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*Education Policy Mobility: Reimagining Sustainability in Neoliberal Times*

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## Abstract

This paper is concerned with the twinning of sustainability with priorities of economic neoliberalization in education, and in particular via the mobility or diffusion of education policy. We discuss the literature on policy mobility as well as overview concerns regarding neoliberalism and education. The paper brings these analyses to bear in considering the uptake of sustainability in education policy. We ask to what extent sustainability as a vehicular idea may be twinning with processes of neoliberalization in education policy in ways that may undermine aspirations of, and action on, environmental sustainability. Towards the end of the paper, we draw on data from an empirical study to help elucidate how the analytic frames of policy mobility can inform our analyses of the potential concerns and possibilities of sustainability as a vehicular idea. In particular, we investigate how sustainability and related language has been adopted in the policies of Canadian post-secondary education institutions over time. The paper closes by suggesting the potential implications of the proceeding analyses for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers concerned with sustainability in education policy.

**Keywords:** education policy, policy mobility, sustainability education, neoliberalism, policy analysis, vehicular idea, higher education, post-secondary education

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5 This paper is informed by trajectories of work in critical policy scholarship or policy sociology in  
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7 education (e.g., Ball, 1994, 1997; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Ozga, 2000), as well as by interdisciplinary  
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9 research on policy diffusion and transfer, and in particular, policy mobility (e.g., Peck, 2011a; Peck &  
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11 Theodore, 2010a; Temenos & McCann, 2013). We explore the shifts in theoretical perspective and  
12  
13 methodological orientation that are required to analyze neoliberalism and sustainability as ‘vehicular  
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15 ideas’ (Temenos and McCann, 2012), and follow the uptake and mobility of policy concerned with  
16  
17 sustainability<sup>1</sup> in Canadian post-secondary education institutions.  
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20  
21 Our understanding of policy includes policy texts, but also broadly considers the contexts and  
22  
23 consequences influencing their development and enactment. As Lingard and Ozga (2007) suggest, a  
24  
25 process/text definition of educational policy “indicates the politics involved in the production and  
26  
27 implementation of a policy and in the actual purposes and language of the policy text” (p. 2). We are  
28  
29 concerned with these politics and their potentially productive and/or constraining effects on how  
30  
31 sustainability is being conceived and mobilized in and through educational policy.  
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35 In this paper we focus particularly on factors that may be influencing where and how  
36  
37 sustainability is being taken up in post-secondary education policy, including in relation to processes of  
38  
39 neoliberalization. We appreciate the cautions made against uses of ‘neoliberalism’ as a ‘blunt, omnibus  
40  
41 category’ that can ‘reproduce a narrowed analytical and political gaze;’ as well as the arguments for  
42  
43 nonetheless considering its distinctive hegemonic aspects across diverse settings and variations (Peck,  
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45 2013, p. 17, 10). Analyses of the impacts of neoliberalization on education policy within specific  
46  
47 locations and across sites have been ongoing over the past several decades (e.g., Ball, 1994, 1998;  
48  
49 Olssen & Peters, 2005); with many concerned about “the increasing colonisation of educational policy  
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55 <sup>1</sup> We understand “sustainability” here as any policy that takes up the natural environment in some  
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57 capacity, including in relation to social, economic, culture, health, and other factors. While we are  
58  
59 concerned with the various ways sustainability terminology is engaged, we have limited the scope to  
60 those cases which include some reference and consideration of environment.

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2  
3 by economic policy imperatives,” including neoliberalism (Ball, 1998, p. 122).

4  
5 Some researchers have also examined the shift to the language of sustainable development” or  
6  
7 “sustainability” in relation to economic policy priorities. For example, While et al. (2004) have  
8  
9 suggested the uptake of this lexicon in policy can provide a “sustainability fix,” or in other words,  
10  
11 support an “organization of economic interests, institutional capacities, and political positions that allows  
12  
13 development to proceed despite economic and ecological crises and in the face of growing popular  
14  
15 concerns about the state of the environment” (Temenos & McCann, 2012, p. 4). There seems little doubt  
16  
17 that sustainability is a ‘vehicular idea’ (McClennan, 2004; Temenos & McCann, 2012) or a ‘floating  
18  
19 signifier’ (Gonzales-Guadiano, 2009), which can be taken up in different ways towards various means.  
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21 Vehicular ideas are distinguished by their hermeneutic and contextual flexibility, by their ability to  
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23 balance between discursive exclusivity and vague open-endedness, by their robust capacity to reabsorb  
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25 opposition, evolve with the times, and move across sites (McLennan, 2004, pp. 488-489), which, more  
26  
27 cynically, can serve to propel or greenwash economic interests. More optimistically, the terminology of  
28  
29 sustainability can be powerful because of its ability to allow for coalition building and for ‘moving  
30  
31 things on’ (Temenos & McCann, 2012). The analysis of sustainability as a ‘vehicular idea’ requires  
32  
33 consideration of both sides of this potentiality, which aligns with calls for both typological, observational  
34  
35 analysis of such vehicular notions and attention to their normative characteristics (McLennan 2004, 494).  
36  
37 For example, we can observe the uptake and use of various types of sustainability discourse, such as the  
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39 three pillars definition, but we should not lose sight of the norms and ideologies that may be articulated  
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41 to various types in particular policymaking contexts.  
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50 We bring these trajectories together in our concerns with the pairing of sustainability with  
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52 priorities of economic neoliberalization in education, and in particular via the mobility or diffusion of  
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54 education policy. We are interested in shifts from language of ‘environment’ to ‘sustainable development’  
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56 and ‘sustainability’ over the past several decades, and explore the concerns and possibilities of the  
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1  
2 mobility of these terms and their associated meanings in education policy. We ask to what extent  
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4 sustainability as a vehicular idea may be twinning with processes of neoliberalization in educational  
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6 policy in ways that may undermine aspirations of, and action on, environmental sustainability. In doing  
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8 so we build on earlier work that has begun to examine the relationships among sustainability,  
9  
10 neoliberalization, policy mobility, and education (e.g., Jickling & Wals, 2008; Hursh & Henderson,  
11  
12 2011; McKenzie, 2012; Sylvestre, McNeil, & Wright, 2013). Towards the end of the paper, we draw on  
13  
14 data from an in progress empirical study to help elucidate how the analytic frames of policy mobility can  
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16 inform our analyses of the potential concerns and possibilities of sustainability as a vehicular idea. In  
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18 particular, we investigate how sustainability and related language has been adopted in the policies of  
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20 Canadian post-secondary education institutions over time. The paper closes by suggesting the potential  
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22 implications of the proceeding analyses for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers concerned with  
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24 sustainability in education policy. We first begin with a discussion of sustainability as a ‘vehicular idea’  
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26 in relation to the developing literature on policy mobility.  
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### 36 **The Mobility Turn**

37  
38 “It sometimes seems as if all the world is on the move” (Urry, 2007, p. 3). The movement of vehicular  
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40 ideas, like Richard Florida’s creative city model or municipal sustainability fixes (Peck, 2012; Temenos  
41  
42 & McCann, 2012), can be interrogated through the lens of the mobility turn in the social sciences and  
43  
44 humanities. This ‘turn’ focuses on the immense scale of movement of objects, people, and ideas across  
45  
46 the globe. It takes a stance that embraces epistemological exchange across disciplines and promises a  
47  
48 transformation of the social sciences away from static paradigms, where roots are favoured at the  
49  
50 expense of routes, in order to explore expanded metaphors of movement (Frello, 2008, p. 26; Urry, 2007,  
51  
52 p. 18). “The term ‘mobilities’ refers not just to movement but to this broader project of establishing a  
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54 ‘movement-driven’ social science in which movement... as well as voluntary/temporary immobilities,  
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3 practices of dwelling and ‘nomadic’ place-making are all viewed as constitutive of economic, social and  
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5 political relations” (Büscher, Urry and Witchger, 2011, p. 4). This project seeks to explain the complex  
6  
7 relationships between mobilities, moorings (like airports or conference centers), spatial scales, and  
8  
9 practices of place-making, in order to describe how social worlds, like sustainability policymaking, are  
10  
11 in part “made in and through movement” (Büscher et al, 2011, p. 13). This paradigm marks a shift away  
12  
13 from the historical focus of social scientific research on face-to-face relationships within spatially  
14  
15 propinquitous communities, and toward an analysis of the multiple, the distributed, the fleeting, and the  
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17 complex interdependencies between corporeal, communicative, and physical travel that variously shape  
18  
19 what we have come to call ‘globalization’ (Büscher et all, 2011). This turn is less defined by any  
20  
21 overarching theoretical orientation than by a renewed empirical sensitivity to the movement of materials  
22  
23 and ideas. This sensitivity attends not only to the global flow of vehicular ideas like ‘sustainability,’ but  
24  
25 also to the flow of these ideas within and across national, regional, or local contexts.  
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31 This mobility turn is currently informing debates in critical policy research. The study of policy  
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33 mobility and mutation is a relatively recent development in this field, partly building out of earlier  
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35 scholarship in political science on policy diffusion and transfer. Providing an overview of various stages  
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37 of the diffusion and transfer literature from the 1960s and onwards, Peck (2011a) suggests aspects of  
38  
39 these literatures that continue to be relevant and useful in policy analysis and those which appear to have  
40  
41 become outdated in more recent contexts of globalized networks of travel and technology. Table 1  
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43 provides an overview of differences identified by Peck (2011a) between the transfer-diffusion literatures  
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45 and those developing under the label of policy mobilities.  
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|                       | Policy Transfer                                      | Policy Mobilities   |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Paradigm              | Methodological nationalism                           | Mobility turn: global flow of policy across nations, regions, and places  |
| Origins               | Disciplinary: political science                      | Transdisciplinary: geography, political science, sociology, urban planning, & expanding, i.e., environmental education research |
| Epistemology          | Positivist/rationalist                               | Postpositivist/constructivist   |
| Privileged Object     | 'Successful' transfers                               | Policies in motion/interconnection: continuous transformation and mutation  |
| Social Action         | Instrumental: bounded rationality                    | Strategic: embedded calculation   |
| Dynamic               | Frustrated replication of best (or better) practices | Contradictory reproduction of connected but unevenly developing policy regimes  |
| Spatiality            | Sequential diffusion                                 | Relational connection   |
| Mode of Explanation   | Reification of essentialized design features         | Contextually sensitive analysis of emergent capacities  |
| Politics of Knowledge | Abstracts from politics of knowledge and practice    | Problematizes politics of knowledge and practice  |

