

Chapter 5

Beyond Neoliberalism: Education for Sustainable Development and a New Paradigm of Global Cooperation

Susan Santone

Abstract The 2015 adoption of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represents a recommitment by the global community to advance health, equal opportunity, and an environmental protection and restoration. The SDGs specifically call out the vital role of the educational system to advance sustainability. Sustainability, and the education needed to achieve it, recognizes that all people have a shared stake in the future of the planet. Collaboration and interdependence are thus foundational principles that must drive educational policy and practice. But a different concept is wielding its influence over education: win-lose competition. This type of competition values hierarchy rather than equity, and individualism over interdependence. This mindset derives from neoliberalism, a school of economic thought focused on free markets and privatization.

This chapter will analyze the influence of neoliberal thinking on educational systems today and the implications for sustainability. The chapter outlines the rise of the neoliberal paradigm, its impacts on policies and practices, and the need for the global community to reassert education as a public good that serves the common good.

Keywords Accountability • Competition • Neoliberalism • Sustainability

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of targets for alleviating poverty, protecting the environment, securing peace, and other major global goals. Like the SDG's predecessor, the Millennium Development Indicators, the SDGs are a global effort to improve life for people, communities, and the environment that supports it all.

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The adoption of the SDGs raises a profound question for educational systems around the world: *What obligation, if any, does education have, to address these goals?* The idea that schooling should prepare citizens to create a healthy, positive future is the core of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines ESD as a lifelong process that “allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future” (2014, para. 1).

In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (the Decade) to begin on January 1, 2005. The Framework for a Draft International Implementation Scheme (2005) articulates the global vision for ESD: “a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation” (p. 24). The Decade advanced in ESD across the globe, with goals and implementation strategies outlined in the Global Action Program on Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2013).

The importance of ESD is embedded in the SDG’s themselves. Goal 4 is to “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” (U.N., 2015). This goal, which emphasizes free, high-quality primary and secondary education for all, also includes this target:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development (para. 2).

Like sustainable development itself, ESD is based on the principle of interdependence: the belief that people, communities, economies, and the environment (which supports it all) are interdependent (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Interdependence requires global cooperation within and among communities and nations to solve common problems.

The theme of cooperation appears across sustainability and ESD policy documents. For example, Point 14 of the Aichi-Nagoya Declaration calls on all educational stakeholders to “to engage in collaborative and transformative knowledge production, dissemination and utilization” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 2).

Clearly, meeting the SDGs and the goals of ESD requires not only understanding the principle of interdependence, but also using it as the foundation of our economic and educational systems around it. This belief system and worldview define the sustainability/ESD paradigm.

But something is getting in the way of this: a paradigm built around the belief that schooling’s main purpose is to prepare students to compete in the global economy. Competitiveness (in multiple forms) has become both the means and the ends of education. Economic competitiveness is the goal, with competitive individualism the strategy. An educational system built upon this mindset undermines the goals of ESD at every level, from policies to teacher preparation to classroom practices.

But is this a misguided warning? After, we need jobs, and the elimination of poverty (presumably through economic growth) is part of the SDGs goals. Moreover, competition is a central dynamic of ecological systems. Sounds good, right?

But the deeper look provided in this chapter reveals an interpretation of competition now infiltrating education is diametrically opposed to the principles of ESD. Moreover, the overwhelming value placed on economic competitiveness is also based on false beliefs about the economy's relationship to the environment. All of this is eroding social equity, the ecological systems the economy depends on, and the larger principle that education should serve the public good.

The reorientation of education to serve economic competitiveness has occurred over decades, and intensified with the proliferation of a particular economic paradigm: neoliberalism. As described, neoliberalism depends on individualism and winner-take-all competition that both creates and requires hierarchies, while shunning interdependence.

The neoliberal paradigm creates unprecedented tension between the urgency of sustainability and the relentless quest for economic growth. To what extent will society be able to meet sustainability goals if we are preparing our children to serve economic ones? The answer may lie in the questions we pose of our educational system: *What do communities need from citizens?* This question will yield a very different response than a question that asks: *What does the economy need from its workers?*

This chapter does not dismiss the important link between education and the economy. There is a widely shared understanding that students must learn skills that can translate into meaningful employment. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights the need for schools to ensure students develop “the skills necessary to achieve their full potential” (OECD, 2013, p. 3). This means that businesses are legitimate stakeholders in the educational system. However, having an economic *interest* in education is different than defining an economic *agenda*. This chapter will examine the difference. The analysis will explore competing economic-educational relationships, what each interpretation prioritizes, and the implications for educational policy and practice.

The term ‘competition’ derives from the Latin *competere*, meaning, “to strive for” (Skeat, 1885, p. 345). *What, exactly, are we striving for?* This chapter illuminates the consequences of our answer.

