CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Formation of Selfhood

Students are sites of ideological battles; educators, policy makers, and researchers endeavor to form school structures and practices to shape a certain way of *being*. The use of the term *being* is not intended to normalize the notion of self as an inherent category of persons. Aligned with a critical psychological commitment, the notion of self is a culturally, historically, and philosophically specific way of making sense of and making up people (Corcoran, 2016; Hacking, 2002; Martin & McLellan, 2013; Rose, 1999; Sugarman, 2015). From this viewpoint, being can be understood, constructed, and experienced in many different ways. However, through discursive practices, ways of reasoning, categories, context, experience, and tools, certain ways of being take form. Schools are sites where these formations, transformations, and reformations occur. This perspective is not deterministic. Students are confronted with visions of selfhood that operate to normalize and promote possible ways of being that function to ascribe qualities to students, inform pedagogical action, and serve as a compass for students' self-regulation.

This book is about how the application of certain psychological constructs in schooling contribute to the normalization of a contentious brand of selfhood, what is referred to here as *neoliberal self*." This type of self has also been referred to by other names, such as *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2008), *managerial self* (Fitzsimons, 2011), and *entrepreneurial self* (Bröckling, 2015). Despite the different terminology, researchers and theorists generally refer to similar qualities. The neoliberal self consists of an internal, knowable, and calculable set of skills and attributes that can be controlled, managed, and maximized through strategic choice-making. The ideal neoliberal self: (1) makes rational choices to increase value; (2) is responsible for life outcomes; (3) strategically manages choices and adapts, if necessary; (4) calibrates and assigns value to self; (5) perpetually pursues the increase in personal value; and (6) is organized around an ethic of efficiency and productivity. This self initiates iterative and perpetual

examination of qualities, actions, goals, and outcomes in order to manage and develop skills and attributes, evaluate the effects of choices, and adjust courses of action, if necessary.

Neoliberal selfhood is a specific way of being that is tied to market prescriptions and is thus a contentious vision associated with problematic ethical, psychological, moral, and economic consequences (Adams et al., 2019; De Lissovoy, 2015; Hogget, 2017; McGuigan, 2016; Richardson, Bishop & Garcia-Joslin, 2018; Rose, 1999; Sugarman, 2015). These consequences include (1) the increase in anxiety, stress, isolation, and selfishness; (2) the orientation of persons to material gain, competition, and economic instrumentalism; (3) disconnectedness from sociohistorical origins and relationships; and (4) the exacerbation of economic inequality. The self is neither inevitable nor natural, although some of the constructs that are associated with this self might suggest otherwise. In fact, the constructs analyzed in this book can serve to naturalize neoliberal selfhood. Lifelong learning (LLL), grit, growth mindset (GM), creativity, whole child (WC), and emotion regulation (ER) may appear to capture natural qualities of persons but instead propagate and normalize neoliberal selfhood.

Herein lies the necessity of this book. Although some researchers, educators, and policy makers may applaud and seek to create policies and practices that normalize neoliberal selfhood, there are many others who want to resist this self. The application of certain psychological constructs in schools ostensibly provides the means and basis for resistance. Some believe that that psychology can support teaching and learning by offering scientifically validated, democratic, and humanistic interpretations of students and classroom practice. However, this position is increasingly questioned by critical psychologists who suggest that applying psychology can contribute to unintended and unforeseen consequences (Corcoran, 2016; Martin & McLellan, 2013; Thrift & Sugarman, 2019; Teo, 2018).

For example, self-esteem tends to be accepted as a natural and normal description of students; something to be observed, measured, and targeted in order to support academic success and well-being. However, Martin and McLellan (2013) argue that this concept and the schooling practices that surround it normalize and promote a sense of self that is detached from context, focused on inner experience, committed to self-mastery, and in need of constant expression. For this reason, the authors link the self-esteem movement to neoliberal values and conceptions of being. Furthermore, as Cruikshank (1999) argues, self-esteem is targeted to generate particular perceptions, attitudes, and emotions so that persons can, in

acceptable ways, reflexively participate in economic and political life. The point is that practices around students' self-esteem might seem humanistic and unequivocally beneficial but may have unrecognized consequences related to values for selfhood, normalized states of being, and the rendering of persons amenable to institutional orders.