Table 1. Policy transfer versus policy mobilities (adapted from Peck, 2011a, p. 775)

Across these approaches, the interest is on how policies are instituted i) over time, and ii) over space, and iii) which factors may be influencing temporal and spatial trends. Policy transfer-diffusion literatures have been concerned with how policy developed in one region or nation spreads to other locations over time, outlining geographic clustering (being influenced by one's neighbours) and networks (being influenced by the networks one participates in) as factors in the diffusion of a policy from its location of origin to other locations (Weyland, 2005). Temporally, diffusion has been suggested to occur on a bell curve: beginning with an innovation and slow uptake until policy uptake surges in popularity and eventually tapers off. The phase at which a government or institution may adopt a policy – either as an early adopter, within the peak of its popularity, or as a laggard – is suggested by the

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3 diffusion literature to be related to *why* the policy was adopted, or its mechanisms of uptake.

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5 While a range of discussions of mechanisms of uptake exist in the transfer-diffusion literatures, a  
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7 predominant approach is to consider the four classifications of emulation, learning, competition, and  
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9 coercion (Garrett et al., 2008; Shipan & Volden, 2008, 2012). “Emulation” can be understood as the  
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11 voluntary adoption of policy already in place elsewhere based on information passed through social  
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13 channels. This may take the form of copying the strategies of powerful or successful actors or  
14  
15 institutions, ‘expert theorization’ in which there is coalescence around favoured solutions which are then  
16  
17 ‘sold’ through various channels, or learning from peers where policy is borrowed from locations which  
18  
19 share political or cultural affinities (Peck, 2011a). “Learning” describes circumstances where policies are  
20  
21 adopted after observing their impact in another institution or jurisdiction (Shipan & Volden, 2008).  
22  
23 However, critical policy research has suggested that “learning” is more prevalent among locations which  
24  
25 share ideology and belief systems, making it difficult to isolate from emulation and other forms of  
26  
27 transfer. As Peck (2011a) suggests: “the near impossibility of rationally determining ‘success’ or ‘failure’  
28  
29 outside the framework of particular policy paradigms and belief systems means that learning behaviour  
30  
31 remains in the eye of the beholder” (p. 787). The mechanism of “competition” refers to cases where a  
32  
33 policy is adopted due to a perception that it confers a competitive economic advantage, while “coercion”  
34  
35 can be understood as pressure or encouragement to adopt a policy from an outside source with some  
36  
37 influence or power, such as a government funding body, and can take the form of required trade  
38  
39 practices or economic sanctions (Shipan & Volden, 2008). In his review of research in these areas, Peck  
40  
41 (2011a) concludes that of the four mechanisms, emulation and competition appear to be the most  
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43 prevalent, often acting in combination and operating through “powersoaked epistemic networks” (p. 788).  
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52 Indeed such networks are a focus in the policy mobilities literature, which critiques frameworks  
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54 of policy transfer-diffusion on the grounds that they focus on policies as discrete objects which can  
55  
56 indeed be ‘transferred’ in whole to other locations (Prince, 2012). Instead the mobilities literature  
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1  
2 suggests that policies, in so far as they move from one location to another, often as bits and pieces, are  
3  
4 also necessarily transformed through that process of movement and translation (Peck & Theodore,  
5  
6 2010a). Rather than tracing policy from a particular point of origin to locations elsewhere, mobilities  
7  
8 approaches also understand policy creation and mobilization as more dispersed or as not necessarily  
9  
10 having a clear centre or point of origin. This latter shift suggests the impacts of the globalization of  
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12 policy practice, where policies are circulating globally with greater speed, “aided by new  
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14 communications technologies and a growing cadre of cosmopolitan policy advocates” (Peck & Theodore,  
15  
16 2010a, p. 172).  
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22 We can analyze this globalization of policy practice by dissecting the relationships between five  
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24 “interdependent ‘mobilities’ that produce social life organized across distance,” including corporeal  
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26 travel, physical movement, imaginative travel, virtual travel, and communicative travel (Büscher et al,  
27  
28 2011, 5). While inquiry may focus on any one of these areas, the mobility turn underlines the specific  
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30 interdependencies between them, including: corporeal travel of policy actors for meetings; imaginative  
31  
32 travel effected through policy tourism or marketing campaigns; virtual travel via video conferences;  
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34 communications via face-to-face meetings, social media, texts, mobile phone; and the actual movement  
35  
36 of the bits and pieces of policy (Büscher et al, 2011, 5). There has been some attention to the complex  
37  
38 interrelationships between the multiple mobilities involved in the movement of policy. For instance,  
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40 McCann (2011) outlines the role of local policy actors (policy professionals and civil society groups), the  
41  
42 “global policy consultocracy,” and informational infrastructures in policy mobilization processes (p.  
43  
44 114). Conferences, seminars, fact-finding trips, ‘policy tourism,’ computer networks, blogs, social media,  
45  
46 and other sites of connection provide venues of policy mobility; while measurement data such as  
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48 indicators, storytelling, and related ‘inscription devices’ such as maps, charts, tables, and powerpoint  
49  
50 slides help policy ‘carriers’ or ‘travelling technocrats’ (Dale, 1992; Lerner & Laurie, 2010) “construct,  
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52 legitimate, and propel specific policy models through and across scales” (Temenos & McCann, in press,  
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3 p. 2).  
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5 The substance of the work undertaken by such carriers, travelling technocrats, and other mediator  
6 intellectuals is the 'facilitation' of spaces for dialogue, like conferences, and platforms for selling ideas,  
7 like websites, so they become more accessible for particular policymaking networks (Osborne, 2004,  
8 441). Thomas Osborne (2004) argues that this style of intellectual labor is part of a broader shift away  
9 from the grand ideas and positivistic expertise of the ivory tower, and toward a more facilitative style of  
10 work that focuses on the production of flashy, vehicular ideas that are responsive to specific policy  
11 networks, think tanks, and media landscapes. Typically, this labor in ideas aims to exert political  
12 influence through networks and the creation of new networks, which marks a decisive shift away from  
13 the advisory policy expert who exerted influence through personal relationships with decision makers  
14 (Osborne, 2004, 433).  
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28 This focus on policy actors, locations, and techniques adds conditions of knowledge production  
29 and circulation to consider in examining the movement of policy, and removes the nation state as the  
30 primary agent in the production and uptake of policies as in some earlier approaches to policy transfer-  
31 diffusion (Temenos & McCann, 2013). This is part of a broader shift away from methodological  
32 nationalism within the new mobilities paradigm (Büscher et al, 2011), wherein sociologist Ulrich Beck  
33 (2006) argues for a methodological cosmopolitanism to interrogate the contradictory and coerced effects  
34 of cosmopolitanization (or globalization) on everyday life and politics. This perspective directs our  
35 attention to the ways in which policy actors may be responding simultaneously to *both* regional *and*  
36 global policymaking networks, and to the tensions and contradictions that come along with these blurred  
37 boundaries of cosmopolitanization (Beck, 2006). This also suggests the significance of researching  
38 across multiple spatial scales, and to the continuing significance of place-based contexts in the  
39 development of policy (McKenzie, 2012). McCann (2011) emphasizes that a mobilities approach builds  
40 on longer standing traditions in geography (for example, the work of David Harvey and Doreen Massey),  
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2 which have understood place “in terms of fixity and mobility; relationality and territoriality” (p. 112).  
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4 This suggests an attention to both the circulatory infrastructures or interconnections among “somewhat  
5  
6 ‘unbounded’ state and state actors” while simultaneously focusing on the continued importance of  
7  
8 territorial embeddedness (Temenos & McCann, 2013, pp. 346-347). Responding to critiques of the  
9  
10 potential overemphasis on mobility in social analyses, Peck (2011) likewise suggests that studies of  
11  
12 policy mobility must embed understandings of mobility in the situated realities of policy-making frames,  
13  
14 rule regimes, and institutional environments. We would add that the situated contexts need also to  
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16 include longer histories of empire and the colonization of land and peoples (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014).  
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22 Indeed, these situated contextual factors are understood to play a considerable role in policy  
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24 uptake, with existing policy/politics suggested by some as largely determining new policy adoption. As  
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26 every policy serves some interests more than others, there are no simple solutions of “best” policy, but  
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28 rather more complex underlying factors that influence which policies may be developed, emulated, or  
29  
30 passed on (Temenos & McCann, 2013). Discussing cross-national policy borrowing or transfer, Halpin  
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32 and Troyna (1995) suggest that policy adoption has much more to do with legitimating other related  
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34 policies within the country of adoption than to with the success, however defined, of the policy in other  
35  
36 locations. Citing research by Whitty and Edwards (1992), they outline how elected politicians and  
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38 officials are “more likely to be interested in a borrowed policy’s political symbolism than its details” (p.  
39  
40 307). Likewise, Peck and Theodore (2010b) suggest how policy models that extend and affirm dominant  
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42 paradigms and consolidate powerful interests, are more like to travel. Furthermore, the style of ideas-  
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44 work that supports the development of these kinds of models remains tied at the heels to ideologies of  
45  
46 ‘innovation’ and ‘enterprise’ (Osborne, 2004). Thus the mobility of policy may have more to do with  
47  
48 ideology than to do with rational or technical decision-making (Peck, 2011b). In sum, the study of policy  
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50 mobilities is concerned with how policy is formed and modified through policy techniques and actors in  
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52 situated and mobile locations, and emphasizes the study of politics and power as they relate to policy.  
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## Neoliberalization and Mobile Policies