The chapter unfolds in five sections: It begins with an overview of neoliberalism and its core beliefs and assumptions. Next, the chapter traces the rise of this thinking in the field of education since the 1950s. Third, the chapter will present ways neoliberal-style competitiveness plays out in curriculum and test-based accountability. The chapter then compares these practices with the tenets of ESD. Finally, the chapter looks at global efforts to reclaim education as a public good, and offers an alternative interpretation of competition to help us get there. While the chapter foregrounds U.S. examples, it also provides global context.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an agenda of economic and social transformation guided by the principles of free markets and limited governmental intervention (Connell, 2010; Hursh, 2005). Neoliberalism grew out of the Keynesian school of economics developed by the British economist John Maynard Keynes to address the Great Depression of the 1930s. One aspect of the Keynesian approach is the use of public policies to stimulate demand, achieve full employment, and stabilize prices (Jahan, Mahmud, & Papageorgiou, 2014). Keynesian economics dominated the post-World War II period through the early 1970s, a time when workers, women, and people of color struggled for equal rights and higher wages (Bowles & Gintis, 1986). While this was an era of stable economic growth, increasing wages and rights among workers contributed to a drop in the growth rate of profits. Between 1965 and 1974, “businesses’ net rate of profit fell by more than 50 %” (Parenti, 1999, p. 118, as cited in Hursh, 2005).

In an effort to restore profits, corporate and government officials embraced neoliberal ideas and promoted policies emphasizing deregulation and reduced governmental intervention. Most relevant to this chapter is the neoliberal push to bring public goods (such as education) into the private sphere. In this mindset, public systems are inherently inefficient because they limit choice and inhibit individual effort by promoting a ‘welfare state’ mentality. Markets presumably fix this problem by promoting competition to efficiently allocate scarce resources, free from the fetters and artificial constraints of government.

Neoliberalism, which reigns today as the dominant global economic paradigm, is based on a set of deep-seated assumptions about the definition of success, how to measure it, and who deserves it.

A core premise of neoliberalism is that unlimited growth is both desirable and possible. Growth is the goal, and success is measured in short-term, quantitative terms, such as daily stock prices, quarterly profits, or the Gross Domestic product. These measures are removed from larger social and ecological systems—relationships that neoliberalism (or most economic theories) do not account for.

Another tenet is individualism.¹ In neoliberal thinking, individual effort pays off and that those who are *successful* have worked the hardest. Likewise, those who are *unsuccessful* deserve it due to character deficits such as a weak work ethic. This is deficit thinking, a way of understanding the world that recasts social problems (such as inequality) on the defects and failures of individuals (Pearl, 1997; Royce, 2009; Ryan, 1976).

Deficit thinkers believe there is a norm (which they define) and that ‘those’ people are exceptions due to ‘impoverished cultures,’ bad parenting, or other self-made ills. In a deficit mindset, income gaps create incentives for individuals to work harder. Competition thus becomes necessary for success, and the role of institutions such as schools is to prepare people to compete (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

¹ *Individualism* (the defiance of interdependence) is distinguished here from *individuality* (the uniqueness of each person).

The Domination Mindset

Neoliberalism rests on two other core concepts: zero-sum competition and hierarchy (people to people, and people to the rest of the natural world). Zero-sum competition is based on the belief that a winner demands many losers. Because only one can win, others are a threat. Relationships are adversarial, and individuals must be constantly vigilant (Porter & Mykleby, 2011). In this paradigm, freedom is defined as autonomy from social constraints, destroying the very idea of community (Daly & Cobb, 1989). Zero-sum competition thus creates and relies on hierarchies, a mentality of domination in which winning is the deserved reward of competition (Martusewicz & Edmunson, 2005).

The concept of domination also extends to the way human view their relationship with the rest of the natural world, i.e., other species and abiotic (nonliving) elements of the environment. The idea that humans are superior to all other beings, and that nature is here to serve humans, is known as anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism and the domination mentality are reflected in the way neoliberalism (and most other schools of economic thought) frame the relationship between the economy and the environment.

Any economic textbook is likely to contain a model that identifies the environment as one of three factors of production: land, labor, and capital. This model ignores the fact that the economy exists within the environment. In fact, the environment serves as the ultimate source of all materials, and the ultimate 'sink' into which all wastes go. Wastes may change chemically or physically from the original material (e.g., petroleum [a liquid] which turns into carbon emissions [a gas] when burned). Therefore, it is impossible to throw anything 'away.' But neoliberalism ignores this, and instead dismisses environmental and social impacts as 'externalities' (Daly & Farley, 2007).

Neoliberalism further ignores the fundamental role of the environment through accounting systems that do not recognize the value of life-sustaining ecosystem services, such as the provision of food, energy, water, and oxygen (Costanza et al., 1997). Neoliberalism dismisses the environmental or social impacts of economic activity as 'externalities' or 'market failures' (Daly, 1980; Daly & Farley, 2007).

Social Darwinism: Deficit Thinking to Explain Inequalities as Natural

One of the first lessons in ecology is that species compete for limited resources, and natural selection results in 'survival of the fittest' (Darwin, 1859). But since the 1800s, this ecological principle has been applied to social, political, and economic realms to rationalize human-created hierarchies (Leonard, 2009). The phrase Social Darwinism has become shorthand for rationalizing inequality using an ecological analogy: as with others species, some people are 'fitter' than others.

The use of Darwinian analogies emerged in the late nineteenth century, roughly paralleling the rise of industrialization and the resulting class stratification. Social Darwinism provided ‘scientific’ proof that some people are naturally superior to others, and theorists at the time concluded that social ills—from poverty to crime—were in fact *individual* problems that resulted from inheriting ‘bad’ genes.

