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Who Answers the Call? Plural Selves, Internal Publicness, and Subjectifying Education

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In this article, I take a critical stance against the individualist and essentialist conceptions of self embedded in educational policy and practice in the contemporary west and global north. These conceptions are both historically rooted in a colonial conception of "man" as rational and independent and are explanatorily narrow, failing to account for the relational and plural nature of lived subjectivity. To envision an alternative, I draw from the decolonial feminist phenomenology of Mariana Ortega and Maria Lugones and on Kathleen Wallace's Cumulative Network Model—an account of selves as historically cumulative networks of "I" perspectives. I argue that reflexive dialogue among these perspectives exhibits an internal publicness that extends Biesta's conception of becoming public beyond its social orientation. Drawing on Valsiner and Cabell's catalysis metaphor and the practice of Philosophy for Children, I propose pedagogical mechanisms that support both external dialogue among students and internal dialogue within their network selves. Reclaiming the publicness of education, I conclude, requires cultivating publicness not only between persons but within them.

Introduction

The "self," whether in the guise of the child or the adult, remains an important concern for education and schooling. Depending on the tradition or orientation, the self is a thing to be shaped, tamed, awakened, called forth, skilled up, or reflected on.

As a concept, the self is regularly positioned as the stable seat of rationality, action, and intention dating back to at least Descartes and has remained in this form in modern psychology and education in the west. We can see this in how individuals are framed as singular entities equipped with various skill sets and dispositions (like resilience). We also see this "self" reflected in diagnoses of ability or limitation.

Despite this view of general stability, educationalists and philosophers continue to explore concepts of the self and the implications for the moral and existential possibilities they open up or shut down. For educationalists and a number of feminist philosophers, these explorations take our relationship with and in the world as a central concern, given the role of relationships in constraining, distracting, and potentially destroying the possibility of a self's ability to step forward into the world on their own terms. In some cases, the self is understood as relationally situated, yet still existing relatively independent of its relations. This independence is often understood as a necessary feature of being able to resist influence or say "no" to what the world demands of us.

In his book *World-Centred Education: A View For the Present*, Gert Biesta (2022) helpfully captures the importance of a self in terms of *subjectification*. Education concerned with supporting subjects in leading their lives from the inside out falls within what he calls an existential educational paradigm. He contrasts this existential paradigm to that of education as cultivation. A key distinction between these two orientations is a rejection of thinking of education as a "process in which 'things'—in the widest possible sense of the word—are cultivated through influences from the 'outside'" (p. 26). Here Biesta is offering a distinction

regarding the orientation of educational work, including purposes and associated practices. His critical concern is that education as cultivation, is at best, "focused on securing 'smooth' transactions" (p. 32) with one's environment, even when that environment should be rejected.

In contrast to a cultivating orientation, education concerned with subjectification seeks to create the space and opportunity for subjects to respond to the world. Subjectifying education then "has to do with encouraging the self to be a self" and "encouraging the self not to walk away from itself" (p. 33). A key feature of Biesta's understanding of subjectification, is the possibility of saying "no" or refusing to adjust to or accommodate influences from one's environment. Drawing from the work of Dietrich Benner and Johann Gottleib Fichte, Biesta frames this as a calling or a "summoning to self-action" (p. 33). "In very simple terms that go to the heart of the matter, this summoning happens when we say 'Hey, you there! Where are you?'"(p. 33).

I agree that educational efforts can generate opportunities for a self to step forth anew, free from external demands and free to say "no" (Biesta, 2022; Masschelein & Simons, 2015). Biesta's paradigmatic account usefully focuses us on subjectification over mere skill acquisition. However, I have two concerns regarding relationally situated accounts, which I interpret Biesta's as. The first is that although Biesta resists thinking of the subject as detached from the world, he still seems to work from the assumption that one can detach from it and that moments of disruption are sufficient to stimulate this. I agree that saying "no" exemplifies one's ability to step into the world from the inside out. Yet, this assumes that what is inside is not already deeply constituted by the relations that surround us, including whether one says "no" in English, for example. Said differently, the self that answers the call of "Hey you there" or the one that steps forward in moments of disruption can itself be the product of previously cultivated commitments and ways of being. My second concern is that it is unclear whether the subject that answers the call in one context is the same subject that answers in a different one. The experience of immigrants and those that find themselves navigating the world as both insider and outsider seems to suggest otherwise. Feminist and decolonial thinkers have offered good reasons to resist seeing the self as singular. Importantly, their concern is not only with the plurality of persons in shared social spaces— the kind of plurality Biesta and even Arendt who he draws from, take as central— but with plurality that exists *within* each self. This internal plurality, I will argue, has equally important implications for subjectifying education.