Located within and spurring on these ‘messier geographies’ of ‘fast policy’ (Peck & Theodore, 2010), neoliberalism is now part of the contextual landscape within which many other policy considerations are undertaken in many regions of the world. If we hope to follow the networks or actors behind policy mobility, we will need to undertake an in-depth analysis of the politics of neoliberalism. We take four points from related work on processes of neoliberalization as central to our discussion here: 1) Neoliberalism is not dead: despite discussions of what next ‘after neoliberalism’ following the 2008 financial crisis, it is clear that there has been further entrenchment of neoliberal rationalities in public policy, including educational policy, in Canada and elsewhere around the globe (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012). 2) Neoliberalism is variegated: or in other words, it takes specific forms in different locales and thus there is no one form of “neoliberalism.” It is important to thus describe and analyze neoliberalization processes in relation to particular sites and situations, rather than discussing “neoliberalism” in sweeping catch-all ways (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2013). 3) Thus, it is not as simple as to say “neoliberalism did it.” As Peck (2013, p. 8) outlines, while “analytically inconvenient,” neoliberalism should be understood to operate alongside of and in hybridity with a range of other forces, which may also, or more so, be influencing the policy contexts (for example, globalization). Part of the variation in neoliberalization in differing contexts is due to the other political and policy trajectories it comes into contact with. 4) Despite these caveats regarding approaching neoliberalism as a frame of analysis, it is also useful to understand the “commonalities and connections across (local) neoliberalisms” in considering the political contexts into which other policies may be taken up (or not) (Peck, 2013, p. 11), including those of sustainability in post-secondary education.

Common manifestations of neoliberalism include the extension of market-based competition as well as commodification processes into many realms of social life, including education (Peck, Theodore,

1  
2 & Brenner, 2012; McKenzie, 2012). The new ‘competition state’ or ‘enterprise society’ then operates  
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4 strategically in relation to the globalization of economy through distributed forms of governance.  
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6 Resulting impacts in education include a rescaling of political authority from an emphasis on the state to  
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8 that of a ‘global education policy field,’ which is constituted through measures of comparative  
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10 performance as well as via networks of politicians and policy makers with similar “policy dispositions  
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12 and related epistemic communities” (Lingard, 2011, p. 368). A second impact of neoliberal governance  
13  
14 on education is the turn to ‘new public management,’ or the application of private sector management  
15  
16 practices in the public sector, including in administering education (Klees, 2008; Lingard, 2011).  
17  
18 Reframing educational institutions and bodies as competitive entities, a focus of accountability and  
19  
20 auditing enables oversight at a distance and fosters a culture of performativity. A third common aspect of  
21  
22 neoliberal educational forms is increasing privatization of education, including of educational policy and  
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24 policy processes. These trends are affecting post-secondary education specifically through new forms of  
25  
26 management and auditing, the commodification of teaching and research, amplification of relations of  
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28 competition, increasing privatization of campuses and research priorities, and an overall growing  
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30 emphasis on measurable outputs (Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006; Olssen & Peters, 2005).  
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38         Returning to earlier discussions of policy mobility, one can see the ways in which neoliberalism  
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40 both spreads through the circulatory systems of policy mobility as well as influences the situated  
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42 institutional environments and rule regimes in which other “mobile policies” may be developed or  
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44 introduced. Indeed, Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2012) suggest that the circulatory systems of policy  
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46 operate “across a now deeply neoliberalized terrain, from which promising local models are variously  
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48 seeded, scaled up, and stylized for emulation, more often than not under the aegis of multilateral  
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50 agencies, private consultancies, and expert networks” (p. 279). Thus, neoliberalization acts as a filter for  
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52 other policy initiatives or models, resulting in policies “strongly skewed in favour of market-oriented  
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54 rationalities and practices” (p. 279). Such policy models are thus carriers of globally endorsed  
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1  
2  
3 presumptions and are represented as replicable policy technologies, with both designs and outcomes  
4  
5 viewed as transferable from place to place. This leads to the worry that:

6  
7 policy models pre-emptively disrupt what would otherwise be much more variegated, ‘local’  
8  
9 policy debates, (re)shaping the very terms in which such debates are constructed. This has the  
10  
11 (desired) effect of further depoliticizing the policymaking processes through the circulation of  
12  
13 prefabricated solutions, traveling in the disarmingly, apparently ‘neutral’ and post-ideological form  
14  
15 of evaluation techno-science and best practice pragmatism. (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012, p.  
16  
17 283)

18  
19  
20  
21 In these ways we worry that neoliberalization is filtering not only how education is conceptualized and  
22  
23 shaped through policy, but also for how sustainability in education is understood and addressed. In the  
24  
25 following section we discuss ‘sustainability’ as it articulates with neoliberalism and global policy flows.  
26  
27

### 28 29 30 31 **The Twinning and Mobility of Neoliberalism and Sustainability in Education Policy**

32  
33 The “pan global rhetoric” of sustainability<sup>2</sup> in education has been suggested to be deeply susceptible to  
34  
35 neoliberal influence (Huckle, 2008) in that it can maintain a façade of green politics while allowing for  
36  
37 the persistence of neoliberal relations to the environment (Irwin, 2007). The neoliberalization of  
38  
39 sustainability in education policy has been suggested as evident in the failure to engage with the  
40  
41 ecological limits to growth in the so-called sustainability focus of corporate social responsibility work in  
42  
43 schools (Manteaw 2008, p. 122), and in the curtailment of progress on sustainability education in  
44  
45 particular national or regional contexts (Huckle, 2008; McKenzie, 2012). Some suggest that “[e]ducation  
46  
47 is becoming more deeply connected to economic and security projects that are highly invested in projects  
48  
49 pushing unrestricted economic growth...in areas of science and technology, military/security apparatuses,  
50  
51  
52  
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54  
55  
56 \_\_\_\_\_  
57 <sup>2</sup> We focus on the terminology of sustainability in this paper, however in some cases similar issues arise  
58 and have been discussed in relation to ‘sustainable development’ and other sustainability-related  
59 terminology. We draw on this broader literature in our discussion of sustainability.