These biological explanations helped spawn the eugenics movement—crudely put, selective breeding and sterilization to ‘improve’ the human genetic stock. Supporters of eugenics believed that forced sterilization of certain people would save society from future problems. A key leader in the movement was Charles Davenport (1886–1944), who spread his ideas in the 1910 publication *Eugenics: The Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding*. Hitler, among others, embraced the false science to drive the Holocaust and advance the domination of the supposedly superior Aryan race.

The strongest ally of eugenics and Social Darwinism is dehumanization, “conceiving of people as other than human beings” (Smith, 2011, p. 26). Hitler, for example, compared the Jewish population to rats. Earlier, nineteenth century scientists aimed to demonstrate that African people were closer to apes than white Europeans (Fig. 5.1).²

The biological explanation of inequality is now discredited as ‘old’ science. But the notion of natural selection, supported by deficit thinking, is deeply embedded in neoliberalism. This paradigm is just as effective at justifying domination and hierarchy as the old biological beliefs did. The rise of Social Darwinism during industrialization seems no accident, and as we will see, the beliefs still cast shadows over educational practice.

The Rise of Neoliberal Values in Education

A comprehensive history of market thinking in education is beyond the scope of this chapter, so we will focus on ways the competition mindset has evolved since the latter part of the twentieth century, beginning with the Cold War.

The Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 sparked paranoia in the U.S. that it would lose the space race. Leaders became urgent about the need to compete on scientific grounds in the service of public defense. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 allocated a billion dollars to science education (Abramson, n.d.). In the zero-sum thinking of the Cold War, winning is necessary for national security.

As noted, neoliberal approaches to economics took hold in the 1970s as a means to bolster the growth of corporate profits, which lagged during the Keynesian era. By this time, the educational system was under the microscope as a key factor in

²At least in the US, these narratives continue to surface as part of ongoing police brutality against African-Americans, particularly men. For example, the social media hashtag “#chimpout” was widely used to describe the supposedly ape-like behavior of Blacks protesters.

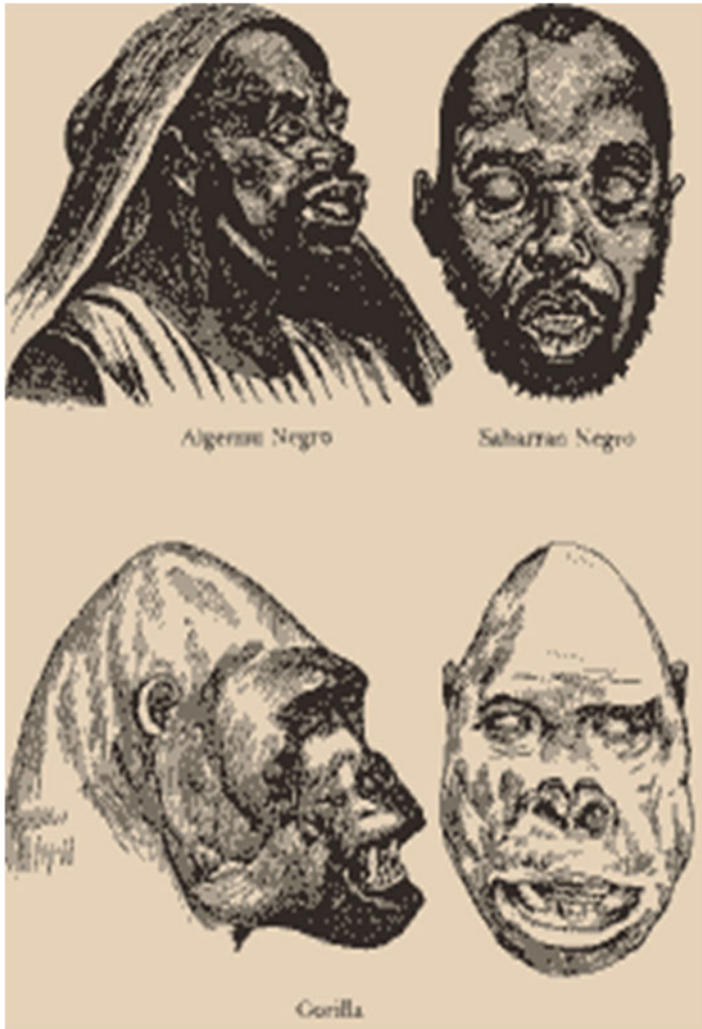


Fig. 5.1 Illustrations from *Types of Mankind*. Source: Nott and Gliddon (1854). This work is in the public domain

economic decline, and the business sector placed blame on the education system for not delivering the skilled workforce needed to compete (Apple, 2001; Furlong & Phillips, 2001). The applications of neoliberalism to education deepened in the 1980s, impacting policies for training, standards, and funding (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010).

To gain public support, neoliberal 'reformers' used disadvantaged students as poster children. Pointing to glaring race- and class-based 'achievement gaps,' reformers spoke endlessly of the dire need to rescue these children from failing public schools. Privatization, vouchers, and competition were sold as a scheme to

give poor families choices. Ongoing discourse about ‘choices’ groomed families to see themselves as consumers, schools and businesses, and public governance as a bureaucratic inefficiency.

Needless to say, grossly unequal educational outcomes certainly require intensive action. Moreover, choice is important, and no student should be trapped in a school that is not meeting her/his needs. The critique here is aimed at the way neoliberal thinking uses these inequalities and the jargon of ‘choices’ to justify the dismantling of education as a public good. Policies to support communities and public institutions are rarely part of the equation.

