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NARCISSISM IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY AND SCHOOLS: THE INFLUENCE OF NEOLIBERAL VALUES ON THE BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

This article examines narcissism as a cultural and educational problem in late-modern societies, arguing that neoliberal values—competition, performativity, and market-like evaluations shape children’s and adolescents’ self-understanding and behavior. Drawing on cultural and psychosocial perspectives (Lasch, Fromm, Twenge and Campbell, Verhaeghe, and Vesna V. Godina), the paper conceptualizes narcissism less as an individual pathology and more as a socially produced pattern of relating to oneself and others. Schools are approached as microcosms where broader cultural imperatives become daily practices through grading, comparison, and status competition, which may intensify external validation seeking and reduce empathic engagement. Two divergent student responses are highlighted: grandiose self-presentation, often linked to aggression under ego threat, and egoistic withdrawal, characterized by self-suppression and fear of standing out. The article concludes by outlining educational strategies that strengthen community, dialogue, and social-emotional learning as protective factors against narcissistic dynamics.

Keywords: narcissism; neoliberalism; school culture; dark triad; echoism; social-emotional learning

Introduction

Contemporary societies increasingly privilege individual success, self-promotion, and competitiveness, while traditional values of community, solidarity, and shared responsibility lose institutional support. This shift is visible across social domains—from media and consumer culture to education—and has been linked to the growth of

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narcissistic orientations as culturally normative ways of constructing self-worth. Rather than treating narcissism only as an individual clinical diagnosis, this article approaches it as a cultural pattern that is learned, rewarded, and reproduced in everyday institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how narcissistic values associated with neoliberal culture are transferred into the school environment and how they influence students' behavioral patterns. The school is examined as a microcosm that both reflects broader social processes and actively reproduces them through institutional practices (assessment, ranking, performativity) and through the digital media ecology that shapes students' social comparisons.

Theoretical framework: narcissism as a product of contemporary culture

In contemporary scientific and philosophical thought, narcissism is increasingly conceptualized as a symptom of broader socio-cultural processes rather than solely as an intrapsychic disorder. The framework of this article draws on authors who connect narcissistic dynamics to political-economic change, consumer culture, and transformations of subjectivity in late capitalism.

Christopher Lasch: narcissism as a cultural formation

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch (1979) argued that modern capitalist culture promotes insecurity and dependence on external validation. In such contexts, maintaining an attractive and successful self-image becomes a central social task, while deeper forms of belonging and meaning are weakened. Within schools, this cultural logic can be amplified when learning is reduced to measurable performance and public comparison.

Erich Fromm: benign and malignant narcissism

Fromm (1955) distinguished between a developmentally normal, self-affirming form of narcissism and malignant narcissism, marked by egocentrism, devaluation of others, and weakened empathy. He emphasized that social arrangements that isolate individuals and reward self-sufficiency can foster destructive narcissistic patterns. Educational systems that privilege individual outcomes while neglecting relational and moral development may therefore unintentionally reinforce malignant expressions.

Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell: narcissistic tendencies among youth

Twenge and Campbell (2009) described increasing narcissistic tendencies among young people in the United States, linking them to cultural emphases on image, fame, and exceptionalism. They highlight how inflated self-importance can coexist with emotional vulnerability when social approval becomes the primary regulator of self-worth.

Paul Verhaeghe: neoliberal subjectivity and psychological distress

Verhaeghe (2012) argues that neoliberal ideology frames individuals as entrepreneurs of the self who must continuously optimize performance, efficiency, and marketable identity. Such pressures can increase anxiety and self-comparison, while also fostering narcissistic defenses that protect the self against perceived failure or insignificance. In education, the translation of corporate logic into schooling can normalize permanent evaluation and competitive self-branding.

Vesna V. Godina: children without community

Slovenian anthropologist Vesna V. Godina (2001) links narcissistic dynamics to the erosion of traditional communities and to socialization practices that provide fewer boundaries and fewer experiences of relational frustration. In such conditions, children may enter school with limited capacities for cooperation and conflict regulation, increasing the likelihood of either aggressive status-seeking or social withdrawal.

School as a reflection of society: narcissistic dynamics in education
In contemporary contexts, schools are increasingly shaped by measurement, comparability, and competition. These features can function as institutional conduits for neoliberal cultural codes: performance visibility, ranking, and individual responsibility for success. When educational worth is narrowly tied to outcomes, students can learn that recognition is conditional upon being exceptional.