1  
2 and resource acquisition” (Pierce, 2012, p. 17). To unpack this neoliberalization of sustainability in  
3  
4 education policy, we might learn from analyses of economic framings of ‘sustainability’ in other areas  
5  
6 of environmental policy. Coffey and Marston (2013) show how the reform agenda of ecologically  
7  
8 modern discourses, where sustainability is at least still tied to environmental goals, may be co-opted by  
9  
10 the neoliberal framing of sustainability in exclusively economic terms. They conclude that policy  
11  
12 strategies that combine these discourses are “flawed because, in commodifying nature, limiting the  
13  
14 nature and magnitude of change required, and placing responsibility to act on to individuals, they offer a  
15  
16 constrained understanding of the challenge of sustainability and what needs to be done” (p. 196). This  
17  
18 suggests how neoliberal framings of sustainability can be subtly masked through their ad hoc synthesis  
19  
20 with other environmental policy discourses. The worry is that in these kinds of ways, the enterprise  
21  
22 society of neoliberalism is bringing ‘sustainability’ into its fold at a moment when “[t]he tensions of  
23  
24 capitalism are being played out on a global, biospheric scale and thus implicate the future of life on earth”  
25  
26 (Cooper 2008, p. 49 in Pierce, 2012, p. 24).  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32

33 The global orientation of sustainability-related terminologies and the movement or stasis of  
34  
35 various understandings (Irwin, 2007; González-Gaudiano, 2005), demands in-depth research into the  
36  
37 mobilities, moorings, definitions and policy routes that allow for the movement of particular  
38  
39 understandings of sustainability and the immobility of others. Why do particular understandings of  
40  
41 ‘sustainability’ get to move across nations and institutions, while other conceptualizations are  
42  
43 immobilized? The complexity of this query may be interrogated by considering mobility not only as a  
44  
45 physical and communicative phenomenon but, also, as a discursive and ideological process that shapes  
46  
47 the kinds of ideas or actors that get to move and those which are rendered immobile (Frello, 2008). This  
48  
49 directs our attention to the ways in which language shapes the mobility or immobility of particular  
50  
51 understandings of sustainability, which we interrogate by considering the competing or facilitatory  
52  
53 discourses that variously shape its meaning in policy (Jorgensen & Phillips cited in Coffey & Marston,  
54  
55  
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58  
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60

1  
2  
3 2013). Thus, if we are going to direct our research imaginations to a future beyond the high carbon  
4  
5 societies of the neoliberal period (Urry, 2011), we need to remain mindful of the versions of  
6  
7 ‘sustainability’ that we draw upon to forecast preferable futures and remain vigilant to its’ co-optation.  
8

9  
10 This can be explored further by considering sustainability as a vehicular idea, which foregrounds  
11  
12 a number of interrelated concerns. First, the ways in which ‘sustainability’ gives substance to new kinds  
13  
14 of cognitive labor in environmental policymaking, which we can analyze by following the facilitative  
15  
16 labor (Osborne, 2004) of various carriers and technocrats as they move through powerful epistemic  
17  
18 networks (Peck, 2011a). Second, its role as a ‘floating signifier’ (González-Gaudiano 2005; 2009) with  
19  
20 rather diffuse meanings across the discourses that gather under its name, which can potentially mask the  
21  
22 persistence of powerful ideologies like the invisible hand of the free market under variegated conditions  
23  
24 of neoliberalization (Irwin, 2007; Peck 2013). The policy discourses through which this masking unfolds  
25  
26 are incredibly complex, due to the disparate and diffuse connotations that have latched onto this floating  
27  
28 signifier.  
29  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 Third, we can analyze the role of sustainability policy goals in de-politicizing local policy debates.  
35  
36 For instance, Temenos and McCann (2012) outline the ways in which mobile and neoliberal policies can  
37  
38 frame thinking on local issues, including in relation to which solutions might be sought or developed in  
39  
40 relation to sustainability policy. Other definitions of the problem and associated solutions can then be left  
41  
42 outside the conversation to the point where they are unable to be thought or raised. They suggest how  
43  
44 sustainability as a policy goal or concept can at times be used in these ways, to frame issues in a manner  
45  
46 that is both open and at the same time delimits the range of possible ways forward (Temenos and  
47  
48 McCann, 2012, p. 1393). Temenos and McCann (2012) suggest that “The utilization of vehicular ideas  
49  
50 like sustainability allows sometimes sudden breaks in policy direction to appear almost seamless, natural,  
51  
52 and inevitable, or alternatively, mask the fact that not much beyond the surface has changed” (p. 1402).  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57 As a ‘vehicular idea’ or mobile policy goal, sustainability and related terms can be understood to be  
58  
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1  
2  
3 formulated with purposive ambiguity or mutability so as to be able to move quickly between  
4  
5 policymaking sites. And unlike moral or theoretical vocabularies, vehicular ideas with their multiple  
6  
7 interpretations have a more limited shelf life: “They serve to make things happen at a particular time,  
8  
9 after which their time may be up” (McLennan, 2004, p. 435).  
10

11  
12 Finally, the notion of sustainability as a vehicular idea also highlights the ways in which the  
13  
14 language and power of neoliberalism brings ‘sustainability’ on board in a variety of consensual and  
15  
16 depoliticized ways that ‘fix’ the terms of debate around local environmental issues (Temenos & McCann,  
17  
18 2012) and mask the persistence of market liberalization (Irwin, 2007). This can be analyzed as part of a  
19  
20 broader depoliticization of the policy process and politics generally, which Swyngedouw (2010)  
21  
22 describes as “structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the  
23  
24 basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative” (p.  
25  
26 215). In an analysis of the transition from environmental education to education for sustainability in New  
27  
28 Zealand, Ruth Irwin (2007) argues that the framing of the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market by the  
29  
30 metaphorical vehicle of ‘sustainability’ serves to perpetuate a calculative, instrumental relationship to the  
31  
32 earth (Irwin, 2007). She argues, “the metaphor of the market gets subsumed in the rhetoric of  
33  
34 ‘sustainability’ and *all factors* are absorbed into the enframing rubric of potential resource” (p. 11). Thus,  
35  
36 there is increasing evidence that certain types of sustainability discourse are depoliticized in  
37  
38 policymaking processes, in ways that foreclose imagining or constructing a future that is more just and  
39  
40 environmentally sustainable than what neoliberalism has to offer, including in education (Irwin, 2007;  
41  
42 Coffey & Marston, 2013; Temenos & McCann, 2012). The remainder of this paper suggests the ways in  
43  
44 which sustainability may be functioning as a ‘vehicular idea’ in the context of initial data from a national  
45  
46 study of sustainability in the educational policy of post-secondary institutions in Canada.  
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### 57 **Researching Sustainability in the Education Policy of Post-secondary Institutions**

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1  
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3 As part of the contextual dynamics of Canadian political and institutional factors, and in the context of  
4  
5 this special issue, we are concerned with the extent to which processes of neoliberalization may be active  
6  
7 in how sustainability is understood in education, and to what extent these two ideas may be traveling  
8  
9 together in their global mobility and local uptake. Our discussion here draws on year one data collected  
10  
11 from the 220 accredited post-secondary institutions in Canada<sup>3</sup> based on their publicly available policy  
12  
13 documents and websites (see Beveridge, McKenzie, Vaughter, & Wright, in review). Of the 220  
14  
15 institutions, 110 had sustainability policies or plans (hereafter referred to jointly as ‘policies’). In our  
16  
17 analysis of the policies, the most frequent terms used in the policy titles were: environment (49 uses),  
18  
19 sustainable development (38 uses), and sustainability (41 uses)<sup>4</sup>. For the purposes of this discussion, we  
20  
21 are focusing on the language used in the titles and sustainability definitions in order to begin to examine  
22  
23 the mobilities of the aims and language of the policies. Building on our discussion of sustainability as a  
24  
25 vehicular idea, we ask to what extent the conceptions of sustainability in education policy texts may be  
26  
27 keeping up with the neoliberal times.  
28  
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33  
34 Figure 1 shows temporal changes in the terms used in the sustainability policy titles, with earlier  
35  
36 policies more commonly using the terminology of environment and sustainable development, with these  
37  
38 terms decreasing in usage as the term sustainability emerged in the mid-2000’s. The width of the bars  
39  
40 indicates the relative number of policies developed in a given year, with most current policies developed  
41  
42 after 2002. Sustainability is the most frequently used term in the titles of policies created over the past  
43  
44 five years. Of the 110 institutions with sustainability policies, 69 policies included definitions of the  
45  
46 terminology used in the policy titles. While a number of the definitions were environment-specific or  
47  
48 specifically used the language of sustainable development in alignment with the policy titles, almost a  
49  
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52  
53 <sup>3</sup> Data were collected in 2012 from all 220 post-secondary institutions in Canada accredited with the  
54 Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) and the Association of Canadian  
55 Community Colleges (ACCC)

56  
57 <sup>4</sup> Policies which focused on sustainability goals but did not include any of the above terms in their titles  
58 totalled 6. Some policy titles included more than one of the terms and thus the numbers add up to more  
59 than 110.  
60

third of the policies included a definition of sustainability which included a focus on the natural environment, society, and economy, or what is often called a “three pillars” definition of sustainability (Sneddon et al., 2006). Given the suggested emergence of sustainability as a dominant terminology, in what follows we examine the definitions in the policies to extend an analysis of sustainability as a potential vehicular idea. In particular, we discuss three pillars definitions and ask how the priorities of neoliberalization may be shaping the construction of ‘sustainability’ as defined in these post-secondary education policies.