The themes of economic competitiveness and global dominance became prominent in the US with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report begins:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility (para. 1).

The report then explicitly identifies the threats posed by others:

We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets ... America’s position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer (para. 6).

A Nation at Risk opened the door to increased business intervention in educational systems, a phenomenon that was also occurring in other countries throughout the 1980s. With the pace of globalization increasing, governments responded with education policies designed to promote competitiveness and serve the needs of the market (McGregor, 2009). These policies include the privatization of educational services, vouchers, and deeper corporate involvement in defining metrics and accountability. In addition, the rise of standardized testing and curriculum has created a \$1 trillion educational market in the U.S. alone (Educational Industry Association, n.d.). Corporate giants such as Pearson are increasingly dominating both the U.S. and global markets (Ravitch, 2015).

‘Accountability’ became another rallying cry, with schools and teachers blamed for the persistent achievement problems at the center of the reform debate. Improving achievement for all students is a laudable and widely shared goal, and accountability to students and communities must be part of this. But instead of adopting approaches to support struggling schools and communities, the U.S. passed into law a punitive test-and-punish policy, the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB).

NCLB introduced an accountability system that required schools to annually increase test scores among demographic subgroups or face an escalating set of consequences, culminating in restructuring or even closure. The law was passed with bipartisan support based on the shared understanding that public schools were not serving the needs of all students, particularly low-income students of color. The resulting policy, designed to combat the *soft bigotry of low expectations*, thrust schools into a high-stakes, no-excuses climate built upon two narratives: (1) public

schools must boost academic achievement regardless of external factors such as poverty, and (2) schools are failing because of a lack of accountability (Sirota, 2013). As further explained in the next section, NCLB and its punitive mindset are based on deficit thinking and serve to replicate inequality.

More recently, the most significant manifestation of the competition mentality in the United States is the 2009 Common Core State Standards initiative developed under the aegis of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2010). Law prohibits the federal government from defining or mandating national standards.

While most everyone agreed that raising expectations was important, the development of Common Core became a political lightning rod. Critics pointed to the lack of transparency and the role of private and corporate interests in the development process. Since the federal government could not pay for the initiative, the Gates Foundation, among others, stepped up to the plate. According to Diane Ravitch,³ a vocal opponent of Common Core, Gates (as of 2014) had given \$200 million to the NGA, the CCSSO, and private nonprofits such as Achieve, a ‘reform’ organization focused on standards and accountability (Achieve, n.d.; Strauss, 2014). Founded in 1996 by governors and business leaders, Achieve is an example of the corporate-governmental partnerships that paved the way to Common Core.

While the standards were technically defined at the state level, the Obama administration provided incentives for states to adopt them through *Race to the Top*, a \$4 billion competitive grant program. *Race to the Top* rewarded states for accountability reforms, including “adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy” (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2015, p. 1). These standards were widely understood to mean Common Core.

Like *Race to the Top*, the standards tout the goal of ‘college and career readiness,’ but clearly have a larger economic purpose. Consider the mission statement:

The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] and the CCSSO). (see Youthbuild, 2014, p. 1)

This message is explicit in the very mission statement of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), prominently displayed on the Department’s homepage in 2016: *Our mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.* Here, equity is an afterthought, not the central goal. In the eyes of the USDOE, having students who are ‘prepared for the future’ is a necessity not for global problem solving or advancing the SDGs, but for economic competitiveness.

³Ravitch, an architect of neoliberal reforms, served as Assistant Secretary of Education under Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander from 1991 to 1993. In 2010 she renounced her earlier work and has since become one of the fiercest critics of policies she once championed.

The economic purpose of education is also at the center of *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*, a March 2012 report sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. The document highlights the threat and risk posed by the presumed failure of the educational system. In discussing the purpose of education, the report notes, "... the state of America's education systems has consequences for economic competitiveness and innovation" (p. xiii). The document adds that

[S]tudents are leaving school without the math and science skills needed for jobs in modern industry ... By almost every measure, U.S. schools are failing to provide the kind of education our society will need to ensure American leadership in the twenty-first century (Foreword, p. x).

To highlight the threats this poses, the report warns that "educational failure puts the United States' future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety at risk," adding that the country "will not be able to keep pace—much less lead—globally unless it moves to fix the problems it has allowed to fester for too long" (p. 58).

The importance of education for national security as outlined in these reports is undeniable. But these reports position education as a bulwark and force to deploy against global threats, not a means to developing citizens in a sustainable and democratic society.

Current Manifestations of Neoliberal Values

The decades-long rise of neoliberalism has brought us to a place where deficit thinking and competition have turned into a neat justification for the frenetic race for quality schools and curriculum. Labaree (1997) sums it up well:

[Education] is a private good that only benefits the owner, an investment in my future, not yours, in my children, not other people's children. For such an educational system to work effectively, it needs to focus a lot of attention on grading, sorting, and selecting students. It needs to provide a variety of ways for individuals to distinguish themselves from others—such as by placing themselves in a more prestigious college, a higher curriculum track, the top reading group, or the gifted program (p. 48).

Market thinking means that success, and the quality education it depends on, are necessarily scarce commodities that force us to see each other as adversaries. The accompanying values and mindsets—hierarchy, deficit thinking, and ranking-and-sorting—are now manifested in the education system through curriculum, classroom practice, and test-based policies.

