

# Education as Agency: Challenging educational individualization through alternative accounts of the agentic

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*In this paper, we problematize current conceptualizations of agency in education. We begin by considering how the construction of the hyper-individual, one that is entirely determined by its own internal capacities, has become the norm within Australian educational policy. We propose that this conceptualization produces undemocratic educational possibilities built on assumptions that individuals have the capacity to rationally choose pathways that will maximize their own interests, ignoring the contextually bound ways in which this produces, makes durable, and reproduces trajectories of disadvantage and advantage within the educational system. We experiment with how education could be understood if the ontological assumption of the individual was unsettled, with a focus shifting to relations rather than intrinsic entities. To do this, we draw from the New Materialist literature and Karen Barad's agential realism to suggest that the assignment of "interactive" agency between fully interiorized individuals, especially through competitive logics, confuses the basis and possibility of democratic action. We consider how educative spaces are the enactments and realization of knowledge and, thus, how an enactment of education is not reducible to separate or separable individuals.*

*Keywords: university; theory of the state; instrumentalism; corporate liberal democracy; advanced capitalism; corporate ideal; common good; private good; academic capitalism; ideological state apparatus; academic freedom; corporatization*

## INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, there has been a deepening preoccupation with the individual in Australian educational policy, establishing a system in which neoliberal individualization of responsibility for the personal biography requires that more people adopt a particular form of aspiration, self-responsibility, and risk calculation (e.g. Gershon 2011; Skeggs 2004a). As Riddle (2007) notes, a neoliberalization of educational systems has occurred in the US, UK, and Australia "on the premise of surveillance, competition, ranking and classification . . . (as) . . . market measures, discourses of 'Choice' and individual merit permeate the narratives that are paraded in policy" (Riddle, 2017, p. 3). Neoliberal policy has impacted on education systems globally, albeit to different degrees and in context-dependent ways. The reification of the individual has deeply influenced educational

theory and philosophy, including efforts presented as seeking more socially just educational outcomes and/or democratic educational structures and practices. As Biesta (2007) highlights, questions of education have always been intertwined with questions of democracy, and there has been a longstanding inclination in educational theory and practice to frame the objective of education as being about producing a subject with certain (rational) qualities for participation in society. This has, as Biesta (2007) argues, “deeply influenced the theory and practice of democratic education and has led . . . to an approach that is both instrumentalistic and individualistic” (p. 15).

With each new call to rethink education, with the focus commonly being on schooling within a broader notion of education, the individual is given greater prominence. Against the backdrop of a shift towards “universal” higher educational participation (Trow, 1973) to service a “knowledge economy”, or “cognitive capitalism” (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Peters & Bulut, 2011) it is increasingly suggested by neoliberal proponents that many of the modernist/bureaucratic approaches to schooling are failing students because of a lack of preparation for the precarious, fluid, and flexible character of work (for example, see Foundation for Young Australians, 2017). In these conditions, in which new economies emerge and struggles grow over the role that education systems will play in the maintenance of these economies, education is being redefined. Left unarticulated here is the telos of education. “Education is a teleological practice” (Biesta, 2010, p. 500), always framed by an aim or purpose, as values constitute educational practices in largely hidden ways. In this context, neat definitions of what a student is and how they are “entangled” in the world mislead us into narrow representations and recitations.

In this paper, we consider the current neoliberal context and the imperative this constructs for deepening the individualization of education. We argue that the shifting basis of the Australian economy, with an increased emphasis on employability and entrepreneurship, requires a strong focus on student engagement and aspiration within education systems that represents a hegemonic internalization of the values of self that correspond with economic value. We contend that democratic education becomes more unlikely when the individual is reified and positioned as being in competition to maximize their own position at the expense of others. When the policy-making imagination is constrained so heavily by the agentic, socially mobile, competitor-entrepreneur, the possibility of either education for or through democracy becomes highly implausible. In terms of addressing the key theme of this special issue in relation to democracy and education, and how we might “resist growing educational inequality and reframe educational policy and practice to better meet the diverse needs of communities” (Riddle, 2019), the implications of this increasingly close association between, for example, industry and education, is clear. The telos of education is in danger of co-option by business interests and values—threatening the possibility of achieving either education for democracy or education through democracy (Biesta, 2007).