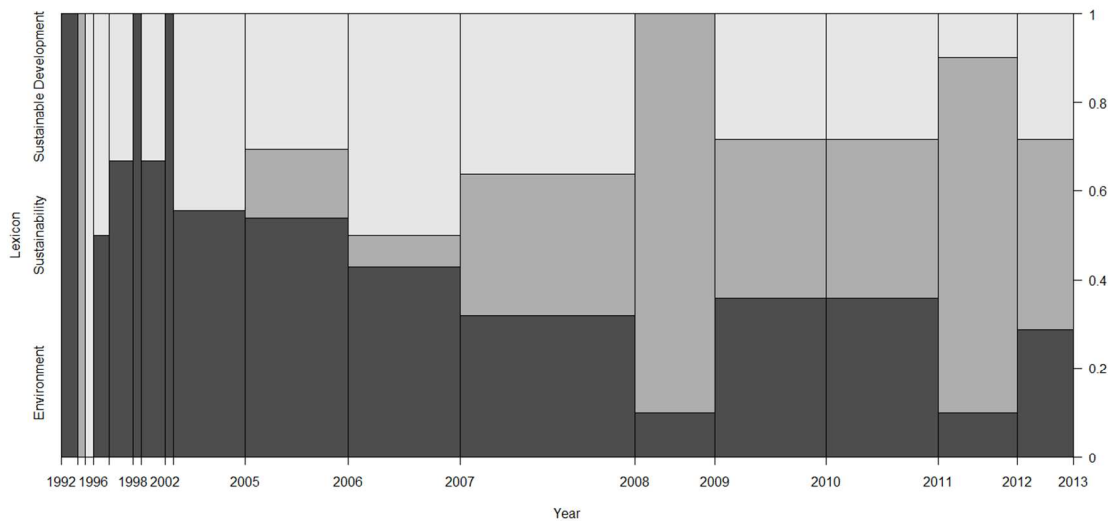


Figure 1. Policy title terminology by year and displaying relative number of policies per year (from Beveridge, McKenzie, Vaughter, & Wright, in review)

The three pillars are often introduced in the literature as a nested concept – the largest circle being the ‘natural environment,’ which the ‘society’ circle is then placed within, and ‘economy,’ is in turn, as part of society (Adams, 2006, p. 2). They are placed in this hierarchy based on the understanding that without a natural environment human beings would not exist, and without a society to create it, there would be no economy. However, within the policies reviewed, there was no mention of any hierarchy or prioritization of these three elements. We might attend to the ideological implications of this

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2  
3 indeterminateness: is an invisible hand supposed to organize coordination between the three pillars? The  
4  
5 vagueness of this type of sustainability definition corroborates our understanding of it as a vehicular idea  
6  
7 (McLennan, 2004). We can read the elasticity of this three pillars definition as suggesting that  
8  
9 sustainability, like environmental education before it, has become a ‘floating signifier’ with diverse  
10  
11 meanings in each of the numerous discourses that gather under its umbrella (Gonzalez-Gaudiano, 2005,  
12  
13 p. 248). This purposive ambiguity is an important variable to consider in studying their mobility, since it  
14  
15 is the indeterminateness of vehicular ideas that allows them to travel quickly across policymaking sites  
16  
17 (Temenos & McCann, 2012) and “move with the times” (McLennan, 2004, pp. 488-89).  
18  
19

20  
21 In addition, we also want to draw attention to the segmentation of the “pillars” and as a result, the  
22  
23 boundaries that are established between them. As Scott and Gough (2006) write, “it is important not to  
24  
25 mistake a convenient representation of something for the thing itself. There are no clear boundaries  
26  
27 between environment, society and economy, and each is fundamentally dependent on the other... Thus,  
28  
29 the solid lines by which this model is normally divided are very misleading” (p. 276). The division of  
30  
31 sustainability into three spheres can thus also be read as a kind of boundary maintenance activity,  
32  
33 wherein the blurry boundaries between these domains are hardened at the policymaking level. The  
34  
35 segmentation of these areas as ‘pillars’ can reduce reflection on the meaning of sustainability in one of  
36  
37 these areas from the perspective of the other: for example, reflection on the meanings of ‘economic  
38  
39 sustainability’ from the perspective of ‘environmental sustainability,’ or the latter in relation to ‘social  
40  
41 sustainability.’ Whereas the nested hierarchy model implies at least some reflection on the  
42  
43 interrelationship of the three pillars, the absence of any such model in the definitions themselves leaves  
44  
45 open for any open area to take priority in moving toward ‘sustainability.’  
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53 Returning to the discussion of the previous section regarding the potential twinning of  
54  
55 sustainability with neoliberalism, three pillar definitions thus run the risk of enabling sustainability as a  
56  
57 vehicular idea in problematic ways. It can function both as a floating signifier through its ambiguity  
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(anything goes), as well as enabling sustainability to be ‘fixed’ in certain ways through the creation of the boundaries between pillars (i.e., giving priority to a particular pillar). This enables sustainability to get onto the policymaking table as it is seen as flexible and not in conflict with economic and political priorities of neoliberalization, and practically can result in situations where, for example, a local administrator believes they can appropriately check off policy requirements to address sustainability if they have done work on economy, society, *or* environment. The boundaries of the three pillar definitions can thus insulate the economy pillar from those of social and environmental sustainability, enabling a form of neoliberal sustainability (Coffey & Marston, 2013). If the boundaries around the three pillars are allowed to harden, and there are no structures for critical reflection on their interrelations, there runs the risk of a relative dominance of a neoliberal framing of sustainability within such policy definitions.

While we recognize this discussion is based only on sustainability definitions in the policies and not on an analysis of the full policies or of practices in institutions<sup>5</sup>, it is intended to provide an example of concerns about the twinning of sustainability with neoliberalism in education policy, as well as to help generate further questions and modes of analysis for researching how such definitions of sustainability become prioritized and mobilized.

In closing the discussion of this research, the initial analysis suggests that increasing numbers of post-secondary institutions in Canada are developing sustainability-related policies, and that increasingly frequently, the terminology used to name these policies is ‘sustainability.’ While this may appear promising on the surface, peeling back just one layer to look at how sustainability is defined in these policies, suggests that priorities of neoliberalization may travel with and into how sustainability is conceptualized. Further analysis is needed to determine the extent to which this may be borne out in the policies in their full, as well as to consider more nuanced questions of mobility and uptake, such as to what extent sustainability networks, policy actors, virtual communications, or other conduits of mobility

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<sup>5</sup> A content analysis of 50 of the 110 full sustainability policy documents is underway ([www.sepn.ca](http://www.sepn.ca)).



1  
2  
3 are facilitating the ways in which sustainability is adopted in localized contexts; as well as how regional  
4  
5 or municipal policies and priorities may also be influencing the specifics of how sustainability is  
6  
7 articulated and practiced. We see shifts in the language of sustainability-related policy over time as  
8  
9 shown in Figure 1, but there are also trends in the language and definitions used regionally, as well as in  
10  
11 the numbers of institutions within various provinces/territories which have policies (see Beveridge,  
12  
13 McKenzie, Vaughter, & Wright, in review). The terminology used in international or national policies  
14  
15 and declarations, assessment bodies such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in  
16  
17 Higher Education (AASHE) or Cégep-Vert in Québec, or the UN-affiliated Regional Centres of  
18  
19 Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development, are some of the factors which may be influencing  
20  
21 the movement and translation of particular versions of sustainability (Peck & Theodore, 2010). Claims of  
22  
23 a sustainability focus are also increasingly a selling point in attracting students, faculty, funders (Kerr &  
24  
25 Hart-Steffes, 2012, p. 12), in an age where post-secondary institutes operate in conditions of  
26  
27 commodification and market-based competition (Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006). In the worst case  
28  
29 scenario of institutional greenwashing, sustainability policies and related high level initiatives such as  
30  
31 signing of declarations, may function as ‘sustainability fixes’ (While et al., 2004), in which there is an  
32  
33 appearance of taking steps towards protecting the environment while the higher prioritization given to  
34  
35 economic considerations in the institution as a whole means that little may have changed. In a better case  
36  
37 scenario, the ever growing focus on sustainability in post-secondary education is an opportunity for  
38  
39 ‘moving things on’ (Tremenos & McCann, 2012) through the institutional prioritization of  
40  
41 environmental considerations.  
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## 52 **Implications for Research**

53  
54 Given these multiple potentialities of sustainability in education policy in current conditions of mobile  
55  
56 neoliberal policymaking, we are left with questions of the possible implications for policymaking,  
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1  
2 practice, and research. Or more specifically, if we consider the mobility of both neoliberal and  
3  
4 sustainability policy, how can we guard against their inevitable pairing? If neoliberal forms of capitalism  
5  
6 are increasingly tied to biological life through our dependence on extractive science and technology  
7  
8 (Castree, 2007; Pierce, 2012), disassociated three pillar versions of sustainability which do not require  
9  
10 the disruption of the logics of neoliberalism seem wholly inadequate. In a national political context  
11  
12 which has lost even the veneer of sustainability<sup>6</sup>, the elasticity of the three pillars definition with its  
13  
14 ability to ‘keep up with the times,’ is not promising.  
15  
16  
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18