In terms of curriculum, low-income students in the US are more likely to experience low-level courses and rote pedagogy that emphasizes test preparation and compliance over meaningful content and critical thinking (Anyon, 1981). Structural inequalities in school funding compound the problem. In the 2012 report noted, the USDOE's Office of Civil Rights documented that many high-poverty schools receive less than their fair share of state and local funding, leaving students in high-poverty schools with fewer resources than schools attended by wealthier peers.

Likewise, low-income students are also less likely to have qualified teachers, advanced courses, and access to technology. At the international level, researchers likewise found that access to quality math curriculum hinged on income, and that wealthier students enjoy greater access to more challenging curriculum (Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido, & Houang, 2015).

Low-income students also struggle under the burden of lower expectations from teachers—a strong predictive factor for graduation and other achievement indicators. For example, researchers in the Netherlands found that teacher expectations in place at the end of primary school strongly predicted secondary school outcomes. In the U.S., secondary teachers have lower expectations for students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These teachers predicted that high-poverty students were 53% less likely to earn a college diploma than their more affluent peers. While the researchers postulated that the low expectations might have been based on students' progress to date, the influence of teachers' beliefs is undeniable.

The combination of weak curriculum, rote pedagogy, and low expectations prepare students for low-level jobs, thus replicating socioeconomic inequalities.

Test-and-Punish Continues in the U.S.

No Child Left Behind aimed for students in all subgroups (including English Language Learners) to be proficient by 2013. Of course, the goal was not met, and NCLB came under increasing fire from many sides of the political spectrum. Despite the criticism, Duncan held onto the idea of competitiveness. In a 2013 New York Times article, Duncan notes, "If we've encouraged anything from Washington, it's for states to set a high bar for what students should know and be able to do to compete in today's global economy" (Hacker & Dreifus, 2013, para. 5).

In 2015, the U.S. replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The fierce debates leading up to its passage centered on persistent achievement gaps and how to close them. But rather than shifting to a different approach, ESSA maintains testing as the centerpiece of accountability, albeit with some modifications, such as more control by the states (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

Few educators would disagree that accountability is important. But test-based policies breed a hierarchy of clear winners and losers. The punitive consequences of low scores make testing efficient mechanisms to sort winners from losers. The parallels to Social Darwinism are not hard to see: punitive testing serves as 'natural selection' to determine the 'fittest' schools, students, and communities.

Test-and-punish policies also ignore a dominant factor that determines student achievement: household income levels. A 2011 study showed that (1) achievement gaps based on economic inequality now exceed those based on racial inequality, and (2) family income is by far the biggest predictive factor in a student's educational achievement (Reardon, 2011). Moreover, the concentration of poverty in US schools is increasing. Between 2006 and 2013, the number of students in high-poverty

school districts (in which more than 20 % of children live below the federal poverty line) increased from 15.9 million to 24 million (Brown, 2015).

These figures illuminate that the so-called ‘achievement gap’ is really an ‘opportunity gap.’ Students in poverty are less likely to have health care, stable housing, or access to enrichment activities such as music lessons or sports leagues (Rothstein, 2008). As noted, such students are also more likely to receive a substandard education in terms of rigor and teacher expectations.

Policies to address this might include equalizing funding, investing in community services, or revamping the curriculum. But in the neoliberal mindset, these approaches are irrelevant because poverty is an individual, not social, problem. This deficit mentality blames low achievement on lazy students, apathetic parents, bad teachers, and poorly managed schools. This drives policies designed to punish. Under NCLB, for examples, schools that did not meet Annual Yearly Progress faced an escalating series of consequences that could ultimately result in firing all staff and turning over management to for-profit company.

While individual effort and teacher quality are certainly factors, deficit thinking disconnects individuals from their larger social and cultural contexts. This yields an incomplete view of the problem. Improving education is of course a shared priority, but as education historian Diane Ravitch points out, “We will not make our schools better by closing them and firing teachers and entire staffs” (n.d., para. 5).

What About PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment)?

No discussion of competition and international education would be complete without an examination of PISA, an international benchmarking initiative that compares the academic performance of 15 year-olds in multiple countries. The OECD began work on PISA in the mid-1990s, and the first survey took place in 2000.

The PISA test results rank countries based on achievement, and at first glance this may seem like yet another example of neoliberalism. However (at least on paper), PISA aims to improve education policies and outcomes based on the valid notion that countries can learn from each other. The PISA results are supposed to highlight common international educational challenges, and compare best practices to spur improvements within countries (OECD, n.d.). The question they ask is: *What can we learn from each other to improve education for all? And, not, How can I beat you?*⁴

In terms of an economic angle, PISA is explicit about connection between the economy and education. But rather than foregrounding competitiveness as the goal, the 2103 report (of 2012 results) explicitly positions social and individual wellbeing as the purpose of economic success. As the OECD notes, “Equipping citizens with

⁴Despite this admirable mission, policymakers in the U.S. (which consistently lags behind other nations) use PISA scores to justify the neoliberal policies described herein.

the skills necessary to achieve their full potential, participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy, and ultimately convert better jobs into better lives is a central preoccupation of policy makers around the world” (p. 3).

The report adds that skilled people are more likely to volunteer, be politically active, and trust others. In this way, a stable society grows from skilled citizens, and good jobs serve the ends of a better life.

