connection, dependence, and support. As such, developing ecological selfhood works to subvert and make evident the fundamental flaws in the business model of education given that it is relationship, cooperation, and connectivity that underwrite ethically defensible orientations to work, education, and healthy self-concept. Competitive relations of antagonism, which are often adopted in the industrial/business model, can thereby be recognized as unhealthy and unsustainable. Pursing “rationality,” when narrowly defined as egoistically maximizing self-interest, is identified as irrational and unethical on the ecological view of

self—it is in direct opposition to self-health and the altruistic virtues which ought to be habituated (Plumwood, 2002). The health generative virtues nurtured by ecological selfhood are replaced with neoliberal “virtues” of selfish individualism, competitiveness, and the economic reduction of crucial domains of human life. Neoliberalism is a view that omits and/or impoverishes the most important dimensions of social experience and therefore requires correction (Plumwood, 1993).

### **Students as Diverse**

Contrary to the standardized “one size fits all” model, ecological selfhood is recognized as varying based on cultural, social, geographical, and so on, factors. Self-concept is not limited to Westernized imaginaries. As such, what is revealed for each student will vary every term, and each group will generate a novel dynamic, which supports particular foci and areas of growth. Developing student ecological selfhood will be responsive to the particular dimensions of race, class, sex, physical ability, etc., of each student.<sup>9</sup> Each student and group will find their own way into conceptualizing their relationships with environments. The neoliberal Western vision of self can be subverted through attending to the varied ways into selfhood tabled by diverse others. Through teacher-learner dialogue all are put in a position to learn newly. Given that developing ecological selfhood is process-based it is perpetually open to revision. Because ecological identity work grows contextually and organically in synergistic configurations of particular individuals, groups, locales and political climates, it cannot be standardized. By its very instantiation, it calls into question the viability of standardized curricula organized along economic lines.

Jessica Hayes-Conroy and Robert Vanderbeck (2005) recognize the paradox of ecological identity work. Namely that, ideally, ecological identity will need to be identified and simultaneously need to be open to radical questioning given the critical thinking being encouraged (2005). The contours of ecological identity need to be gestured at, but at the same time they cannot be required to remain static. Developing reflective capacity is at the core of ecological identity work and involves the exercise of mindful, introspective deliberation (Thomashow, 1996). The wider ramifications of personal and collective action are seriously considered (Thomashow, 1996). Given its process-driven nature there is no point at which success is “achieved,” or where “the answer” (singular) is found. Fruitfully pursuing ecological citizenship includes perpetually nurturing the virtues of creativity, imagination, patience, skill, foresight, analysis, and ethical thoughtfulness (Thomashow, 1996). Each combination of students will afford opportunities for unique class dynamics, personal and shared reflection, as well as ways of making sense of one’s self-concept in relation to the environment.

### **Liberating Growth Model**

In contrast to the banking style model, constructivist learning theories demonstrate the active role of the learner working to construct knowledge, thereby highlighting the importance of the contextual nature of learning (Kelsey, 2003, p. 423).

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<sup>9</sup> This list is not uncontentious, nor is it complete. Rather, it is a snapshot of evolving terms meant to demarcate relevant concepts for self-formation.

The notion of there being one right answer to one right question in subjects that have historically grown and developed over time, subjects that we continually wish to improve upon, is overtly wrong-headed. I argue elsewhere that students are empowered when tools for rigorous and clear, open-minded, open-hearted, analysis are explored and applied, “Students are empowered when they are encouraged to believe in their current capacity and future ability as critical thinkers and participants in shaping the world” (2012, p. 22). The neoliberal paradigm as manifest in Western education, and described above, works directly against such critical thinking.

Ecological identity work requires introspection, mindfulness, personal awareness, reflection, and responsible environmental citizenship (Thomashow, 1996). Because it is process-driven and context sensitive there is an open invitation to imagine creative solutions beyond existing paradigms. Along these lines, Darlene Clover (2002) recommends focusing on a liberatory platform of Freirian *conscientização* (critical consciousness) and becoming engaged as educator-activists (p. 318). *Conscientização*, when applied to ecological education, involves recognizing, respecting and nurturing ecological knowledge (Clover, 2002). *Conscientização* requires attending to how existing political, social and economic structures and forces both contribute to environmental problems and undermine active citizenship (Clover, 2002). Developing *conscientização* encompasses both critically understanding one’s society and culture and comprehending our capacities to actively change the situation (Clover, 2002). Ecological identity work helps to expose how neoliberalism shapes, constrains, limits and perpetuates particular ways of imaging oneself in relation to the world, thereby supporting *conscientização*.

Broadly speaking, collaboration and imagination are being minimized as students are “educated” to take their competitive place in the economy and perform without questioning the larger paradigms being kept in place. Public education “has devolved into vocational preparation for participation in the economy” (Pinar, 2012, p. 27). So long as neoliberal ideology shapes the contours of educational institutions and self-concept the associated limitations will be engrained through indoctrination via regurgitation and habituation. In contrast, liberating education requires reflection and inspiration of consciousness of oneself and one’s creative power to alter the world (Freire, 2012). The development of ecological selfhood is one manifestation of critical consciousness. Insofar as ethical exemplars, action strategies, and communities of support are identified, light is shed on available generative powers for positively altering the world.