In what follows, I draw from conceptions of self that more fully acknowledge how central features of our lived experience become integrated into our very subjectivity. I will argue relational and plural conceptions of self offer a more accurate account of what is involved in living as a subject. My argument for this alternative is grounded on two premises. The first is that the individualist conception of self which we find functioning throughout contemporary education and society more broadly, has origins that are increasingly and rightly challenged by educational and philosophical thinkers. The second premise argues that the explanatory and educational power of the traditional conception of self is narrow in scope and potentially miseducative, if not outright harmful, in its application.

The remainder of the article proceeds in three parts. First, I examine the historical origins and explanatory limitations of individualist conceptions of self. Second, I present a relational and multiple account drawing from Mariana Ortega, Maria Lugones, and Kathleen Wallace. I then explore pedagogical implications through the concept of pedagogical catalysts. Finally, I argue that both external dialogue among persons and internal dialogue among perspectives within a network self exhibit a public quality—a re-conception that expands where we look for publicness in educational contexts. The overall argument is necessarily exploratory and seeks to trace connections that each warrant fuller elaboration elsewhere.

An Inherited Conception

Contemporary educational thought in the Anglo-west regularly adopts a conception of the self as a rational and independent entity. Gert Biesta (2007) has linked this individualist conception to the enlightenment and sees it as the foundation for the move toward instrumentalism. More critically, Nelson Maldonao-Torres (2007) has linked this to a colonial history that saw the conception of "man" used as a tool to exclude, oppress, and eradicate others utilizing categories of race and gender and weaponizing the distinction of rationality versus emotionality. As Maria Lugones (2010) echoes, colonial expansion brought with it the imposition of hierarchies and dichotomies that end up woven into the social life of people in everyday moments.

> The European, bourgeois, colonial, modern man became a subject/agent, fit for rule, for public life and ruling, a being of civilization, heterosexual, Christian, a being of mind and reason. The European bourgeois woman was not understood as his complement, but as someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being home bound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man. (p. 743)

This colonial inheritance did not dissolve with the formal end of empire. As Azada-Palacios (2024) shows in her analysis of the American colonial period in the Philippines (a pattern that cuts across colonial projects), these hierarchies become embedded in educational structures and practices that continue to shape what counts as knowledge, who counts as a knower, and how students are understood and assessed.

The privileging of mind and reason extends from monotheistic Christian traditions that forcibly replaced indigenous and non-Christian worldviews. These traditions separate the spirit from the body and in privileging the spirit, and its resulting correlate the mind, they conceptualise the self as a non-physical entity that remains what it is within and across relationships over time. If such impositions shape our very understanding of who we are, they inevitably make their way into those moments where we believe we are saying "no"— in a sense then even our resistance can be shaped by what we resist. In educational contexts this colonial conception is reflected in the framing of students as individual entities which need to only develop skills and abilities and are assessed through psychological and cognitive constructs like semantic memory organisation (Lai et al., 2024) or content area retention and application in context independent tasks. The self as mental entity (a gendered construct as outlined above) pervades the literature in the "learning sciences" which continues to have a strong influence on education policy.

Any argument in support of escaping these influences, or educating for this purpose, must confront the constitutive impact the conception represents, and that will necessarily involve— I suggest— utilising a different concept of self, one that takes such relations as its starting point. The particular history of the concept we typically run into is not a harmless one. It is instead one that has contributed to the exclusion of people and experiences.

Explanatorily Narrow

On a practical level, adopting the individualist conception of self leads to reductionist orientations to teaching and education, including: simplified accounts of what students need in order to overcome challenges (e.g. adopt a growth mindset, develop resilience); explanations of their success (they are the best and brightest, gifted); and blaming individuals for failure (they are defiant, resistant). This atomistic and essentialist conception also gets reinforced in political and economic structures and systems that emerge from the same historical path outlined in the previous section. This conception of self is the self of an expanding global capitalism. When it comes to schooling, such a conception allows us to prescribe a universal curriculum that focuses on thinking at the expense of political, ethical and cultural relationships and contexts.