19 We suggest that an exploration of policy mobility can be helpful in considering how and why  
20  
21 certain ideas travel and in enabling more intentionality in which ideas are taken up, or possibly ruptured.  
22  
23 Guarding against being mere neoliberal ‘network dopesters’ (Peck, 2012, p. 25), we can then better ask  
24  
25 which actors, associations, policies we are mobilizing and why. Such analytic frames also enable us to  
26  
27 better consider the value, not only of mobile policies, but those which are also community and place  
28  
29 specific. With an orientation to policy which considers the contexts or origins of policy as well as its  
30  
31 enactment through practice, we propose the following kinds of questions that may be asked about the  
32  
33 origins and mobilities of education policy:  
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- 38 - Can the policy or policy mandate be traced to a beginning, and if so, who was responsible for its  
39  
40 genesis and the writing of the text?
- 41  
42 - What are the typical and unconventional routes followed by sustainability-related education  
43  
44 policy in their movement from one institution to another, or from one country to another?
- 45  
46 - How are sustainability-related education discourses synthesized with other policy agendas and  
47  
48 discourses, and what are the effects of such hybrid policy discourses?
- 49  
50 - How is sustainability articulating in relation to neoliberalization in local contexts?  
51  
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54  
55 <sup>6</sup> The Canadian federal government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper has revoked the protection of  
56  
57 99% of Canada’s waterways and dismantled federal agencies responsible for environmental science and  
58  
59 environmental assessment over the last several years to facilitate oil and tar sands development (Land,  
60  
2013).

- 1  
2  
3 - How does the mobility of sustainability-related education policy intersect with community and  
4  
5 place-based ‘policies’ of sustainability education?  
6  
7 - What are the most significant moorings (retreats, conference centers) and platforms (websites,  
8  
9 magazines, journals, etc.) for the development, branding, and selling of sustainability-related  
10  
11 education policy; or alternatively for dissensus and dialogue?  
12  
13  
14 - What are the various roles played by different policy actors, both locally at an institutional level,  
15  
16 but also across institutions and nations through global policy networks?  
17  
18  
19 - How can environmental education researchers engage diverse communities in the process of  
20  
21 reimagining the meaning and scope of sustainability-related policy in education?  
22  
23

24 Although beyond the scope of the current paper, another host of detailed questions surrounds the related  
25  
26 sphere of policy enactment or practice - in what happens on the ground in particular institutions and  
27  
28 communities as policies are adopted and interpreted in local contexts, including in relation to how  
29  
30 policies are combined, modified, resisted, and otherwise informed by situated actors, places, and  
31  
32 practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992).  
33  
34

35  
36 Much of the existing research on policy mobilities focuses on unique urban planning, social, or  
37  
38 health policy initiatives which can then be traced in their uptake across different locales – for example,  
39  
40 workfare policies in the US (Peck & Theodore, 2010) or urban design policies such as smart growth or  
41  
42 business improvement districts as they have spread globally (McCann & Ward, 2012). Likewise, the  
43  
44 uptake of sustainability in educational policy can be studied to better understand when and where various  
45  
46 terminology and models emerged and the means through which they have become more distributed and  
47  
48 with what effects. Methodologies for studying policy mobilities are still nascent, but have tended  
49  
50 towards qualitative ethnographic and case study approaches which “follow the policy” within and across  
51  
52 sites (McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012). McCann (2011) advocates for “global  
53  
54 ethnographies” that study relationships between sites while maintaining one site as the primary  
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1  
2  
3 perspective (p. 121). Temenos and McCann (2013) suggest that most policy mobilities work to this point  
4  
5 has largely employed “‘standard’ qualitative case study methods” (p. 351), and that there is additional  
6  
7 need for more detailed empirical research. McCann (2011) also suggests the value of analyzing policy  
8  
9 documents and websites to better understand the structural and historical contexts within which policy  
10  
11 mobilities have emerged and are active, as well as the potential of quantitative methods in examining  
12  
13 some data (p. 122). Finally, mobile methods also involve following the actors and their techniques  
14  
15 (Büscher et al., 2011), honing a deep familiarity with the specific techniques used by actors to organize  
16  
17 the movement of policy.  
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20  
21 By better understanding how current sustainability policies in education emerge, travel, and are  
22  
23 adapted in particular national or regional contexts, including in convergence or divergence with  
24  
25 processes and discourses of neoliberalization, we can perhaps offer more critical and imaginative  
26  
27 interventions in how sustainability is mobilized in education (McKenzie, 2009). Arguably, we need a  
28  
29 rupture or dissensus with the limited terms of debate around ‘sustainability’ in education policy, which  
30  
31 we might imagine as a widening and redistribution of those who have a say in the unfolding of de-  
32  
33 politicized education policy (Stevenson, 2013). Philosopher Jacques Ranciere (2009) says “dissensus  
34  
35 brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the  
36  
37 distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared  
38  
39 world” (p. 49). A dissensus with consensual understandings of sustainability would involve a radical  
40  
41 reconfiguration of who is able to have a voice, and of what is expressible in public discourse around  
42  
43 ‘sustainability’ in education policy. It will require drawing upon many dynamic understandings and  
44  
45 practices of social, cultural and environmental sustainability (Dillard, Dujon, & King 2009; Monani  
46  
47 2011; Stoekl 2007) in order to move beyond these neoliberal times.  
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Rebecca McNeil recently completed her MES thesis on sustainability in higher education in the School for Resource and Environmental Science at Dalhousie University and is a communications strategist for the environmental sector in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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*Education Policy Mobility: Reimagining Sustainability in Neoliberal Times*

For Peer Review Only

**Abstract**

This paper is concerned with the twinning of sustainability with priorities of economic neoliberalization in education, and in particular via the mobility or diffusion of education policy. We discuss the literature on policy mobility as well as overview concerns regarding neoliberalism and education. The paper brings these analyses to bear in considering the uptake of sustainability in education policy. We ask to what extent sustainability as a vehicular idea may be twinning with processes of neoliberalization in education policy in ways that may undermine aspirations of, and action on, environmental sustainability. Towards the end of the paper, we draw on data from an empirical study to help elucidate how the analytic frames of policy mobility can inform our analyses of the potential concerns and possibilities of sustainability as a vehicular idea. In particular, we investigate how sustainability and related language has been adopted in the policies of Canadian post-secondary education institutions over time. The paper closes by suggesting the potential implications of the proceeding analyses for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers concerned with sustainability in education policy.

**Keywords:** education policy, policy mobility, sustainability education, neoliberalism, policy analysis, vehicular idea, higher education, post-secondary education

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3 This paper is informed by trajectories of work in critical policy scholarship or policy sociology in  
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5 education (e.g., Ball, 1994, 1997; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Ozga, 2000), as well as by interdisciplinary  
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7 research on policy diffusion and transfer, and in particular, policy mobility (e.g., Peck, 2011a; Peck &  
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9 Theodore, 2010a; Temenos & McCann, 2013). We explore the shifts in theoretical perspective and  
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11 methodological orientation that are required to analyze neoliberalism and sustainability as ‘vehicular  
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13 ideas’ (Temenos and McCann, 2012), and follow the uptake and mobility of policy concerned with  
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15 sustainability<sup>1</sup> in Canadian post-secondary education institutions.  
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19 Our understanding of policy includes policy texts, but also broadly considers the contexts and  
20  
21 consequences influencing their development and enactment. As Lingard and Ozga (2007) suggest, a  
22  
23 process/text definition of educational policy “indicates the politics involved in the production and  
24  
25 implementation of a policy and in the actual purposes and language of the policy text” (p. 2). We are  
26  
27 concerned with these politics and their potentially productive and/or constraining effects on how  
28  
29 sustainability is being conceived and mobilized in and through educational policy.  
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33 In this paper we focus particularly on factors that may be influencing where and how  
34  
35 sustainability is being taken up in post-secondary education policy, including in relation to processes of  
36  
37 neoliberalization. We appreciate the cautions made against uses of ‘neoliberalism’ as a ‘blunt, omnibus  
38  
39 category’ that can ‘reproduce a narrowed analytical and political gaze,’ as well as the arguments for  
40  
41 nonetheless considering its distinctive hegemonic aspects across diverse settings and variations (Peck,  
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43 2013, p. 17, 10). Analyses of the impacts of neoliberalization on education policy within specific  
44  
45 locations and across sites have been ongoing over the past several decades (e.g., Ball, 1994, 1998;  
46  
47 Olssen & Peters, 2005); with many concerned about “the increasing colonisation of educational policy  
48  
49 by economic policy imperatives,” including neoliberalism (Ball, 1998, p. 122).  
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55 <sup>1</sup> We understand “sustainability” here as any policy that takes up the natural environment in some  
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57 capacity, including in relation to social, economic, culture, health, and other factors. While we are  
58  
59 concerned with the various ways sustainability terminology is engaged, we have limited the scope to  
60 those cases which include some reference and consideration of environment.