ESD: A Different Set of Assumptions

The inequality required and supported by neoliberalism precludes the possibility for shared goals. Interdependence is impossible because everyone is an adversary. Education for Sustainable Development, like sustainability itself, is based on a fundamentally different set of beliefs and values.

First, ESD recognizes the fact that all people are part of social, cultural and biological communities; interdependence, not individualism, is the operating principle (Martusewicz & Edmunson, 2005). Interdependence is built upon an equity perspective, a way of viewing social problems that examines systems, connections, and structural factors rather than simply blaming individuals (Royce, 2009). An equity perspective favors educational solutions that support the development of the whole child, address institutional inequalities in society, and maintain public access to and control of schooling.

The author emphasizes that the equity perspective is not against the appropriate involvement of outside stakeholders, including businesses. New ideas can be powerful drivers of positive change. Likewise, while the equity perspective favors accountability, it believes that standardized tests are inadequate yardsticks because they cannot measure real-world problem-solving, empathy, community engagement, motivation to learn, or other factors that determine students’ readiness for life and citizenship (Ravtich, 2010).

ESD also addresses social and emotional skills such as social awareness and responsible decision-making (The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). A growing body of research in the US and internationally suggests that social-emotional wellbeing is an essential underpinning for academic success, and that families, schools and communities can all support this (Ikesako & Miyamoto, 2015).

In terms of assumptions about human-economic-environmental relationships, ESD is based on several principles:

- The environment includes all living and non-living elements that comprise the world. Humans are part of the environment. They live interdependently with other species and non-living elements of the environment such as air, water, and minerals.

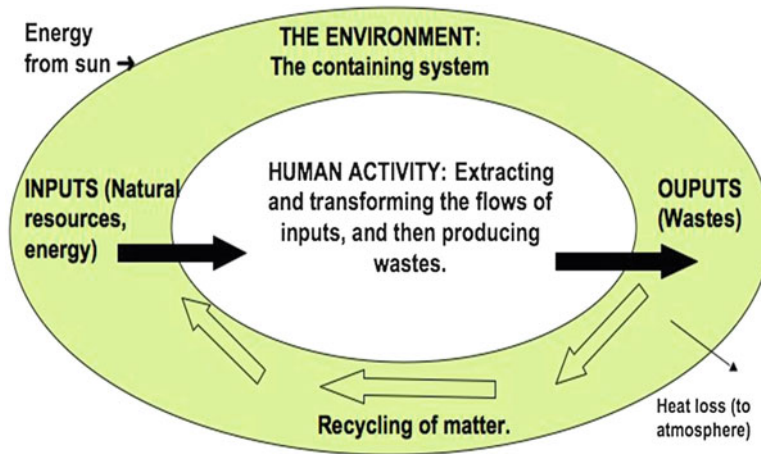


Fig. 5.2 The economy is a subsystem of the environment. *Source:* Author created and adapted from Daly (1980)

- The environment serves as the ultimate source of all materials and the final ‘sink’ into which wastes go. These wastes can change physically and/or chemically, but they do not go ‘away’ (Daly, 1980) (Fig. 5.2).
- Our wellbeing is sustained through the ‘Commons’: shared natural and human-created gifts, such as water, air, language, and stories, that must be passed on to future generations (On the Commons, 2011).
- *Communities* thus include human and non-human members: other species, and abiotic (non-living) elements such as air, water, and infrastructure.

The pedagogy of ESD draws upon multiple approaches, all of which emphasize experiential learning, civic engagement, and real-world problem solving (Hopkins & McKeown, 2002). These approaches include ecojustice education (Bowers, 1999), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and environmental education (Orr, 2004/1994). The richness of this pedagogy demands, enables, and contextualizes academic learning to develop students as critical thinkers, active citizens, problem-solvers, and yes, workers, albeit in a sustainable economy (Barrat Hacking, Scott, & Lee, 2010; Bartosh, Tudor, Ferguson, & Taylor, 2006; Ernst & Monroe, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003; Hoody & Lieberman, 2005). Tables 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 summarize the difference between the neoliberal and sustainability paradigms.

Table 5.1 The neoliberal and sustainability paradigms compared: beliefs about success and how to measure it

Neoliberalism	Neoliberalism in education	Sustainability	ESD (ed for sustainability)
<p>“Developed” = industrialized. Development and economic progress are measured in quantitative terms: increases in profits, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), industrial output, etc. Short-term indicators matter most: daily stock prices, quarterly profits, annual GDP (Daly 1980; Prugh, 1995)</p>	<p>Purpose of education: prepare students to compete in the global economy (Engel, 2000; Kohn, 2002; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011). Goals and metrics: achievement defined by test short-term test scores and other “data-driven” measures. Data and information are conflated with knowledge and wisdom (Orr, 2004/1994).</p>	<p>“Developed” = qualitative improvements in health, happiness, communities, etc. Economic growth can be part of development, but measures of progress go beyond the GDP. Long-term thinking: how will actions today impact the next seven generations? Change is approached cautiously. Practices that sustain the community are retained. Traditions and relationships that sustain the community are valued and preserved. Also valued: elders’ experiences and non-market exchanges (Bowers 1999; Daly & Cobb 1989; Santone 2012).</p>	<p>Purpose of education: develop citizens for a diverse, democratic, and sustainability society. “Citizenship” implies multiple roles, including family member, community member, and worker (Apple & Beane, 1995; Banks, 2007). Achievement is based on the wellbeing of the whole child: physical, academic, social-emotional. Long-term view of success: create life-long learners and citizens in a democracy (Apple & Beane, 1995). Knowledge and wisdom take many forms (Martusewicz, et al. 2011).</p>