In terms of helping to inform our understanding of persons and ways of life, the rational individualist conception, with its tendency to equate the self with a thinking subject, does a poor job of explaining robust features of the self that cannot be reduced to thinking. The reductionism of individualist thinking becomes apparent when we consider what it omits. As Kathleen Wallace (2019b) reminds us, a self would not be what it is without the interplay of our specific physical body, coordination with unique others, and distinctive experiences. A conception of self that omits these seems bereft of the value and meaning that make life worth living and are most certainly key aspects of what makes us who we are and how we are. Thankfully, we are not stuck with this conception. Importantly, neither is education.

We Are Relational Rather Than Individual

The conception of self I explore here is more radical than it might initially appear—we are not merely situated in relations but are made up of them. This has implications not only for what selves can do, but for what selves are, and how they engage with the world.

Theories of relational autonomy help illustrate the challenges and barriers our relationality presents when we attempt to be a self on our own terms. They also show how social and cultural relations are part

of the equation. As Linda Barclay (2000) argues, our responses to the world "will always bear the markings of those social relationships most pervasive in our lives—to family, to culture and so on" (p. 55). We cannot fully escape the socially determined values that shape our identity. Paradoxically, these are the same relations that enable autonomy. "The capacity and aspiration for autonomy is not something we are born with but something we develop only in society. The fact that any of us has the capacity for autonomous agency is a debt we owe to others" (p. 57). Said differently, people who step forth as an I, in the face of social conditions that may serve to act against them, do not step forward independent of any relationship to the world. Instead, they step forward as a result of certain relationships helping make it possible, including solidarity groups, supportive relationships, shifting cultural norms and temporal and material conditions (Meade, 2025).

Yet, constraints and opportunities are not simply features of localized contexts that affect what selves can do. Feminist and decolonial philosophers help us see how social power and gender dynamics shape what kinds of selves are formed in the first place. Within and beyond schools and families, certain selves are encouraged or allowed to step forth while others are not. As Judith Butler (1990) notes in her reading of Foucault, it is by virtue of being subjected to structures that we are "formed, defined and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures" (p. 3). Where Butler points to how structures form subjects, Jennifer Nedelsky (1989) takes this further and counsels that we must

> take seriously its constitutive quality; social context cannot simply mean that individuals will, of course, encounter one another. It means, rather, that there are no human beings in the absence of relation with others. We take our being in part from those relations. (p. 9)

While accounts of relational autonomy helpfully illustrate how social relations shape what selves can do and how they can act, the thinkers I turn to next push deeper by arguing that such relations constitute what selves fundamentally are, including the plurality that exists within each one of them. In the following sections, I explore two relationally constituted conceptions of self and trace their educational implications. Mariana Ortega's work on multiplicity shows how plural selves map onto lived experience, while Kathleen Wallace's (2019a) Cumulative Network Model (CNM) explains how selves are both multiple and singular. I then apply these insights to pedagogy through Valsiner and Cabell's (2011) concept of catalytic self-making, arguing that both external and internal dialogues among selves have a public quality.

Multiple Selves, Multiple Worlds

In *"New Mestizas," "World'-Travelers," and "Dasein": Phenomenology and the Multi-Voiced, Multi-Cultural Self*, Mariana Ortega (2001) presents a plural conception of self, informed by the work of Gloria Anzaldua and Maria Lugones. Despite clear differences in the origins and purposes behind the accounts of self explored by these thinkers, Ortega sees them equally concerned with articulating an account that "attempts to do justice to our experience, which takes into consideration the various contexts that contribute to making us who we are"(p. 3). Ortega draws heavily from Maria Lugones's (2003) concept of World Travelling which is grounded on the premise that we are constructed by our context and that different contexts construct us differently so that different aspects of our selves become salient. In the work of both Ortega and Lugones "world" is not a place but is a construction of life. Each of the constructions of life that shape us reflect a different set of intersubjective relationships and dependencies and by extension different versions of self—if not different selves altogether. Importantly for Lugones (2003), mechanisms of power shape those worlds and the experience of the self within them. Such a conception of self shifts away from the unified, epistemic self whose relation to the world is understood as a matter of ideas and representations—ones that can be approached positivistically and are susceptible to various truth regimes. In contrast to the self who can choose to act in a way that emancipates themselves from negative influences, or whose authentic self is freed via fortuitous disruption, the self we see here is one thrown into an existential struggle, not only with the world outside, but with the multiple identities that have developed within them.