We propose that a productive means of counteracting this approach is to draw from philosophies that offer a radical vision of the basis of agency. To do so, we draw from Barad’s (2007) “agential realism” to problematize the notion of student as a container of knowledge, aspiration, and engagement. We approach this by considering what agency in education might look like if the ontological assumption underpinning agency shifted from things to relations. If, as Barad (2007) puts it, “the primary ontological units are not ‘things’ but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/

relationalities/(re)articulations of the world” (p. 141), then we need to consider the ways in which knowing, aspiring, and engaging is always emerging in relation. We argue that a part of the difficulty of working with concepts such as engagement and aspiration in education stems from an ontological problem in the constitution of the individual student and the responsabilization of this actor to perform hegemonic forms of educational engagement and aspiration. Following Barad, we consider phenomena to be the fundamental condition of agency. This perspective allows for analysis of educational agency as “intra-action” within a web of socio-material relations that bond subjects to their realities. In this way, we explore the possibility that agential realism provides an ontological counterpoint for research in education, one that can assist us to break free from an intense preoccupation with the individual, yet one that does not dismiss the subject within educational relations.

Neoliberal imaginaries, as noted earlier, impact differently across physical, temporal, and social contexts. We recognize, however, the existence of a global narrative of neoliberalized individualism and it is this dynamic to which we respond in this paper. Our context of investigation is the Australian education policy landscape, yet we see the value of interrogating this hyper-individualization in different global-local educational contexts. The contribution to comparative perspectives on how we might resist educational inequality stems from a localized policy interrogation and re-theorization in relation to this global policy, funding, and practice narrative. This paper offers a different way of conceptualizing agency, collectivity, and democracy in relation to schooling and, more broadly, education. We begin by considering Australian educational policy that has brought about the strengthening of individualization in Australian education.

### **THE INDIVIDUAL IN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATIONAL POLICY**

Marginson (2004) identifies 1984–1985 as pivotal in the Australian context in relation to a new policy discussion influenced by the approach of the Thatcher government in the UK. These changes manifested in the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s, building “neoliberal logic into every sector of the education system” (Connell, 2013, p. 104) and essentially attempting to solve problems with market-based “solutions.” In earlier models in Australian (and generally Western) social democracies, an intensive manufacturing/industrial focus meant that educational “aspiration” or “engagement” was not necessarily as important in order to secure work. Now, with Australian educational policy directed towards a neoliberalized version of mass higher education (Gale & Tranter, 2011) to support the shift towards the so-called knowledge economy, secondary and vocational education has seen an intensification of interest in retaining historically less “engaged” students. For example, between 1943 and 2010, the minimum school leaving age in most states and territories was either 15 or 16 years. In 2010, the National Youth Participation Requirement, agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments, meant that any student under 17 who wished to leave school had to either be enrolled in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course, undertaking an apprenticeship, or be working more than 25 hours a week (ACARA, 2010). Increasingly, longer and more intense levels of educational “engagement” have become normalized.

Increasingly at play across the various sectors of the educational system, these logics also work to frame understandings of the purpose of education towards a changing character of work. These shifts move from a focus on employment to “employability”, meaning

that learning and re-learning, training and re-training, are becoming necessary and normalized pathways. This brings education into an ever-closer association with economy, as it is considered that “through policies of competition and choice, education will become increasingly more ‘productive’ and the economy more competitive and successful” (Angus, 2015, p. 399). Driven by waves of reform that critique “industrial” models of education, educational doxa is paired back to a sheer orientation to business and industry. This was given prominence in the recent *Growth Through Achievement* report led by David Gonski (Department of Education and Training, 2018). These points are now regularly recited by Australian politicians, and notably, education ministers. For example, NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes recently recommended to a regional-NSW Business Chamber (Gregory, 2018) that schools needed to be built at the centre of communities so that businesses can “look in and see how they can partner” with educators and students. Calling for a re-integration of schools back into communities, Minister Stokes framed education as a process whereby business’s interests are at the heart of the purpose of education:

The recent Gonski report’s recommendations said the idea of business mentoring in schools and relationships between industry and education is critical in achieving education excellence. We need to get away from the Fordist idea of education as some sort of production line. The skillset we need is bigger and the relational engagement as a community needs to be bigger. That has changed the way we design our schools—we need to facilitate that community interaction and joint use facilities that make it spatially attractive for businesses to look into schools and see how they can partner. We then build richer communities where young people are more attuned to what business expects from them and where the opportunities are, and we ourselves can learn what sorts of products young people want and what sort of experiences they’re looking for. (Gregory, 2018)

Neoliberal commitments operate across the political landscape in Australia and across all educational sectors. In VET, *Skilling Australia for the Future* (ALP, 2007) was part of “a succession of policy documents which suggested that Australia’s economic prosperity depended upon the productivity of the individual who was imagined to be well trained and highly skilled” (Garrick, 2011). These changes have also meant a repositioning of higher education as part of the turn towards a more highly skilled, entrepreneurial, and “employable” individual. Indeed, the imperative to “innovate” education systems towards the needs of market-based economies is growing. In Australia, Kenway, Bullen, and Robb (2007) identify the era of Brendan Nelson (2001–2006) as federal education minister as one that repositioned Australian universities within the framework of a “knowledge economy” and a “national innovation system”. Drawing on Schumpeter (1943), they contend that “innovation” subsumes education to the market, operating as a driver of economic growth via commercialization and the capitalist processes of “creative destruction” (2007). Burke (2016) summarizes the outcomes of these shifts starkly, arguing that “[t]he purpose of HE (higher education) in the utilitarian, neoliberal framework is reduced to enhanced employability, entrepreneurialism and economic competitiveness” (p. 1).

Hence, the broader hegemony of neoliberal policy has created the conditions for education systems to serve a pivotal economic role. Policy technologies govern through emphasizing “that individuals must take responsibility, as lifelong learners and entrepreneurs of the self, to navigate their own achievement of well-being” (Zipin, Sellar,

Brennan, & Gale, 2015, p. 229). Those who become effective managers of self, deemed so through either the achievement, expression, or aspiration of employable/entrepreneurial traits and ideals of productivity, are valorized. Subsequently, those who become disengaged are blamed for their lack of interest in these pathways, being seen to lack aspiration (Gale & Parker, 2015). Educational engagement, then, takes on a particularly individualized notion of the subject, where, from a policy standpoint, there is a need to invigorate/motivate individuals into taking these pursuits on, where “mainstream invocations of aspiration deficit tend to signify a lack of motivation, in an individualist psychological register” (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 229).

### **INDIVIDUALIZATION VS RELATIONALITY**

In this climate of individualization, dis-engagement from education has taken on an almost pathological interpretation, applied mainly to the most marginalized groups within education. Yet individualized approaches to education have been shown to be empirically ineffective. For example, Burke (2016) highlights how a focus on raising the educational aspirations of people from disadvantaged backgrounds confuses material poverty with a so-called poverty of aspirations. She argues that “[t]here are a number of examples emerging from the UK context where ‘aspiration-raising’ activities have been shown in fact to reinforce rather than overcome cultural and socioeconomic divisions and inequalities” (Burke, 2016, p. 3). Similar approaches have been taken within the Australian context, having predictable results (Gale & Parker, 2015; Sellar, 2013). It seems prudent, then, to attempt to “understand why, whatever the advocates of choice might believe, the mere provision of new choices to individual families is unlikely to overcome deep-rooted patterns of structural and cultural disadvantage” (Whitty, 2002, p. 12). Yet, even though research continually demonstrates that these approaches to education are failing, individualized and market-based solutions are offered as the best solution.