It might seem odd to link self-esteem and neoliberal selfhood. Likewise, there might be some resistance to situating the constructs discussed in this book in this ideology. There are debates about the ways structures, policies, and practices contribute to the normalization, (re)formation, and transformation of self. Although some researchers and theorists might be inclined to resist neoliberalism, there is not always agreement about what contributes, and in what ways, to the neoliberal self. The narrative told here is that grit, GM, LLL, ER, creativity, and WC instantiate, validate, and normalize neoliberal selfhood. Although these constructs tend to be rationalized as humanistic, democratic, and unequivocally beneficial for students, ideology circulates in and through them to communicate norms and values for a particular brand of self. Rather than opposing or resisting neoliberal selfhood, these constructs can be applied to substantiate and normalize this self.

The constructs analyzed in this book are often included under the rubric of noncognitive skills (NCS). Although this term has limitations (e.g., Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Lundberg, 2017; Kautz et al., 2014), it is intended to capture a discursive shift away from targeting psychological substance beyond reasoning capabilities. Researchers and policy makers point to the scientific basis for targeting attitudes, perceptions, mindsets, emotions, dispositions, and character as predictors of academic success, preparation for college and careers, democratic engagement, and overall well-being (Bollington, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2018; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Dweck, 2006; Garcia, 2016; Humphries & Kosse, 2017; Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016). NCS are associated with humanistic, democratic, and progressive visions of persons and purposes of schooling (e.g., ASCD, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2018; Garcia, 2016; Holbein et al., 2016). Thus, those who champion social justice and humanization in schooling tend to endorse and celebrate this focus. A major challenge with this line of inquiry is that this discourse masquerades as scientific descriptions of students that are natural, humanistic, desirable, and beneficial.

However, a counter-narrative is presented that implicates NCS in a contentious ideology that is associated with market-based prescriptions for being. The purpose of this book is to invite critical conversations about

the way ideology runs in and through the NCS discourse. As with self-esteem, some researchers, policy makers, and educators might strive to resist neoliberalism but inadvertently endorse it through the application of certain psychological ideas. Identifying the ideological currents in psychology discourse is not about rejecting certain constructs to be replaced with ones that are neutral and value-free, or to endorse opposing binaries. All of psychology is bound to philosophical, ideological, political, and cultural contexts. The goal of this inquiry is to make the ideological entanglement explicit in order to facilitate ethical conversations about values for and consequences of selfhood in schooling policy and practices. If one assumes that grit, GM, LLL, ER, WC, and creativity are natural descriptors of persons that need to be targeted in schooling, the danger is that neoliberalism can operate freely as a normalizing vision of selfhood with unchecked scientific force to legitimize problematic subject positions.

1.1 Foundational Commitments and Conceptualizations

1.1.1 Neoliberalism as an Economic Logic

Neoliberalism is a notion that continues to gain attention as it has arguably proliferated rapidly throughout the globe and in all spheres of life (Davies & Bansel, 2007; McGuigan, 2016; Rose, 1999; Sugarman, 2015). Neoliberalism is defined as an economic and governmental logic that is underpinned by the idea that the best way to achieve prosperity for persons is to transform institutions and relationships to operate like the "free" market. This ideology is typically associated with the normalization, protection, and reproduction of free market structures and relationships. As an economic logic, the foundational commitment is that prosperity is achieved by using state power to remove all obstacles to economic agility and to protect free market operations. Therefore, as Harvey (2007) contends, neoliberal policies center on deregulation, privatization, free trade, and de-unionization. This ideology plays out in efforts to privatize public schooling through vouchers and charter schools, the weakening of the teachers union through a vigorous public campaign to perpetuate the narrative that educational inequality results from "bad" teachers, the reduction of public funding, competition for federal funding, and an increase in school choice. Neoliberalism is more than a commitment that prioritizes free market structures at the economic, institutional, and policy levels. It is an ideology that leads to the construction, reconstruction, and

normalization of specific types of relationships and being (Adams et al., 2019; Apple, 2017; Lipman, 2013; Rose, 1999; Sugarman, 2015)