Such an understanding of the self is meant to resonate with immigrants or those living in multiple cultural contexts. As a recent immigrant myself (I moved from the US to Ireland in 2017), this framing has helped me to make sense of and provides language for my own experience. For example, I grew up in the state of Utah, United States, which at the time was dominated by a single religious perspective and equally

a rugged individualist sensibility—an extension of its frontier heritage. My early life and subjectivity were shaped by a particular relationship to nature (I spent a lot of time alone in it) and of course an accompanying conception of masculinity. At the age of 19, I moved away from Utah and although I was not part of the Mormon church, I found that my ethical and moral outlook somehow still reflected some of its core sensibilities. This was a shocking realisation to come to when I did but makes perfect sense when we think of the self as relationally constituted. After living in six different states in the U.S. and now another country, I have multiple perspectives that frame my experience, each of which I can trace back to important relationships and contextual realities. The self who is developing in Ireland is not an extension of the one that developed in Utah; it is a different self. Yet, when I return to Utah, I find that old version of myself somehow being awakened (including a kind of masculinity I have tried to abandon) and doing so whether I like it or not.

I fully acknowledge that the "world travelling" that I am describing in my case is imbued with privileges that make comparisons to the experience of Ortega, or historically oppressed persons implausible if not inappropriate. Rather than suggesting my experience is comparable in terms of the challenges and prejudices faced, I instead use my experience to illustrate how even a privileged "self," with a more homogenous narrative can be more meaningfully understood via a conception of the self as multiple and relational. This reinforces its explanatory power.

The point I want to draw from Ortega (2016) and Lugones (2003) is that propositions related to a self stepping forth into the world on its own terms—whether understood as autonomy or subjectification—must account for multiple constitutive perspectives and further that systems or processes (including educational ones) that wash over or ignore them, fail to understand actual selves and reinforce the sanitising influence of a colonial project that no longer has a place in our world. If we are multiple, we need a pluralist account of stepping forth as a subject. Below, I propose that Kathleen Wallace has developed one that aligns with Ortega and Lugones and provides important explanatory details that can inform educational practice.

Cumulative Network Model of the Self

Kathleen Wallace (2019a) has articulated a relationally constituted conception of the self that takes our embodied and embedded nature seriously without falling back onto an essentialist conception. In line with feminist critiques and drawing upon pragmatist philosophical insights, she proposes that:

> "relationality" is not only social, but that the self is relational throughout, psychologically, physically, biologically, culturally, semantically, as well as socially. Hence, the self is a network of relations. The model also aims to recognize that temporality or historicity is constitutive of the self, that the self is a process, not a static three-dimensional thing. Hence, the self is a cumulative network. (p. 190)

By theorising the self as a cumulative network of traits (including distinct "I" perspectives), Wallace extends the explanatory power of the construct of a multiple self beyond that of Ortega (2016) and Lugones (2003). The emotional, embodied, historical and processual features of the network help us to better understand how hidden and contextual influences can indirectly become part of the way we engage with and understand the world and how we change over time. The term "self" therefore points to a network which contains multiple perspectives, developed historically over time as a result of relations and biological (embodied) and social factors that converge to shape a particular part of the network, often taking the form of "I" perspectives (Joe as rugged individualist able to navigate the wilderness). The self then should not be confused as one of these perspectives but instead understood as the whole network which will include multiple perspectives—much in the way that the Utah-self and the Ireland-self are not separate selves but perspectives within a singular cumulative network. Additionally, because the network is cumulative it means that it is ever-changing—an important contrast to the individualist conception that tends to identify the self as already there, already complete and simply waiting to be discovered.

Yet if the network is ever-changing, what provides coherence over time? For Wallace (2019b), the answer lies in two features of the network working together. First, the body itself functions as an organising "sub-network" within the larger network. It is a hub of biological, neurological, and physical traits that, while itself relational and changeable, provides a thread of material continuity across contexts. Second, and

more distinctively, the self is its history. Wallace (2019b) argues that the self at any time is best understood not as an isolated time-slice but as the cumulative upshot of everything it has been up to that point (p. 47). The past is not literally present but remains a constituent of the self as it currently is. Coherence then is not the product of an essential core that persists unchanged, but of an accumulated and overlapping cluster of traits (biological, social, and historical) whose integrity sustains the self as that self over time (Wallace, 2019a).