Neoliberal conceptualizations of the subject have also received sustained sociological criticism. As Skeggs (2004b, p. 139) argues, the “agentic self” is premised on a simplistic access to “choice”. Yet, as she explains, “choice is a resource, to which some lack access and which they cannot see as a possibility; it is not within their field of vision, their plausibility structure” (p. 139). This is continually confirmed through studies exploring the broader patterns of inequality that manifest along class, race, and gender lines. Moreover, social interaction is conceived of as occurring in a “neutral and ‘flat’ space, where everybody competes from an equal position” (Skeggs, 2004a, p. 63) with equal access to the material means of agency. Skeggs continues:

This discursive neutralising of capitalism is a highly morally-charged issue, as it shifts our perception from capitalism as a force that generates class inequalities to a flat, neutral and equal space where everybody is free to exchange.

If this discursive space itself is neutral and equal, “success” must, therefore, come via the capacity to “out-perform” others, “always accruing through exchange and investment in order to enhance futures” (Skeggs, 2011, p. 502). This doxic presentation of capitalist “neutrality” does, however, make invisible the relational spatial-material conditions that carry social weight and are crucial for the enactment of certain agencies.

The concealed dimensions of social relations lie within an enduring philosophical commitment to individual interiority and separability, which has become an effective method of governance. Neoliberal subjectivity adheres to the turns towards individual choice and market logics as a mode of misrecognition and hence the world is experienced and perceived through the systems of governance. Neoliberalism becomes dispositional (Hilgers, 2013, p. 83) with educational actors taking on patterns of self-responsibilization, along with expecting these dispositions from others. Even though actors will regularly perceive the impossibility of successfully adopting schemes of practice that work “in their own best interest,” they are, nevertheless, inclined to accept the responsibility for these failings. These often lead to a sense of shame and guilt, experienced even for things well outside the control of actors (for an HE example, see Bunn, Bennett, & Burke, 2018). Neoliberal ideological commitments to hyper-individualism that emphasize the interiority of responsibility, choice, and risk require more than a surface-level means of counteraction. They require a sustained engagement with alternative philosophies that promote democratic engagement regarding the way individuals and their worlds are conceived. We turn, now, to consider the role that the notion of “agency” plays in this process of conception.

### **INTERROGATING AGENCY**

Neoliberal educational policy rests on philosophical presuppositions that sharply distinguish between the fully agentic individual and the agency-less spaces and materials external to them. This philosophical commitment more broadly retains a Cartesian stance that has been subject to intense scrutiny within social theory. As Coole notes (2005), in a broad summary of theories of agency, the agentic self is “already implicitly opposed to the external world, where bodies and material structures are seen as limits or threats to freedom because they are governed by a causality that is antithetical to free, rational agency and ontologically devoid of its qualities” (p. 126). This understanding of the agentic self has been caught in a conceptual difficulty—one relevant to understandings of democracy—that in order for a subject to possess freedom in actions, and consequently take responsibility for freedom and choice, agency must be positioned “within” the interior of rational agents. Even theories that attempt to move away from such a strong focus on individual agency towards intersubjectivity tend towards attributing agentic capacity to the individual in stronger or weaker ways, depending upon their circumstances. As Coole (2005) remarks, these perspectives retain “fairly unreconstructed ontological assumptions about the nature of agency” (p. 126).

There is a fundamental tension between conceptions of a fully interiorized individual operating in neutral space and the attempts to characterize the individual as fully bound within socio-material relations that characterize or constrain the opportunities available to any given social actor. Thus, it is useful to consider ontological approaches that reflect a relational characterization of agentic potentiality that could be drawn into a productive relationship with democratic educational philosophy. While limited for space, we draw from “New Materialism” (Coole & Frost, 2010) and Karen Barad’s (2007) philosophy of agential realism to build an interrogation of the irreducibility of agency to the interior of the individual, and to consider ways that the agency of education can be differently conceived to draw more attention to the contextual boundedness of “individual” knowledge.