Measuring value: school as a competitive arena

In highly competitive systems, grades, standardized tests, awards, and public comparisons can become the dominant language through which students interpret their value. The logic resembles social-media dynamics: curate the best self, hide weaknesses, maximize

approval. Over time, students may develop a strong need for external validation, which can appear as fragility under criticism or as escalation of attention-seeking behaviors.

Behavioral consequences: competitiveness, aggression, and isolation

Competitive school climates can fragment peer relationships and increase status-oriented interactions. Some students respond by intensifying self-presentation, contempt, or manipulation to secure attention and dominance. Research indicates that narcissistic traits in youth may relate to aggression when self-image is threatened (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998) and that dark-triad-related traits are associated with higher levels of peer aggression and relational harm (Kerig and Stellwagen, 2010). Other students may withdraw, become socially invisible, or internalize persistent self-doubt when they do not (or cannot) compete on these terms.

Teachers and systemic ambivalence

Teachers work within institutional requirements of assessment and standardization and may, often unintentionally, reinforce performative dynamics. Professional success can be equated with producing high measurable outcomes, while relational work is less visible in evaluation systems. This ambivalence can reduce space for dialogue and mutual recognition—conditions that are protective against narcissistic vulnerabilities.

Psychological aspects: narcissism, echoism, and the dark triad among students

Narcissistic dynamics in schools are not only visible as disruptive or attention-seeking behavior; they also function as self-regulation strategies that help students manage shame, insecurity, and social rank pressure. Late childhood and adolescence are periods of intense identity work, heightened peer evaluation, and sensitivity to status. When recognition is tied primarily to visibility and performance, students may adopt two broad coping styles: self-enhancing strategies that protect the ego through superiority and control, and self-effacing strategies that protect the self by avoiding attention and self-assertion.

Integrating constructs: a spectrum of self-regulation

It is useful to treat narcissism as a spectrum rather than a single type. Grandiose presentations emphasize dominance, entitlement,

and exhibitionism, whereas vulnerable presentations emphasize hypersensitivity, shame-proneness, defensive withdrawal, and oscillations between feeling special and feeling worthless. Echoism can be placed at the extreme self-effacing end: it reflects a chronic fear of being “too much,” leading to over-adaptation and avoidance of visibility. Dark-triad traits intersect with this spectrum when the regulation of self-worth increasingly relies on using others as instruments (manipulation, callousness, coercion) rather than on mutual recognition.

Table 1: Psychological responses associated with narcissistic school culture (conceptual synthesis)

Construct orientation	Core motive	Typical school manifestations	Likely risks	Pedagogical leverage
Grandiose narcissism	Protect self-worth via superiority and visibility	Attention seeking, dominance in peer groups, intolerance of criticism, status competition	Aggression under ego threat; bullying; fragile relationships	Shift recognition to effort/process; structured leadership roles with accountability; restorative feedback
Vulnerable narcissism	Protect self-worth via defensiveness and shame avoidance	High reactivity to evaluation, withdrawal after setbacks, resentment	Anxiety/depression; rumination; relational volatility	Predictable evaluation; warm structure; coaching in emotion regulation and self-compassion
Echoism	Protect self by avoiding visibility and self-assertion	Over-compliance, silence, fear of standing out, difficulty setting boundaries	Internalizing problems; exploitation by peers; learned helplessness	Voice-giving routines; boundary skills; consent-based participation; micro-success experiences
Machiavellianism (dark triad)	Control outcomes via strategy and	Instrumental friendships, cynicism, rule-bending,	Relational harm; distrust; moral disengagement	Clear norms; perspective-taking; moral reasoning;

		manipulation	social engineering		consequences tied to repair
Callous-unemotional traits / psychopathy features	Low fear and low empathy; sensation seeking	Impulsivity, rule violations, cruelty, shallow affect	Severe conduct problems; victimization of peers		Consistent boundaries; supervision; multi-tier support and specialist referral
Secure self-esteem (protective)	Self-worth anchored in belonging and competence	Cooperation, realistic confidence, resilience under feedback	Lower risk profile		Belonging, autonomy-support, mastery goals, SEL and dialogical pedagogy

Developmental mechanisms and school ecology

Several mechanisms help explain why these adaptations can intensify in school settings. First, peer ecology in adolescence is strongly organized by social rank and belonging; students calibrate self-worth through repeated social comparisons. Second, evaluative practices (public grading, constant testing, ranking) can turn learning into a reputation contest, where mistakes threaten social standing. Third, digital “mirror” environments extend this contest beyond school hours by quantifying approval and amplifying curated self-presentation. Under these pressures, students may learn to treat the self as a project to be marketed rather than as a developing person embedded in reciprocal relationships.