This network conception blurs the lines between the self as a bounded signifier of a person (identity) and the context the self-network is located in. In illustrating the self as a cumulative network of relations and traits, Wallace presents the case of a hypothetical self, named Lindsey. According to CNM, *Lindsey* is a marker for a network—a historically cumulative network of traits and relations up to the given moment, including "mother, novelist, English speaker, Irish-Catholic, feminist, professor of philosophy, automobile driver, psycho-biological organism, introverted, prone to a cheerful disposition, fearful of heights, brown-eyed, myopic, left-handed and so on" (Wallace, 2019b, p. 27). The constitutive and network aspects of the model equally apply to the traits and sub-traits of the network. For example, Lindsey as an English speaker is constituted by physical, cultural, and social relations and traits.

Relations also frame subjectivity within the model. Although the self is understood as a cumulative network, the network is constituted by multiple "I" perspectives, each itself a relational phenomenon that can serve as a standpoint for reflection and action. Returning to her example of Lindsey, Wallace shows how these can be in dialogue with each other in a way that leads to new perspectives. This, I will suggest, is also an account of how subjects can step forward into the world on their own terms while still understanding those terms as relational. Wallace (2019a) explains this in terms of a process of reflexive communication amongst perspectives, often in response to an event or object[1]:

> suppose Lindsey is considering whether to have another child. According to CNM, the self-evaluating process would involve perspectives of Lindsey communicating with one another, perhaps something like the following. I-as-philosopher, I-as-mother, I-as-spouse, I-as-feminist reflexively communicate with each other, considering, perhaps issues such as "how would having another child affect my ability to do philosophical work?" "how would it alter my relations to my current children? to my spouse?" "how important is it that my child have a sibling?" "what will be the caretaking responsibilities and will they be equitable between me and my spouse?" The "I" as subject is multiple perspectives and these perspectives may unite to form an integrated perspective, an I who is the cumulative whole self. (p. 211)

For Wallace, our "I" perspectives can be relatively independent from each other, but as a result of a reflexive capacity and process, can be brought together in a relatively integrated experiential standpoint. Importantly, the relational nature of these perspectives remains active at any given moment and is susceptible to influence from the present context. Such influences of context were captured by Ortega (2016) and Lugones (2003) in terms of "worlds." All three thinkers' views point to different versions of our multiple selves being more or less at ease in different worlds, although Wallace captures this more in terms of the fit between perspective and context over time. To return to my own example, the rugged individualist perspective in my network has grown increasingly less prevalent and relevant in my network over time the longer I am away from the context that constituted it. This is not just a matter of attrition but is also the result of the rugged individualist perspective being brought into conflict and communication with other emerging perspectives in my network— ones that are no longer comfortable embracing the conception of masculinity it carries with it. That said, should I find myself back in the context where that perspective was developed, I will find it more difficult to keep that perspective from taking a more central role. The structures (institutional and normative), people, and politics of that context in a sense call that perspective forth or challenge the other "I" perspectives within my network in ways that may function to silence or frustrate them. That a context can frustrate or constrain a perspective is very much a part of what makes contextual support necessary for stepping forth as the kind of self we hope to be. Here is where I see connections back to the ideas of relational autonomy touched upon in the introduction.

[1] This understanding of the self as a dynamic multiplicity of perspectives in internal dialogue has a parallel in Hubert Hermans's dialogical self theory, which conceives of the self as a multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in dialogue with one another (Monereo & Hermans, 2023). While working in related territory, my concern here is philosophical and educational rather than psychological and is focused on the conditions under which such dialogue can be understood as subjective and as exhibiting a public quality.

What I hoped to do in this last section is to show that our context can call forth, frustrate, invite and support different perspectives coming into dialogue with each other and with that very context. An interesting implication of the network and pluralist conceptions of self is that under the right conditions, a new perspective can be generated. Lindsey's response to the question of having another child establishes a normative stance on a life event that is a unique combination of the Lindsey network. Her reflexive communication between her feminist, philosopher, and mother perspectives allows for a new version of Lindsey to emerge which cannot be reduced to an application of the combined cultivating influences of each of those perspectives. If that reflexive communication (which I will call dialogue moving forward) is central to the development of new "I" perspectives and subjective trajectories of the network, then we can understand that dialogue as central to both becoming a self and to stepping forth into the world as a self "on our own terms." In the next section I want to suggest that this dialogue, both between external selves and the network's internal "I" perspectives can be understood as having a public quality.