Key to Barad's argument for agential realism is that the "ontological primitive" has been incorrectly positioned. Western philosophy, following Descartes, has positioned the "thing" or "entity" as being the key, immutable ontological condition. Barad argues against this positioning. She considers that the ontological primitive is not the thing; rather it is the relations themselves that gives us epistemological phenomena. She explains: "because relations constitute the ontological primitives, it makes no sense to talk about independently existing things as somehow behind or constitutive/causal in the production of phenomena. In essence, there are no noumena, only phenomena" (2003, n. 817). The human is, thus, never properly constituted without consideration of its co-constitution within the relations of a phenomenon. This, of course, leaves the problem of agency: how is deliberate conscious action to be understood if it is only ever an expression of a phenomenon? Moreover, what are the consequences for educational practices if the very locus and character of agency is in question? What if agency itself is always co-constituted and enacted and so never fully realizable as a pre-inscribed condition of the individuated agent?

Barad introduces the notion of intra-action to consider how agency arises within phenomenal relations. Put briefly—because phenomena are thoroughly entangled and dependent upon relations as their own ontological basis—action is always an enactment within and through a phenomenon. The notion of absolute separation is made impossible since "phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components'" (2003, p. 815), where "separations (individuations) become differential movements in the internal and inseparable torsions of Nature itself" (Kirby, 2012, p. 203). Agency, then, needs to be seen as an enactment within a phenomenon rather than originating from an interiority driving an independent will to action:

Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of "subjects" or "objects" (as they do not pre-exist as such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever – it is "doing"/"being" in its intra-activity. Agency is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity. Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure. Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering (Barad, 2003, p. 826–827).

According to Barad, agency is never properly "possessed," subsequently precluding the designation of subjects always already possessing a completely interior potential for agency. Rather than subjectively owned and held, agency is a condition of the varieties of phenomenal constitutions—an enactment that is irreducible to a simple division between subjects or objects. In a sociological sense, the impacts of geographies, of material wealth and deprivation, and the symbolic are constitutive of agentic formations.

## **AGENCY AS EDUCATION**

Although Barad (2007, p. 177–178) extends the possibility of agency much more widely than human subjectivities, more needs to be said regarding how, or even whether, subjectivities can be formed and sustained. Numerous authors within New Materialist writings, for example, have stressed the importance of the corporeal/sensorial/phenomenological character of the body, and its role within agentic formation (e.g., Kirby, 2017; Coole, 2005). Nevertheless, agential realism represents an opportunity to fundamentally reconstruct understandings of educational contexts as a form of resistance to neoliberal individuation. A foundation of this reconstruction is the argument that education is an agentic phenomenon; that it is co-constituted and so needs to be understood as an enactment that cannot be reduced to any single individual, model, or learning space. Knowledge and knowing becomes an “event,” rather than an individual possession, and cannot be defined beyond the entanglements that are necessary for its enactment (Hughes & Lury, 2013). Taken further, we argue that education is never reducible to an individual agentic potentiality, as the relations themselves are constitutive of the possibility of agency. Via this lens, students’ individual capabilities are viewed not as a construction of inherent qualities but as expressions situated within a greater series of relations that restrict and enact knowing and capability. This allows for a politics around the possibility of the agentic, as the phenomenal possibility of enactment is constrained and/or made possible only through the relations in place.

In other words, rather than giving exclusive epistemological attention to the way in which the individual holds agency, and enacts this agency, a whole host of other relations—including human actors, the character of place, and the material and symbolic attributes of these relations—make this agentic enactment possible. We contend that these can be usefully conceptualized as the means of realization (Kirby, 2017). As such, educational agency is negotiated through a specific group of socio-material conditions, which will differently position educational subjects in relation to the inequalities and advantages endemic to the phenomenon. Education and/or career “pathways” are a common discourse in secondary schooling, currently conceived of as navigable trajectories for individual students to produce, pursue, and negotiate. This conception, however, works to conceal the endlessly entangled relations that enact agentic possibility over time in the open, messy, social contexts of education. These means of realization are not simply cruder versions of capital. What we refer to includes material worlds and the conditions of interaction, including how these manifest versions of self without being reduced to an economic conversion. In this sense, movements towards democracy for, and through, education share kinship with Barad’s ontology in their focus on a coming together, a being in common, and a community of events that are dependent upon their relations, to produce the circumstance for the enactment of, for example, knowledge as only ever being co-constructed.