1.1.2 Neoliberalism as Rationality of Government

Neoliberalism is a form of governance that infiltrates all aspects of interaction, action, and the constitution of selfhood (Fitzsimons, 2011; Peters & Tesar, 2017; Rose, 1999). From this understanding, neoliberalism operates in and through interactions that do not have an immediate economic connection but nonetheless conform to an economic rationalization. Neoliberal governance is about harnessing the self-regulatory capacities of persons so that they can make choices that bring about value to themselves. The underlying commitment is that a citizenry that is self-regulated, enterprising, entrepreneurial, adaptable, and flexible supports individual interest, which is tied to economic vitality. Sugarman (2015) captures this way of thinking: "This relation [well-being of the state and of individuals] consists in the premises that the economy is optimized through the entrepreneurial activity of autonomous individuals and that human wellbeing is furthered if individuals are free to direct their lives as entrepreneurs" (p. 104).

For neoliberal governance, persons do not necessarily have to make choices that secure the most material wealth but must treat life as a project to be developed and managed regardless of the economic return. In this regard, neoliberal selfhood can be instantiated in efforts to maximize happiness, democratic engagement, and physical well-being.

In order to manage, develop, and optimize value, Sugarman (2015) notes that persons are required to make choices and are thus, consequently, rendered responsible for the outcomes of those choices. Davies and Bansel (2007) call this the *responsibilization* of subjectivity. Freedom, liberation, and empowerment are exercised and realized through choices. The belief in meritocracy is foundational to this rationality. Persons must believe that through their choices, they can achieve whatever goals they set. Therefore, pedagogical interventions are directed at helping students make those choices, which involves self-examination, the identification and articulation of goals, the development of the instruments (e.g., skills and dispositions) to achieve goals, and reflections on the consequences of thoughts and actions.

Herein lies a paradox with neoliberal governance. Although rhetorically based on the commitment to autonomy and freedom, there are cognitive, behavioral, and noncognitive prescriptions and obligations (Rose, 1999;

Vassallo, 2012). One must make choices, practice autonomy, pursue fulfillment, pursue self-actualization, and obtain self-mastery to be recognized as a valuable contributor to modern structures, whether familial, democratic, economic, medical, or educational. As Rose (1999) puts it, neoliberal governance obliges persons to be free, which is not metaphysical freedom but a way of being that counts as such in relation to an ideal. Making choices and pursuing the maximization of value count as freedom, autonomy, and independence. Yet, such practices are restrictive visions of selfhood. Neoliberalism governance is about disciplining persons to be compliant to market-consistent behaviors, as well as justifying interventions for those who fail to comply. In education, interventions often look like well-intentioned practices to make people better, healthier, productive, and efficient. These interventions are designed to shape dispositions, character, and other mental faculties so that persons can develop the attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and desires to be enterprising persons.

Although seemingly humanistic and natural, the pedagogical target of NCS reflects institutional efforts to produce persons who can perform market-consistent behaviors. This set of skills is not inevitable, inherent, neutral, or value-free but rather is entangled in ways to normalize and validate neoliberal selfhood. A feature of neoliberal governance is not that it suppresses but rather creates possible fields of action. NCS provide a framework for making sense of students, acting on them, and helping students to reflexively act on themselves. The NCS discussed in this book serve as a framework to make up students in ways that rely on a neoliberal vision for ideal selfhood.

1.1.3 Neoliberal Selfhood

In order for neoliberalism governance to work, persons must embody neoliberal selfhood, or at least view this being as an aspirational and normalized subject position (Apple, 2006). If students do not embody neoliberal selfhood, the goal is to promote that ideal as a reference to evaluate and calibrate selfhood and to serve as a compass to evaluate and make sense of themselves. In the free market, ideal persons are consumers who make choices that are strategically organized around bringing value to oneself so as to be competitive, marketable, and useful. Neoliberal selfhood is organized around the idea that one has a set of skills and attributes that need to be managed, maintained, and developed (Sugarman, 2015). The self is constructed as a knowable, calculable, and internal set of qualities that must be centered in decision-making about personal investment. That

is, one constructs and calibrates selfhood in terms of strengths, weaknesses, interests, goals, and a myriad of dispositions in order to inform decisions that are intended to optimize personal value.