Publicness

Discussions of publicness in education typically focus on external dimensions: public institutions, public spaces, civic engagement, or pedagogies that bring students together (Sandlin et al., 2011). These accounts assume publicness operates *between* distinct individuals. But if selves are relationally constituted networks of multiple "I" perspectives as I have argued, we must extend our understanding of where publicness is to be found. Here and in previous work (Oyler, 2023), I suggest that publicness can appear within us. Recognizing this internal publicness is crucial for reclaiming the public character of education.

I draw this conception of publicness from Gert Biesta's (2012) exploration of public pedagogy. In contrast to what he referred to as "pedagogies *for* the public"' and "pedagogy *of* the public," Biesta offered what he called "a pedagogy concerned with becoming public," where:

> Becoming public is not about a physical relocation from the home to the street or from the oikos to the polis, but about the achievement of a form of human togetherness in which, to put it in the language of Hannah Arendt, action is possible and freedom can appear. (p. 693)

Biesta's insight is that publicness is not a matter of location but a particular quality of interaction—one where freedom can occur. As a quality, it is equally applicable to interactions within the self, between its multiple perspectives.

This aligns with Wallace's reflexive communication among "I" perspectives, as illustrated in Lindsey's philosopher-self, mother-self, and feminist-self communicating about what to do. This communication is the condition for stepping into the world as a subject rather than simply acting out the instructions provided by the world outside of us. Without this reflexive communication among perspectives, we risk moving through life on autopilot, i.e. the network operating unreflectively, reproducing old patterns. To maintain subjectivity then is to maintain the conditions of stepping into the world in ways where new beginnings are possible, including the beginning of new perspectives. These beginnings and the freedom that characterises the contexts in which they can emerge reflects a public character, even within our network self. How then might we create educational engagements that support such beginnings? In the next section, I claim this can involve mechanisms that bring perspectives into contact and reflexive dialogue.

Self-Making Catalysts

In their chapter in the *Handbook of Dialogic Self Theory*, Jaan Valsiner and Kenneth Cabell (2011) explore the challenges and tensions associated with what they term as *self-making* which understands internal dialogue amongst internal "I" perspectives as central to development. Self-making for them involves internally "reconstructing, renegotiating and reorganizing meanings of selves, in relationship to each other and the environment"' (p. 110). Self-making is an active process of bringing the network to bear on itself to generate new perspectives and possibilities.

To make sense of self-making, they adopt a concept from the field of Chemistry, a field concerned with, in part, how elements react with each other and the conditions that make such reaction possible.:

> In general, 'catalysis' is a broad term that refers to a process that provides the conditions necessary – but not by themselves sufficient – to produce a particular qualitative change in a system. Thus, the catalyst does not cause a particular reaction to happen, nor does it cause a particular result. Instead, catalysis supports the reaction and enables the production of the outcome. (Valsiner & Cabell, p. 113)

The catalysis metaphor is particularly useful for understanding how educational engagements can support reflexive dialogue among perspectives without determining which perspective should dominate. In his description of subjectifying education, Biesta (2022) has suggested the interruption (of experience or habits) creates a space for selves to step forward as subjects, free from cultivating influences. I am concerned that the self that steps forward may be a perspective that is unhelpful to the network, if not damaging to the context it steps into. For example, when confronted with a conflict, the rugged individualist self within my network may automatically step forth even though it is not how I want to act in the world today. This perspective carries with it a lack of sensitivity to the experience of others. Should it be the thing that steps forth, it will simply reproduce old habits from my youth rather that representing a considered response from my current network. The educator-self and the Irish-resident-self in my network might offer more appropriate responses, but without conditions for internal dialogue, the habitual pattern wins by default. Building catalytic mechanisms into spaces of disruption addresses this concern. It helps ensure that what emerges is genuinely subjective.

Three catalytic functions are particularly important for supporting internal publicness. The first is that catalysts bring reactants into closer proximity to each other. Similarly, a pedagogical catalyst would bring students closer to each other, and to themselves. Organised in the right way, multiple perspectives can be animated and brought into dialogue, thus enhancing the subjectifying potential.

Secondly, catalysts put reactants into favourable orientation to each other. We want students to come together in ways that allow for a qualitative change, ones that support their subjectification. Orienting them dialogically—internally and externally—creates a space of plurality where the possibility of something new can arrive, free from expectation and cultivation.