New understandings of educational agency (as enacted in relation) provide ways of rethinking current education structures, purposes, and practices (that largely reward middle-class dispositions) shifting towards more inclusive modes that recognize a wider array of dispositions as being important and productive. How this might be achieved is beyond the scope of this paper, although Apple (2015), following Fraser (1997) on the importance of engaging with the politics of redistribution and recognition within a social justice framework, has argued for the identification and sustenance of decentered unities.



These are spaces crucial for educational and social transformation enabling progressive movements to find common ground where different groups can “engage in joint struggles without being subsumed under the leadership of only one understanding of how exploitation and domination operate in daily life” (Apple, 2015, p. 302). Certainly, the significant ongoing funding of equity and widening participation in tertiary education in Australia is a field where rampant neoliberal policy imagination, with the individual as the unit of focus, has created difficult tensions and contradictions for educational policymakers and practitioners across the educational landscape, including schools. There is now extensive literature highlighting the problematic ways in which a policy focus on personal aspiration sits directly at odds with the realities of why particular groups are underrepresented in further and higher education (Burke, 2012; St Clair & Benjamin, 2011; Whitty, Hayton, & Tang, 2015). Arguably, even if one were to adopt a neo-social mode of governance perspective, governments run the risk of ineffective large-scale educational investment where projects are beholden to policy-making efforts that have adopted mis-placed notions of agency. We advocate for developing new understandings within educational policy of the broader ontological conditions of meaningful and democratic engagement within education. This is conceived as a project where a productive reconstruction of our conception of agency, via shifting our “ontological primitive” for educational research and practice, can make a promising contribution to interpreting how the impacts of different contexts of education restrict and empower, with the ultimate goal of producing a sharper understandings of how education is enacted. Biesta (2007) recommends that what schools can do—or at least should try to do—is to make democratic action possible. It is in relation to this commendation that our paper offers a foundation for reconceptualizing what can be collectively enacted, building on new ontological understandings of what knowledge and knowing is in educational contexts.

## CONCLUSION

Australian educational policy is worryingly wedded to a conception of education as a series of fully agentic and rational subjects acting to maximize their own self-interests. As we have discussed above, this is a commitment that reduces the opportunities for meaningful, democratic education and ignores the broader relational struggles that restrict the possible strategies and opportunities available to differently positioned educational actors. This commitment also misrecognizes the inequalities that the peculiar contexts of education operate within and assumes a firm dichotomy between the fully interior rational subject on the one hand and a passive, neutral space for interactions on the other.

Our argument brings attention to the value of reconceiving these relations via a problematizing of agency. New materialist and agential realist approaches are considered here as offering a subversive means of reconceiving agency and the neutrality of space and nature. These re-conceptions propose novel pathways for recognizing relations as the ontological precondition, facilitating possible ways forward for democratic education. Approaching education as a broader system of agential relations allows us to rethink agency “as happening in the spaces of the intra-actions rather than in the humanist sociological account of institutional structure vs human agency” (Ringrose & Renold 2016, p. 223).

Certainly, further attention needs to be paid to the ways in which relations within education are still generally and affectively produced through broader social systems and, consequently, performed within localized educational contexts. Many of these contexts will simultaneously conform to and resist these broader socio-material webs, and this must be recognized as part of the formation of agency. While this may be a small contribution to reconceiving of education as itself an enactment of agency, the need to rethink the individual has become a critical step towards imagining greater equality and access in Australian education systems. This reconceptualization of education as agency brings with it the possibility of new comparative education perspectives as, while localized in their realization, these agentic formations emerge within an increasingly globalized set of policy and practice fields beholden to a problematic neoliberal imaginary of the hyper-individual.

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