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2  
3 Some researchers have also examined the shift to the language of sustainable development” or  
4  
5 “sustainability” in relation to economic policy priorities. For example, While et al. (2004) have  
6  
7 suggested the uptake of this lexicon in policy can provide a “sustainability fix,” or in other words,  
8  
9 support an “organization of economic interests, institutional capacities, and political positions that allows  
10  
11 development to proceed despite economic and ecological crises and in the face of growing popular  
12  
13 concerns about the state of the environment” (Temenos & McCann, 2012, p. 4). There seems little doubt  
14  
15 that sustainability is a ‘vehicular idea’ (McClennan, 2004; Temenos & McCann, 2012) or a ‘floating  
16  
17 signifier’ (Gonzales-Guadiano, 2009), which can be taken up in different ways towards various means.  
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19 Vehicular ideas are distinguished by their hermeneutic and contextual flexibility, by their ability to  
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21 balance between discursive exclusivity and vague open-endedness, by their robust capacity to reabsorb  
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23 opposition, evolve with the times, and move across sites (McLennan, 2004, pp. 488-489), which, more  
24  
25 cynically, can serve to propel or greenwash economic interests. More optimistically, the terminology of  
26  
27 sustainability can be powerful because of its ability to allow for coalition building and for ‘moving  
28  
29 things on’ (Temenos & McCann, 2012). The analysis of sustainability as a ‘vehicular idea’ requires  
30  
31 consideration of both sides of this potentiality, which aligns with calls for both typological, observational  
32  
33 analysis of such vehicular notions and attention to their normative characteristics (McLennan 2004, 494).  
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35 For example, we can observe the uptake and use of various types of sustainability discourse, such as the  
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37 three pillars definition, but we should not lose sight of the norms and ideologies that may be articulated  
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39 to various types in particular policymaking contexts.  
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47 We bring these trajectories together in our concerns with the pairing of sustainability with  
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49 priorities of economic neoliberalization in education, and in particular via the mobility or diffusion of  
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51 education policy. We are interested in shifts from language of ‘environment’ to ‘sustainable development’  
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53 and ‘sustainability’ over the past several decades, and explore the concerns and possibilities of the  
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55 mobility of these terms and their associated meanings in education policy. We ask to what extent  
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2 sustainability as a vehicular idea may be twinning with processes of neoliberalization in educational  
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4 policy in ways that may undermine aspirations of, and action on, environmental sustainability. In doing  
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6 so we build on earlier work that has begun to examine the relationships among sustainability,  
7  
8 neoliberalization, policy mobility, and education (e.g., Jickling & Wals, 2008; Hursh & Henderson,  
9  
10 2011; McKenzie, 2012; Sylvestre, McNeil, & Wright, 2013). Towards the end of the paper, we draw on  
11  
12 data from an in progress empirical study to help elucidate how the analytic frames of policy mobility can  
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14 inform our analyses of the potential concerns and possibilities of sustainability as a vehicular idea. In  
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16 particular, we investigate how sustainability and related language has been adopted in the policies of  
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18 Canadian post-secondary education institutions over time. The paper closes by suggesting the potential  
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20 implications of the proceeding analyses for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers concerned with  
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22 sustainability in education policy. We first begin with a discussion of sustainability as a ‘vehicular idea’  
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24 in relation to the developing literature on policy mobility.  
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### 33 **The Mobility Turn**

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35 “It sometimes seems as if all the world is on the move” (Urry, 2007, p. 3). The movement of vehicular  
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37 ideas, like Richard Florida’s creative city model or municipal sustainability fixes (Peck, 2012; Temenos  
38  
39 & McCann, 2012), can be interrogated through the lens of the mobility turn in the social sciences and  
40  
41 humanities. This ‘turn’ focuses on the immense scale of movement of objects, people, and ideas across  
42  
43 the globe. It takes a stance that embraces epistemological exchange across disciplines and promises a  
44  
45 transformation of the social sciences away from static paradigms, where roots are favoured at the  
46  
47 expense of routes, in order to explore expanded metaphors of movement (Frello, 2008, p. 26; Urry, 2007,  
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49 p. 18). “The term ‘mobilities’ refers not just to movement but to this broader project of establishing a  
50  
51 ‘movement-driven’ social science in which movement... as well as voluntary/temporary immobilities,  
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53 practices of dwelling and ‘nomadic’ place-making are all viewed as constitutive of economic, social and  
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2 political relations” (Büscher, Urry and Witchger, 2011, p. 4). This project seeks to explain the complex  
3 relationships between mobilities, moorings (like airports or conference centers), spatial scales, and  
4  
5 practices of place-making, in order to describe how social worlds, like sustainability policymaking, are  
6  
7 in part “made in and through movement” (Büscher et al, 2011, p. 13). This paradigm marks a shift away  
8  
9 from the historical focus of social scientific research on face-to-face relationships within spatially  
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11 propinquitous communities, and toward an analysis of the multiple, the distributed, the fleeting, and the  
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13 complex interdependencies between corporeal, communicative, and physical travel that variously shape  
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15 what we have come to call ‘globalization’ (Büscher et all, 2011). This turn is less defined by any  
16  
17 overarching theoretical orientation than by a renewed empirical sensitivity to the movement of materials  
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19 and ideas. This sensitivity attends not only to the global flow of vehicular ideas like ‘sustainability,’ but  
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21 also to the flow of these ideas within and across national, regional, or local contexts.  
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29 This mobility turn is currently informing debates in critical policy research. The study of policy  
30 mobility and mutation is a relatively recent development in this field, partly building out of earlier  
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32 scholarship in political science on policy diffusion and transfer. Providing an overview of various stages  
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34 of the diffusion and transfer literature from the 1960s and onwards, Peck (2011a) suggests aspects of  
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36 these literatures that continue to be relevant and useful in policy analysis and those which appear to have  
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38 become outdated in more recent contexts of globalized networks of travel and technology. Table 1  
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40 provides an overview of differences identified by Peck (2011a) between the transfer-diffusion literatures  
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42 and those developing under the label of policy mobilities.  
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|                       | Policy Transfer                                      | Policy Mobilities   |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Paradigm              | Methodological nationalism                           | Mobility turn: global flow of policy across nations, regions, and places  |
| Origins               | Disciplinary: political science                      | Transdisciplinary: geography, political science, sociology, urban planning, & expanding, i.e., environmental education research |
| Epistemology          | Positivist/rationalist                               | Postpositivist/constructivist   |
| Privileged Object     | 'Successful' transfers                               | Policies in motion/interconnection: continuous transformation and mutation  |
| Social Action         | Instrumental: bounded rationality                    | Strategic: embedded calculation   |
| Dynamic               | Frustrated replication of best (or better) practices | Contradictory reproduction of connected but unevenly developing policy regimes  |
| Spatiality            | Sequential diffusion                                 | Relational connection   |
| Mode of Explanation   | Reification of essentialized design features         | Contextually sensitive analysis of emergent capacities  |
| Politics of Knowledge | Abstracts from politics of knowledge and practice    | Problematizes politics of knowledge and practice  |

Table 1. Policy transfer versus policy mobilities (adapted from Peck, 2011a, p. 775)

Across these approaches, the interest is on how policies are instituted i) over time, and ii) over space, and iii) which factors may be influencing temporal and spatial trends. Policy transfer-diffusion literatures have been concerned with how policy developed in one region or nation spreads to other locations over time, outlining geographic clustering (being influenced by one's neighbours) and networks (being influenced by the networks one participates in) as factors in the diffusion of a policy from its location of origin to other locations (Weyland, 2005). Temporally, diffusion has been suggested to occur on a bell curve: beginning with an innovation and slow uptake until policy uptake surges in popularity and eventually tapers off. The phase at which a government or institution may adopt a policy – either as an early adopter, within the peak of its popularity, or as a laggard – is suggested by the

1  
2  
3 diffusion literature to be related to *why* the policy was adopted, or its mechanisms of uptake.