Consequently, as Sugarman (2015) notes, the neoliberal self is organized around management and performance vocabularies, which include satisfaction, productivity, effectiveness, goal attainment, risk, and worth. The concepts of enterprise and entrepreneurialism are key features of this self as the expectation is normalized that persons autonomously and creatively consume knowledge and experiences that add value to their being. Choices and their consequences must be evaluated to judge the degree and achievement of value.

These principles of selfhood are normalized and validated in various ways in PreK-12 policy and practice. Researchers and theorists point out that psychology has long contributed to the production and normalization of this type of self (Adams et al. 2019; Martin & McLellan, 2013; Sugarman, 2015). For example, as Adams et al., (2019) assert, dominant psychological narratives tend to comprise visions for being that include (1) the sense that one is free to choose and radically abstract from context; (2) the idea that selfhood is a project of ongoing development that needs to be managed; (3) a commitment to growth and personal fulfillment to achieve well-being; and (4) the need for affect regulation. Although the authors contend that dominant psychological narratives tend to be informed by these commitments, they implicate neoliberal ideology in the acceleration and naturalization of these values. In education, emphasis on and the naturalization of GM, ER, grit, creativity, LLL, and the WC contribute to this acceleration.

1.1.4 Merging Neoliberalism with Noncognitive Skills

Implicating NCS in representations and the normalization of neoliberal selfhood might seem counterintuitive. Typically, neoliberalism is associated with economic instrumentalism, which involves centering curriculum and assessment on skills and attributes that are associated with ideal workers. There is certainly this element in the NCS discourse. Researchers and policy makers often justify the importance of cultivating NCS for competition and functionality in the economic market, and are thus the key for mitigating economic inequality (e.g., see the 2015 report by the bipartisan working group that included the American Enterprise Institute and Brookings Institute). The twenty-first century economic environment tends to be conceptualized as in flux, rapidly changing,

unpredictable, and global – conditions that require schooling to center character traits and dispositions that support adaptability, flexibility, self-regulation, LLL, optimism, and creativity. NCS provide a framework to target those qualities associated with economic participation.

Rhetorically, the value of NCS extends beyond economic instrumentalism to include a range of ethical, social, and personal benefits. Researchers and policy makers contend that targeting and developing students' NCS can support their relationship building, democratic engagement, happiness, and well-being (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2018; Schön, 1983; Garcia, 2016; Holbein, 2016; Jarvis, 2008; Kalin, 2016). Regardless of the ostensible broad benefit, NCS are entangled in a neoliberal rationality of government and function to produce a type of being who is well matched for a neoliberal agenda. The concepts analyzed in this book are not uniquely neoliberal, nor are they part of a coherent and organized agenda to endorse and protect market-based prescriptions for selfhood. The constructs in this book have been part of psychological discourse prior to the dominance of neoliberalism. However, in a neoliberal ethos, NCS function in a specific way and are take form in ways that align with neoliberal values for selfhood. NCS normalize a particular brand of self that is well suited for a neoliberal agenda because these skills are entangled in the performance language of maximization, optimization, and management. In addition, these skills invoke a sense of selfhood and valued qualities that align with neoliberal ideology. As Sugarman (2015) points out, there is not a centralized body orchestrating and organizing psychological discourse to endorse neoliberal selfhood. Rather, a neoliberal-informed narrative about ideal being is implicated in the acceptance of, value for, and, at times, the conceptualization and treatment of NCS.