Third, catalysts remain unchanged by the reaction, available for repeated use. Effective pedagogical catalysers then need to take a form that can be utilised consistently and repeatedly. This will also provide a scaffolding effect for student reflexive communication, which for many will be a novel form of engagement.

In what follows, I explore how philosophical inquiry functions catalytically in two ways: bringing students into dialogue with each other (external publicness) and bringing students into dialogue with themselves (internal publicness). In both cases, the catalyst provides necessary but not sufficient conditions for subjects to step forward through reflexive communication.

Pedagogical Catalyst – Publicness With External Others

In the field of pre-college philosophy, a common pedagogical approach is to invite children to engage in a community of philosophical inquiry. This typically involves the group engaging with a common stimulus, generating questions that target a philosophical issue of interest, and working together to come to some tentative yet meaningful resolution or judgment.

Consider how a question like *Do I own my arm the same way I own my toys?* (one from my own teaching experience) functions in a community of inquiry of six- and seven-year-olds. The inquiry allows students to bring different "I" perspectives to the question—child-as-sibling who has fought over toys; child-as-fragile navigating their own bodily vulnerability; child-as-friend navigating fairness. The commonality of the concept to these perspectives draws them into contact. As the inquiry proceeds, a participant who initially insisted "yes"—drawing on their toy owner perspective, shaped by sibling battles—finds that perspective in tension with another: the self who knows their arm feels different from a toy, that it cannot be given away or replaced. This internal tension, stimulated by external dialogue with others, is catalytic. No perspective is prescribed as correct, instead the conditions are created for a qualitative shift to a new understanding of ownership, selfhood, and embodiment.

Thinkers in the field of Philosophy for Children, especially those whose thinking and practice align with the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) and its founders Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, often characterise philosophical concepts and issues as *common, central*, and *contestable* following Splitter and Sharp (1995). In labelling philosophical concepts as *common*, advocates

point to the fact that concepts like fairness, beauty, good, freedom and of course self, are concepts that we find threaded throughout the experience of people regardless of their context and way of life. This feature of commonality means that such concepts can serve as a common point of reference, not because we hold a common conception, but because the concept informs our otherwise diverse experiences.

When we say that philosophical concepts are *central*, we mean that they play a central role in how we make sense of our experience. Said differently, how we understand a concept has consequences for future experience and even action and therefore we have a stake in deciding what they mean. Its catalytic quality rests in the fact that these stakes are not only relevant to different individuals who come into contact with each other, they are present for many of the "I" perspectives that make up an individual network self. In my case, the rugged individualist male still present in my cumulative network, is deeply concerned with freedom but the conception of freedom at work there is different than the one that informs the "I" perspective of the educator working in a university in Ireland[2]. Because each perspective has a stake in the concept, directly confronting it can draw those perspectives into interaction. Conceptual examination and negotiation help set the conditions for interaction and a qualitative shift in the network, i.e. for new beginnings.

The diversity of conceptions of a given concept is what Splitter and Sharp (1995) are referring to when they characterise them as *contestable*. Importantly, contestability is not just a matter of there being different views or disagreement. Contestability points to the fact that philosophical concepts have also proven to remain contestable over time. As they state, "they seem to resist our best attempts to define them with complete clarity and finality" (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p. 130). This echoes the feature of a catalyst in that it may function to bring agents into interaction, but once the interaction is achieved the catalyst returns to its original state—it stays common, central, and contestable.

The catalytic pedagogical potential of philosophy is open to various approaches in terms of utilisation. As within chemistry, if we seek to give any direction to the catalytic interaction, a regulator needs to be present. In philosophy for children the principles of *community* (do it together and collaboratively) and *inquiry* (seek the most reasonable answer) serve this function. Yet without the philosophical nature of the engagement, I do not see such an engagement activating multiple "I" perspectives in the way I am hoping for. Groups inquire together regularly to solve problems, and such an engagement can be purely practical and instrumental. Infusing the philosophical into engagements of this kind increases the chance that some aspect, and maybe multiple aspects, of our network selves will be stimulated and brought into interaction. I suggest that this can be understood as an invitation to examine and problematise our perspective and our very life constructs or worlds to put it in Lugones's (2003) terms.