Table 5.2 The neoliberal and sustainability paradigms compared: beliefs about the relationship among humans, the economy, and the environment

Neoliberalism	Neoliberalism in education	Sustainability	ESD
<p>Anthropocentrism Nature is a collection of resources that exist for human gain. Humans therefore have the right to control and “tame” it (Bacon, 2000/1620; Merchant, 2000; Quinn, 1992). The environment is one factor of production: land, labor and capital. Unlimited growth is assumed to be both desirable and possible. Ecosystem services are not valued in accounting systems or policies. (Daly 1980).</p>	<p>Interdependence: humans are one of many species in a complex web of life. Communities include non-human members. “Diversity” includes cultural, linguistic, and biological diversity (Quinn 1992). The environment is the basis of all economic activity. It is the source of all materials and the final “sink” into which all wastes go (Daly 1980). Economic policies and practices are based on ecological and systems principles: “waste = food,” regeneration, limits, scale, feedback loops. Ecosystem services are considered in accounting and policy decisions (Costanza et al., 1997).</p>	<p>The curriculum separates disciplines. “Literacy” is defined by reading and math. Ecological literacy is “extra” and unrelated to other areas (Orr, 2004/1994). Environmental education focuses on “exotica” (e.g., rainforests and polar bears), sending the message that the environment is a place both far away and without people. Economics curriculum ignores the dependence of the economy on the environment, and reinforces the values of market-based capitalism (Maier & Nelson, 2007; Santone 2012).</p>	<p>Content is holistic, integrated and driven by what students need to contribute to a diverse, democratic, and sustainable society. Ecological literacy is co-central and connected to other forms of literacy. Economics is reframed to emphasize a sustainable economy (Orr, 2004/1994; Santone 2001, 2010, 2012). Economics emphasizes the knowledge and skills needed to advance a sustainable economy within healthy communities (Santone 2010; Santone & Saunders 2013). Concepts: environment as source/sink; Laws of thermodynamics: conservation of energy, and entropy (Daly, 1980). Analysis of paradigms and cultural beliefs.</p>

Table 5.3 The neoliberal and sustainability paradigms compared: beliefs about the nature of the relationships among self, others, communities, and nation

Neoliberalism	Neoliberalism in education	Sustainability	ESD
<p>Individualism is valued over interdependence. Diversity is a problem to be managed. Freedom = autonomy from community and social constraints (Daly & Cobb, 1989). Zero-sum mentality and unlimited competition: one can only win if others lose. Threats must be contained through force (Kennan, 1947; Porter & Mykleby, 2011; Quinn, 1992).</p>	<p>Individuals are part of ecological and cultural communities. Diversity supports community resiliency (Quinn, 1992). There is a difference among <i>individuality</i>, (the uniqueness of each person), <i>individualism</i> (prioritization of individual freedom), and <i>community</i> (existing in social and ecological relationships with others). Competitors are not necessarily adversaries, and a winner does not demand a loser (Porter & Mykleby 2011, p. 5).</p>	<p>Curriculum: character education emphasizes personal responsibility but ignores environmental and social responsibility, or business and institutional ethics. Economics education emphasized monetized relationships (i.e., producers and consumers) (Santone, 2010). Equity: school policies reward winners at the expense of losers. Individual teachers, students, and families are blamed for failure due to their “deficits” (Ryan, 1976). Excluding “problem” kids and “other people’s children” is acceptable (Delpit, 1995; Kozol, 2005).</p>	<p>Equity: the health and wellbeing of students, schools, families and communities are interdependent (Rothstein 2008). Holistic approach to character and responsibility. Academic success is achievable by all, with polices based on an ethic of cooperation, mutual support, and a commitment to dismantling structural barriers to equity and achievement (Gorski, 2007; Rothstein 2008).</p>

Global Action to Reclaim Education as a Public Good

UNESCO's historic commitment to ESD represents a high-level global effort to reorient and reclaim the educational system as a public good that serves the common good. Most recently, in 2015, UNESCO released *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good*. This book, inspired by the original UNESCO Constitution in 1945, begins with an eloquent plea about the role of education:

The world is changing—education must also change. Societies everywhere are undergoing deep transformation, and this calls for new forms of education to foster the competencies that societies and economies need, today and tomorrow. This means moving beyond literacy and numeracy, to focus on learning environments and on new approaches to learning for greater justice, social equity and global solidarity. Education must be about learning to live on a planet under pressure. It must be about cultural literacy, on the basis of respect and equal dignity, helping to weave together the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. This is a humanist vision of education as an essential common good (p. 3).

The document highlights that both knowledge and education should be considered common goods available to all people “as part of a collective societal endeavor” (p. 3).

The Learning Metrics Task Force

Another, perhaps less prominent global education effort is The Learning Metrics Task Force (LMFT), convened by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. The global task force included 1700 consultation participants from 118 countries.