1.1.4.1 Growth Mindset: Normalization of Perpetual Improvement

The analyses begin with a critical interrogation of GM, which is defined as the perception that hard work and effort are responsible for the development of intelligence, talent, and ability (Dweck, 2006). This mindset is contrasted with a fixed one, which is defined by the perception that intelligence, talent, and ability are fixed entities. Few are likely to argue that schools should endorse, validate, and value a fixed mindset. The presence of an unappealing binary can operate to conceal the dangers with the alternative construct. Although seemingly innocuous, the values for being and engagement in the GM discourse align with foundational

features of neoliberal selfhood. Like ideal neoliberal selfhood, one with GM is bound to projections into the future in pursuit of perpetual improvement and growth, which must be strategically managed. This commitment requires assessments of personal incompleteness, which provide the motivation to continuously pursue, yet never reach, fruition, goal attainment, and mastery. GM is driven by fear of complacent, content, and complete persons, as these opposing subject positions misalign with values of productivity, consumption, and the attainment of normative standards of success. The use of GM to make sense of students normalizes a neoliberal life ethic, engenders potentially dangerous psychological consequences, and invalidates various subject positions.

1.1.4.2 Grit: Technical Management of Passion

Another construct that is featured in the discourse of NCS is grit, which is often coupled with GM as important requirements for academic success (e.g., Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Goodwin & Miller, 2013; Jiang et al., 2019; Shechtman et al., 2013). Researchers assert that the perception alone about the controllability of talent, intelligence, and ability is not enough; persons must tenaciously pursue growth, development, and improvement. That is, they must display grit. A common definition of grit is a tendency to persist in overcoming challenges to achieve long-term goals in the face of obstacles or distractions (Duckworth et al., 2007; Shechtman et al., 2013; Tough, 2013). Grit encompasses the individual character traits of goal-directedness, motivation, self-control, and positive mindset.

The use of grit in schools has been more contentious than the NCS featured in this book. Theorists implicate this so-called skill in neoliberal values (Golden, 2017; Saltman, 2014; Stokas, 2015). One point of alignment relates to the rendering of persons responsible for their life outcomes and endorsement of a meritocratic view of economic structures. As with GM, persons have control over their outcomes and can attain normative versions of success through their own effort, which is made possible in contexts that present equal opportunities for everybody. There is another way that grit is entangled in neoliberalism, one that can be rationalized as humanistic and natural. The notion of passion is included in some conceptualizations and is treated as necessary to long-term goal pursuit. Although typically thought about as quintessentially human, the requirement for passion makes the emotional connection to goals a pedagogical target and means for management.

If grit is a pedagogical target and passion is required, then it is imperative for students to identify, articulate, and pursue a passion as a measure of their value. Pedagogical interventions must be shaped and analyzed in terms of the opportunities for students to find and pursue passion. Metaphors circulate about passion as something to be discovered, ignited, or cultivated. Passion is a category used to evaluate students, rationalize interventions, and normalize a particular type of engagement. Grit can be disentangled from ideological commitments by rationalizing that long-term goal pursuit originated from persons and ultimately supports the realization of an innate purpose or calling. However, the targeting of passion in schooling may seem appealing because it aligns with an emerging economic trope of the passionate worker. There are values for the entrepreneurial, purposeful, innovative, and dedicated worker who commits to greatness, expertise, mastery, and specialization.

1.1.4.3 Emotion Regulation: Strategic Self-Management

Students' emotion responses and expressions are implicated in their engagement and performance. Despite the fact that emotions are conceptually and methodologically ambiguous, this relationship tends to be accepted. Certain emotions are associated with academic achievement. Part of the problem is that the pursuit and embodiment of NCS can invite counterproductive emotional responses. Proponents recognize that grit and GM are not without psychological consequences. A life ethic of perpetual growth that must be strategically orchestrated can generate stress. Personal assessments of incompleteness can create anxiety, especially if efforts toward completeness are not detected or quick enough (Sugarman & Thrift, 2017). Efforts to improve and achieve mastery are likely to involve setbacks and failures, as paths to improvement are seldom linear and consistently positive. The passionate pursuit of a long-term goal is seldom without suffering. With values for grit, GM, and creativity, students are expected to take risks, which increase possibilities for failing. GM and grit have the potential to invite debilitating fear and pessimism, all of which are counterproductive for academic learning. All these potential consequences can invite fear and flight responses, which can lead to disengagement, quitting, withdrawal, and anxiety.

There are important debates about what counts as an emotion and the role of emotions in performance. There is allusion to these debates but the focus is on how ER, while itself aligned with neoliberal selfhood, is increasingly necessary because of the normalization and validation of this