### **The Neoliberal Self-Contradiction**

Sadly, and bafflingly, on the neoliberal approach to education students participate in systems that undermine the possibility for further future generations of students. Thus, we are faced with the self-contradictory nature of neoliberal identities. The individualistic, atomistic, economic, rationalistic, self-construct that grounds neoliberalism is itself destructive of future possibilities for selfhood, given that it fails to recognize, reflect, and respect essential, ecological, community connection. It is a literal contradiction, espousing a vision of selfhood that destroys future possibilities for there being a self. A neoliberal concept of self requires ways of being that are serving to make impossible the continuation of human selves as well as a myriad of non-human selves; it

fails to recognize robust dimensions of ecological selfhood. This failure is evidenced by current levels of human generated ecological destruction (IPCC, 2014). In so far as human health is taken to require the continuation of our species, the neoliberal vision of self presents a pressing threat to such health.

### **The Pedagogical is Political**

Insofar as teachers have autonomy in their work this facilitates opportunities for subversive, resistant, and creative responses to the neoliberal paradigm (Gruenewald & Manteaw, 2007). The pedagogical is political. This is inevitable. Even attempting “neutrality” is political in that it is supported by a particular, contestable, epistemology of education. Clover (2002) contends that pedagogy and politics must be intertwined; pedagogical choices implement political objectives. The question is then *which* political objectives do educators wish to adopt to do justice to the quality of education owed to students and to manifest integrity with regard to facilitating genuine learning? We teach, but to what end? Proactive approaches rooted in ecological, ethical, understandings are needed from those who are looked to as authorities regarding knowledge. Ecological identity work supports a move away from individual achievement as the sole focus of assessment and toward responsibility for making education relevant to students through connecting it to improving the quality of community life (Gruenewald, 2005, p. 275, as cited in Gruenewald & Manteaw, 2007).

Alternative theories and practices required for effective environmental education must include how socio-political-economic ideological forces proactively shape student thought and self-concept. Given that students do not consent to such social shaping it is crucial, as educators, to provide students with the tools to identify and work against unwanted social shaping. Pedagogical transparency will be essential and reconceptualising the self ecologically must only occur if the students themselves, of their own volition, deem such a shift in their self-concept to be merited and desirable. Only through a). identifying the sources and forces pushing in the direction of atomistic, individualistic, rationalistic (narrowly defined), competitive entrepreneurial self-construction, and b). recognizing it as an unnecessary, preventable, and unhealthy construction of humans and their relations to others (including non-human others and systems), can alternatives be freely chosen.

### **Conclusion**

The vision of the self that serves as the foundation to neoliberal shifts in education is unhealthy, in that it is premised of a vision of self where humans are atomistic, individualistic, competitive, economic, Western entities. Such a view fails to reflect relational elements of selfhood, which requires attending to and reflecting deep connection, community relations, the need for cooperation, and ecological dimensions of self. Ecological identity plays a crucial role in the self-health of humans and it also facilitates the thriving of wider ecosystems and their innumerable members. The neoliberal vision of self is epistemically untenable in that it fails to reflect the actual connections humans have with nature, substituting a hyper-seperative calculating self-interested self for the ethical, emotional, complex human self. The neoliberal vision of

self not only gives an impoverished account of human capacities, it undermines the possibility of future selves through grounding ecological destruction. The neoliberal self is contradictory in that such a vision of self destroys the possibility for future human selves. It is a vision of selves that proactively generates the absence of selves.

Insofar as the ecological self problematizes the neoliberal self it provides an indispensable point of departure for developing critique. Reconceptualizing along the lines of ecological selfhood helps to expose, destabilize, and undermine underlying assumptions of neoliberalism through showing them to be unsustainable and unhealthy conjectures rather than “matters of fact.” Reflective ecological identity work leads to an ongoing process of critical thinking and engaging with the world in ways that proactively shape and reflect ecological values. Educators are especially well positioned to facilitate ecological identity work wherein ecological selfhood can be used to provide one healthy alternative to neoliberal selfhood, and such a move need not be limited explicitly to ecological educators. Any educative practice involves adopting a working concept of the self; I am making the case that health requires recognition of ecological dimensions of the self.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> There are multiple, additional, layered, notions of self that could be beneficially analyzed—for a very short series of examples consider animalistic, emotional, social, political, familial, and spiritual dimensions of selfhood. I am not making the case that the ecological self is the *sole* counter to the neoliberal self, rather I am exploring one option among many others which simultaneously need tending to. It is additionally important to note that, given Western historical notions of hyper-separative individual selves, we must be careful to articulate the importance of analysis at varying community levels. Critical pedagogy demands attending to self-construct while simultaneously recognizing the limitations of focus on the self.

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