Pedagogical Catalysts – Publicness With Internal Others

I have discussed the space for engaging in a dialogue with oneself elsewhere (Oyler, 2023) in terms of Arendt's concept of solitude. There I suggested that teachers engage their teacher selves in a particular dialogue and offered a set of questions for framing that discussion. I see a similar strategy being relevant here. In this case, we would need to invite students to bring their "I" perspectives together in ways that seek to appraise their value and their potential for guiding future action or responding to the call of "Hey you!" from Biesta (2022). Below are a set of questions that might help them to reflexively communicate within their network to respond to a situation from their life or to the philosophical catalyst above:

1. *Why are these the perspectives and relationships that have emerged?* Different situations and contexts will call forth different "I" perspectives in different ways. Whether these are useful, informative, or relevant is open to question. Many of us are familiar with situations where the best version of ourselves was regretfully absent.
2. *Are these the most relevant perspectives and relationships? Which ones are missing?* Leading one's life from the inside out is a matter of choosing which direction one will take. Our relationally constituted nature means that internalised influences can have a tendency to dictate or stimulate certain kinds of responses. We are not leading from the inside out if we are proceeding in a knee-jerk fashion.
3. *What commitments and ways of thinking are being smuggled in by these perspectives and relationships?* Some relationships and perspectives will be better served when included in the reflexive engagement.

[2] Roughly these might be captured in the distinction between negative and positive freedom.

Thinking about the consequences and motivations that are served will be central to a critical appraisal.

4. *Which perspectives will help me to live how I hope to live (to guide the network more generally)?* Not all external influences or internalised perspectives are problematic. Some of them offer us opportunities that we might otherwise miss or fail to appreciate if we do not bring them into focus and communication. This final step seems central to being a subject of one's own life.

Another concrete mechanism for bringing this into the classroom could involve asking students to write a narrative of their own Moral Evolution[3] that they return to as they study. This assignment asks students to trace key moments, relationships, and contexts that shaped their ethical commitments over time, creating an account of how their moral perspectives developed. Doing so will allow them to take account of the influences and events behind their various "'I" perspectives and begin to bring them to bear on their present and future actions. Said differently, they can develop a genealogy of their "I" perspectives to trace how each emerged and how they continue to shape the network moving forward. Note that this is not a matter of developing personality inventories which can fix students into static categories rather than recognizing their developmental nature. Instead, it is about coming to understand how we have come to be the network of "I" perspectives and commitments we are at this moment.

Conclusion

Reclaiming the publicness of education requires more than the creation and maintenance of public spaces for engagement. If selves are relationally constituted pluralities, then publicness must also be cultivated *within* students. This cultivation can be aided through pedagogies that catalyse reflexive dialogue among their various "I" perspectives. This internal publicness is not a retreat from our engagement with others but a precondition for it. Subjects who cannot engage their own plurality cannot engage meaningfully with the plurality of others.

This article has traced how individualist conceptions of self are both rooted in a colonial history and narrow in explanatory scope. As such, they fail to account for the plurality of lived subjectivity—one acknowledged in feminist and decolonial thought. Drawing from Ortega, Lugones, and Wallace, I offered an alternative account of selves understood as a network of "I" perspectives, each shaped and constrained by contexts, relationships and mechanisms of power. This conception helps to supplement what it means to step forward as a subject: not to escape the influences of cultivation as a singular "I", but instead as a reflexive plurality of perspectives able to generate new possibilities.

Pedagogically, catalytic mechanisms can help create the conditions of reflexive dialogue in ways that refrain from prescribing an outcome. I have suggested that the nature of philosophical concepts themselves have a catalytic quality. Combining them with collaborative and communal inquiry enhances their ability to support internal and external dialogue. This enables network selves to shape their future trajectories rather than reproduce patterns of behaviour.

Educationally, the argument here suggests that we need to support subjectification by attending to publicness at two levels. We need to create spaces where students can engage with each other around matters of concern that are central to their experience, while also creating internal public spaces where students can engage their own plurality. This dual focus demands that we rethink teaching and assessment practices that assume and promote conceptions of self that ignore embodied, emotional, and social dimensions of selfhood.

Questions remain regarding implementation in contemporary educational contexts; teacher preparation for facilitating internal publicness; and curriculum design that honours plural selves. Addressing these questions is essential to the project of reclaiming publicness in education—not merely defending public institutions but recognizing and nurturing the public quality of selfhood itself. To ignore this internal dimension of publicness is to relinquish education to individualist logics that deny our fundamentally relational and plural nature.

[3] I have Michael Philips, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Portland State University to thank for this idea. I was asked to complete such an assignment in one of his ethics modules during my undergraduate degree. I have since used it in a number of my own ethics and philosophy modules over the years.

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