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How Does Culture Shape Education? Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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Facing the climate emergency, we seem to be running out of time to “fix” the world. While there is no scarcity of ideas about how to address sustainability challenges, we continue to spiral down the trajectory of climate catastrophe. We hear enthusiastic calls for more and better education, excitement about new and more advanced technologies, and hopeful anticipation of a fresh wave of scientific breakthroughs. In parallel, there are discussions of developing yet another set of global sustainability goals and biodiversity targets, as well as talks about the need for more stringent international climate agreements. Despite multiple attempts to address the climate crisis, we are miserably failing both ourselves and the natural world around us, while the climate crisis escalates further.

In “[Educating for the Future We Want](#),” Stephen Sterling argues that we need to move beyond the existing approaches to the climate crisis (i.e., no response, accommodation, or reform) and instead pursue a transformative approach that “nurtures a sustainability ethos as the driver of purpose, policy, and practice.” He argues that this requires a paradigm shift in education, acknowledging the socioeconomic, political, and technological pressures on the system, which weigh heavily on mainstream education thinking and practice. We propose that this list must also include an acknowledgement of cultural pressures, i.e., a cultural paradigm shift, a proposition long posited by philosophers, psychologists, and other social scientists, but largely unacknowledged by policymakers and the wider public.¹ The cultural paradigm shift entails a much-needed reconfiguration of the cultural foundations of Western modern(ist) schooling— leaving behind the logic of human exceptionalism and (neo)liberal individualism as a single vision for sustainability, and moving toward more interdependent ways of surviving on a damaged earth.

In our collaborative research, we have begun to empirically document that different ways of conceptualizing “culture” and “self” have important implications for environmental and sustainability studies, as well as for education. Drawing on literature from environmental psychology, we define culture as something materialized in patterns of practices and institutions, rather than a stable set of beliefs or values stored inside people, distinguishing between independent and interdependent self-construal.² Although there are degrees of diversity and difference, forms of self-construal generally differ from one culture and/or society to another. In particular, independent self-construal is dominant in individualistic societies (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia), whereas interdependent self-construal tends to be dominant in collectivistic societies (e.g., most countries outside Europe and North America). Taking this seriously, our recent analyses reveal that cultural dimensions strongly relate not only with people’s environmental attitudes but also with their actual environmental impacts.³ We found that those in countries with strong individualism tended not to accept anthropogenic causes of climate change and tended to have great environmental impacts on Earth. The same countries additionally tended to be more significantly affected by COVID-19.⁴

These findings directly translate into education policy and practice. In a recent study, we explored how some of the so-called “best practices,” such as student-centered learning, may inadvertently promote ontological individualism (independent self-construal) which, in turn, is one potential cause of our inability to move toward sustainability.⁵ In particular, our research highlights that countries committed to student-centered learning tend to be dominated by ontological individualism and then shows that these same countries score lower on a range of social and environmental sustainability indices (e.g., income inequality, mental illness, crime, ecological footprint). Moreover, countries where the belief in ontological individualism is dominant tend to be liberal market economies, an institutional arrangement largely ineffective or even detrimental to social and environmental sustainability.

In this sense, our research shows that as long as the dominant model of modern schooling (at least as we know it in the West) continues to reify human exceptionalism and (neo)liberal individualism (reflected in the notion of independent selfhood), it will ultimately propel us further (and faster) into an ecological catastrophe. We instead invite education policymakers and practitioners to rethink existing pedagogical approaches from a different perspective, inevitably questioning the universality of the so-called “best practice” approaches (such as student-centered learning) and reconsidering their implications for sustainability. This is also an invitation to look beyond the Western horizon and become

more aware of already existing pedagogies in both non-Western and Western countries that constitute alternatives, as highlighted by many colleagues in this discussion thread. As we become better attuned to how particular pedagogies affect students' sense of self—that touchstone of onto-epistemic belief—we can begin to imagine myriad ways to alleviate excessive ontological individualism, first and foremost among ourselves.

Ultimately, rearticulating education in terms of interdependent relationships must extend beyond humans and include the Earth's broader ecological community.⁶ To this end, we must radically reconfigure our curricula and pedagogies, in accordance with collective, interdependent, and relational notions of agency that extend beyond human beings. Such cultural shift is necessary for achieving not only social and environmental sustainability, but also our very survival.⁷

Endnotes

1. Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207; Chet Bowers, *Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture: Rethinking Moral Education, Creativity, Intelligence, and Other Modern Orthodoxies* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995); Chet Bowers, "Towards an Eco-Justice Pedagogy," *Environmental Education Research* 8 (2002): 21–34; David Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1998); Hikaru Komatsu et al., "Culture and the Independent Self: Obstacles to Environmental Sustainability?," *Anthropocene* 26 (2019): 1–13.
2. Thomas Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Glenn Adams and Hazel Markus, "Toward a Conception of Culture Suitable for a Social Psychology of Culture," in *The Psychological Foundations of Culture*, eds. Mark Schaller and Christian Crandall (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004), 335–360; Komatsu et al., "Culture and the Interdependent Self."
3. Hikaru Komatsu et al., "Culture and the Interdependent Self"; Komatsu et al., "Will Education Post-2015 Move Us toward Environmental Sustainability?," in *Grading Global Four: Tensions, Threats, and Opportunities in the Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education*, ed. Antonia Wulff (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
4. Iveta Silova et al., "Covid-19, Climate, and Culture: Facing the Crisis of (Neo)Liberal Individualism. NORRAG, January 14, 2021, <https://www.norrag.org/covid-19-climate-and-culture-facing-the-crisis-of-neoliberal-individualism-by-iveta-silova-hikaru-komatsu-and-jeremy-rappleye/>.
5. Hikaru Komatsu et al., "Student-Centered Learning and Sustainability: Solution or Problem?," *Comparative Education Review* 65 (2021): 6–33.
6. Common Worlds Research Collective, *Learning to Become with the World: Education for Future Survival*, Education Research and Foresight Working Paper 28 (Paris: UNESCO, 2020), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374923>.
7. Jeremy Rappleye and Hikaru Komatsu, "Towards (Comparative) Educational Research for a Finite Future," *Comparative Education* 56, no. 2 (2020): 190–217.

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