In 2013, the LMFT reached a consensus on the competencies needed by all children based on a set of Learning Domains that span early childhood through post-secondary education. These domains are physical wellbeing, social-emotional [health], culture and the arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and mathematics, and science and technology. This well-rounded list reflects the development of the whole child, focused on the “ultimate goal [of] quality education for all” (2013, p. 16).

Other recommendations in the document emphasize education as a public good. Recommendation 5, Equity, emphasizes the role of data collection for identifying and addressing inequalities, particularly within countries. Recommendation 6, Assessment as a Public Good, is an explicit recommendation that “any recommended products or services used for tracking at the global level should be considered public goods, with tools, documentation and data made freely available” (p. X). As with *Rethinking Education*, the LMFT asserts the necessity of education to remain in the public sphere.

Towards a Different Concept of Competition

Fully reclaiming education from the grips of neoliberalism will take a shift in how we think about the core topic of this chapter: competition as defined by neoliberalism. Competition is a reality, but it need not be zero-sum and based on domination. This section presents some alternative ways to think about this concept.

As noted, nature operates by the principle of competition; species compete for food, habitat, and mates to ensure survival and reproduction. But this occurs within ecological constraints (Quinn, 1992). Ecosystems remain resilient and self-renewing when competition is limited and biodiversity is preserved. Eliminating species weakens the system. Interdependence, not zero-sum dominance, is the operating principle.

Another way to reconceptualize competition is through the concepts of ‘low road’ and ‘high road’ competition (Reynolds, 2002). Low road competition focuses on winning at all costs. In an economic context, low road competition rewards externalizing environmental costs, squelching workers’ rights, or compromising on safety and quality. This paradigm of competition is thus the proverbial *race to the bottom*.

In contrast, high road competition generates healthy rivalry and challenges competitors to excel. This version of competition more closely aligns with the Latin root, *competere* (to strive for). Striving is what high road competition is about: *How can I improve my educational system? How can do so in ways that take all stakeholders and impacts into account?* This framing of competition is broadly reflected in the writings Adam Smith (1776/2003), widely seen as the ‘grandfather’ of capitalism. Smith—and many who followed—believed that markets are healthy when they provide full transparency, internalize all costs, prevent monopolization, and provide real choices to consumers (Daly & Cobb, 1989).

High road ideals are also found in the competition outlined in *A National Strategic Narrative* (Porter & Mykleby, 2011), a document calling for a new ‘story’ for the U.S.—one that discards the domination mentality and instead embraces global interdependence. The report is significant because of its authors: two former high-ranking Pentagon officials, Captain Wayne Porter (U.S. Navy, retired) and Colonel Mark Mykleby (U.S. Marine Corps, retired). Porter and Mykleby served as special strategic assistants to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen.

The document critiques the dated Cold War mentality of ‘threat and risk.’ It emphasizes that competing countries need not be adversaries and that “a winner does not demand a loser” (Porter & Mykleby, 2011, p. 5).

The authors further make the case that global interdependence is a strength, not a weakness, and that achieving sustainable prosperity relies on engagement and diplomacy rather than force. Prosperity should not come from dominance, but from sustainable communities, renewable energy, and enduring values such freedom and justice. The report boldly declares, “Dominance, like fossil fuels, is not a sustainable form of power” (p. 5). To realize this vision, the document calls for “the prioritization

of our investments in intellectual capital and a sustainable infrastructure of education, health and social services to provide for the continuing development and growth of America's youth" (p. 13).

Finally, a new understanding of competition depends on properly seeing the relationship between the economy and society. It is a biophysical reality that the economy is contained within larger global and social systems (Daly & Farley, 2007). Likewise, students' economic skills are a subset of broader civic competencies (Santone & Saunders, 2013). Jobs are certainly crucial and schooling must prepare students to contribute to economic wellbeing. But schools must also prepare students to design an economic system to serve the planet's seven billion people while also sustaining the environment it all depends on. Viewing economic priorities in isolation from larger ecological and social systems is an inaccurate, obsolete worldview that robs our students of the knowledge they need to create a better life.

Conclusions

Education's obligation to serve the public good has given way to education as an increasingly private tool for economic growth. Driven by the values of neoliberalism, this shift has reshaped accountability policies, curriculum, and pedagogy. Instead of emphasizing collaboration towards shared goals, neoliberal approaches foster zero-sum competition, punitive consequences, and accountability schemes that sort winners from losers in the service of the economy. Too often, these reforms are justified on the backs of disadvantaged students and the promise that 'choices,' privatization, and competition will improve schools. The result (and intention) is often just the opposite.

It's time to reclaim and reorient schools worldwide to the urgent imperatives of equal opportunity and sustainability. The first steps are to recognize interdependence and to prioritize collaboration. And if we do compete, let's make sure it's healthy, fair, and an incentive for us to strive for our best. We must then call out the inherent contradiction of neoliberal-style competition and the claim that it engenders educational excellence. If healthy competition requires equal footing, hierarchy and domination actually *undermine* true competition. Neoliberalism, it seems, is in a zero-sum competition with itself.

Key Chapter Concepts

1. Neoliberalism: An economic school of thought based on free markets and a reduced role of government
2. Zero-sum competition: A type of 'either-or' competition in which a winner demands a loser.

3. High-road competition: A type of competition based on striving for higher quality and better outcomes, and the belief that multiple parties can ‘win’.
4. Hierarchy: Inequalities defined by ranking
5. Deficit thinking: A way of explaining social problems as the result of individual defects

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