Implications for identification and support

This synthesis suggests that educators should avoid interpreting narcissistic behaviors only as moral failure or “spoiling.” Such behaviors can indicate a brittle self-esteem system that cannot tolerate ordinary imperfection. Likewise, echoic withdrawal should not be mistaken for good adjustment; it may reflect hidden distress and systematic self-suppression. A school response that combines clear boundaries with relational safety is crucial: students need predictable limits (so dominance games do not pay) and reliable belonging (so performance is not the only path to being seen). Multi-tier systems of support can integrate classroom-wide relational practices, targeted coaching for emotion regulation and social problem solving, and specialist referral when severe conduct problems or internalizing symptoms persist.

Educational strategies against narcissistic culture: from competition to community

If narcissistic dynamics are culturally and institutionally produced, schools are not only sites of reproduction but also potential sites of prevention. Educational practice can offer stable relationships, mutual recognition, and community-based meaning making.

From a prevention perspective, the most effective lever is not a single 'program' but the everyday ecology of the classroom: how feedback is delivered, how status is distributed, how mistakes are treated, and whether students experience belonging that is not contingent on being exceptional. Shifting school culture therefore requires aligning assessment, classroom management, and teacher–student relationships with mastery goals, cooperation, and ethical responsibility.

Critique of competitiveness and the imperative of excellence

Following Verhaeghe's (2012) critique, corporate logics can be reflected in schooling when teachers become managers, students become products, and classrooms become meritocratic laboratories. Pedagogical work that prioritizes progress, cooperation, and ethical responsibility can reduce the need for status performance (Kroflič, 2011).

Concretely, this implies reducing public ranking and replacing purely comparative evaluation with 'assessment for learning' (transparent criteria, formative feedback, and opportunities for revision). When students can improve without humiliation, the incentive to protect self-worth through domination or contempt is weakened.

Reciprocal learning and the pedagogy of dialogue

Reciprocal learning approaches view learners as co-constructors of knowledge and the teacher as a facilitator of dialogue. This shifts recognition from domination and comparison toward participation and mutual understanding (Medveš, 2000).

Dialogical pedagogy is strengthened when it is paired with cooperative learning structures (shared goals, individual accountability, and roles that rotate), so that social recognition is earned through contribution to the group rather than through outperforming peers.

Empathy as a skill: social-emotional learning (SEL)

School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs can improve social-emotional skills, reduce conduct problems, and

strengthen academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Follow-up evidence suggests benefits can persist over time (Taylor et al., 2017). Integrating these competencies into everyday teaching can reduce relational conditions that feed narcissistic defensiveness.

For SEL to matter, it needs to be embedded in daily routines (emotion labeling, conflict repair scripts, perspective-taking prompts) and supported at the whole-school level (consistent norms, coordinated responses to bullying, and staff modeling). Otherwise, SEL risks becoming an isolated 'add-on' rather than a cultural counterweight.

The teacher as an empathic role model

Teachers are powerful relational models. Humiliation, sarcasm, or dismissiveness can normalize status aggression, whereas openness to dialogue, consistent boundaries, and repair after mistakes can foster emotional safety.

Importantly, empathic authority is not permissive: it combines warmth with firm, predictable limits. Teacher-led repair after conflicts (naming harm, taking responsibility, and restoring relationships) teaches students that dignity can be preserved without winning status battles.

School as a community of safety, not measurement

Inclusive school cultures that treat failure as part of learning, reduce public ranking, and prioritize belonging can function as a counterweight to narcissistic cultural pressures.

Finally, contemporary 'community pedagogy' should include critical digital literacy: helping students understand how platforms monetize attention, why comparison loops are addictive, and how to set boundaries around online self-presentation. When students can name the mechanisms of the digital spectacle, they gain psychological distance from the constant demand to perform.

Conclusion: from narcissistic logic to community pedagogy

This article argues that narcissism in contemporary youth should be understood not only as an individual tendency but as a culturally patterned response to neoliberal imperatives of performance, comparison, and visibility. Schools are central spaces where these imperatives become concrete practices, shaping both interpersonal dynamics and internal self-regulation. Educational responses should target institutional conditions—assessment cultures and classroom relational climates—alongside evidence-informed practices that support secure self-esteem, empathy, and relational responsibility.

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