4  
5 While a range of discussions of mechanisms of uptake exist in the transfer-diffusion literatures, a  
6  
7 predominant approach is to consider the four classifications of emulation, learning, competition, and  
8  
9 coercion (Garrett et al., 2008; Shipan & Volden, 2008, 2012). “Emulation” can be understood as the  
10  
11 voluntary adoption of policy already in place elsewhere based on information passed through social  
12  
13 channels. This may take the form of copying the strategies of powerful or successful actors or  
14  
15 institutions, ‘expert theorization’ in which there is coalescence around favoured solutions which are then  
16  
17 ‘sold’ through various channels, or learning from peers where policy is borrowed from locations which  
18  
19 share political or cultural affinities (Peck, 2011a). “Learning” describes circumstances where policies are  
20  
21 adopted after observing their impact in another institution or jurisdiction (Shipan & Volden, 2008).  
22  
23 However, critical policy research has suggested that “learning” is more prevalent among locations which  
24  
25 share ideology and belief systems, making it difficult to isolate from emulation and other forms of  
26  
27 transfer. As Peck (2011a) suggests: “the near impossibility of rationally determining ‘success’ or ‘failure’  
28  
29 outside the framework of particular policy paradigms and belief systems means that learning behaviour  
30  
31 remains in the eye of the beholder” (p. 787). The mechanism of “competition” refers to cases where a  
32  
33 policy is adopted due to a perception that it confers a competitive economic advantage, while “coercion”  
34  
35 can be understood as pressure or encouragement to adopt a policy from an outside source with some  
36  
37 influence or power, such as a government funding body, and can take the form of required trade  
38  
39 practices or economic sanctions (Shipan & Volden, 2008). In his review of research in these areas, Peck  
40  
41 (2011a) concludes that of the four mechanisms, emulation and competition appear to be the most  
42  
43 prevalent, often acting in combination and operating through “powersoaked epistemic networks” (p. 788).  
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52 Indeed such networks are a focus in the policy mobilities literature, which critiques frameworks  
53  
54 of policy transfer-diffusion on the grounds that they focus on policies as discrete objects which can  
55  
56 indeed be ‘transferred’ in whole to other locations (Prince, 2012). Instead the mobilities literature  
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1  
2 suggests that policies, in so far as they move from one location to another, often as bits and pieces, are  
3  
4 also necessarily transformed through that process of movement and translation (Peck & Theodore,  
5  
6 2010a). Rather than tracing policy from a particular point of origin to locations elsewhere, mobilities  
7  
8 approaches also understand policy creation and mobilization as more dispersed or as not necessarily  
9  
10 having a clear centre or point of origin. This latter shift suggests the impacts of the globalization of  
11  
12 policy practice, where policies are circulating globally with greater speed, “aided by new  
13  
14 communications technologies and a growing cadre of cosmopolitan policy advocates” (Peck & Theodore,  
15  
16 2010a, p. 172).  
17  
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21  
22 We can analyze this globalization of policy practice by dissecting the relationships between five  
23  
24 “interdependent ‘mobilities’ that produce social life organized across distance,” including corporeal  
25  
26 travel, physical movement, imaginative travel, virtual travel, and communicative travel (Büscher et al,  
27  
28 2011, 5). While inquiry may focus on any one of these areas, the mobility turn underlines the specific  
29  
30 interdependencies between them, including: corporeal travel of policy actors for meetings; imaginative  
31  
32 travel effected through policy tourism or marketing campaigns; virtual travel via video conferences;  
33  
34 communications via face-to-face meetings, social media, texts, mobile phone; and the actual movement  
35  
36 of the bits and pieces of policy (Büscher et al, 2011, 5). There has been some attention to the complex  
37  
38 interrelationships between the multiple mobilities involved in the movement of policy. For instance,  
39  
40 McCann (2011) outlines the role of local policy actors (policy professionals and civil society groups), the  
41  
42 “global policy consultocracy,” and informational infrastructures in policy mobilization processes (p.  
43  
44 114). Conferences, seminars, fact-finding trips, ‘policy tourism,’ computer networks, blogs, social media,  
45  
46 and other sites of connection provide venues of policy mobility; while measurement data such as  
47  
48 indicators, storytelling, and related ‘inscription devices’ such as maps, charts, tables, and powerpoint  
49  
50 slides help policy ‘carriers’ or ‘travelling technocrats’ (Dale, 1992; Lerner & Laurie, 2010) “construct,  
51  
52 legitimate, and propel specific policy models through and across scales” (Temenos & McCann, in press,  
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3 p. 2).  
4

5 The substance of the work undertaken by such carriers, travelling technocrats, and other mediator  
6 intellectuals is the 'facilitation' of spaces for dialogue, like conferences, and platforms for selling ideas,  
7 like websites, so they become more accessible for particular policymaking networks (Osborne, 2004,  
8 441). Thomas Osborne (2004) argues that this style of intellectual labor is part of a broader shift away  
9 from the grand ideas and positivistic expertise of the ivory tower, and toward a more facilitative style of  
10 work that focuses on the production of flashy, vehicular ideas that are responsive to specific policy  
11 networks, think tanks, and media landscapes. Typically, this labor in ideas aims to exert political  
12 influence through networks and the creation of new networks, which marks a decisive shift away from  
13 the advisory policy expert who exerted influence through personal relationships with decision makers  
14 (Osborne, 2004, 433).  
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28 This focus on policy actors, locations, and techniques adds conditions of knowledge production  
29 and circulation to consider in examining the movement of policy, and removes the nation state as the  
30 primary agent in the production and uptake of policies as in some earlier approaches to policy transfer-  
31 diffusion (Temenos & McCann, 2013). This is part of a broader shift away from methodological  
32 nationalism within the new mobilities paradigm (Büscher et al, 2011), wherein sociologist Ulrich Beck  
33 (2006) argues for a methodological cosmopolitanism to interrogate the contradictory and coerced effects  
34 of cosmopolitanization (or globalization) on everyday life and politics. This perspective directs our  
35 attention to the ways in which policy actors may be responding simultaneously to *both* regional *and*  
36 global policymaking networks, and to the tensions and contradictions that come along with these blurred  
37 boundaries of cosmopolitanization (Beck, 2006). This also suggests the significance of researching  
38 across multiple spatial scales, and to the continuing significance of place-based contexts in the  
39 development of policy (McKenzie, 2012). McCann (2011) emphasizes that a mobilities approach builds  
40 on longer standing traditions in geography (for example, the work of David Harvey and Doreen Massey),  
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2 which have understood place “in terms of fixity and mobility; relationality and territoriality” (p. 112).  
3  
4 This suggests an attention to both the circulatory infrastructures or interconnections among “somewhat  
5  
6 ‘unbounded’ state and state actors” while simultaneously focusing on the continued importance of  
7  
8 territorial embeddedness (Temenos & McCann, 2013, pp. 346-347). Responding to critiques of the  
9  
10 potential overemphasis on mobility in social analyses, Peck (2011) likewise suggests that studies of  
11  
12 policy mobility must embed understandings of mobility in the situated realities of policy-making frames,  
13  
14 rule regimes, and institutional environments. We would add that the situated contexts need also to  
15  
16 include longer histories of empire and the colonization of land and peoples (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014).  
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21  
22 Indeed, these situated contextual factors are understood to play a considerable role in policy  
23  
24 uptake, with existing policy/politics suggested by some as largely determining new policy adoption. As  
25  
26 every policy serves some interests more than others, there are no simple solutions of “best” policy, but  
27  
28 rather more complex underlying factors that influence which policies may be developed, emulated, or  
29  
30 passed on (Temenos & McCann, 2013). Discussing cross-national policy borrowing or transfer, Halpin  
31  
32 and Troyna (1995) suggest that policy adoption has much more to do with legitimating other related  
33  
34 policies within the country of adoption than to with the success, however defined, of the policy in other  
35  
36 locations. Citing research by Whitty and Edwards (1992), they outline how elected politicians and  
37  
38 officials are “more likely to be interested in a borrowed policy’s political symbolism than its details” (p.  
39  
40 307). Likewise, Peck and Theodore (2010b) suggest how policy models that extend and affirm dominant  
41  
42 paradigms and consolidate powerful interests, are more like to travel. Furthermore, the style of ideas-  
43  
44 work that supports the development of these kinds of models remains tied at the heels to ideologies of  
45  
46 ‘innovation’ and ‘enterprise’ (Osborne, 2004). Thus the mobility of policy may have more to do with  
47  
48 ideology than to do with rational or technical decision-making (Peck, 2011b). In sum, the study of policy  
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50 mobilities is concerned with how policy is formed and modified through policy techniques and actors in  
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52 situated and mobile locations, and emphasizes the study of politics and power as they relate to policy.  
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## Neoliberalization and Mobile Policies

Located within and spurring on these ‘messier geographies’ of ‘fast policy’ (Peck & Theodore, 2010), neoliberalism is now part of the contextual landscape within which many other policy considerations are undertaken in many regions of the world. If we hope to follow the networks or actors behind policy mobility, we will need to undertake an in-depth analysis of the politics of neoliberalism. We take four points from related work on processes of neoliberalization as central to our discussion here: 1) Neoliberalism is not dead: despite discussions of what next ‘after neoliberalism’ following the 2008 financial crisis, it is clear that there has been further entrenchment of neoliberal rationalities in public policy, including educational policy, in Canada and elsewhere around the globe (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012). 2) Neoliberalism is variegated: or in other words, it takes specific forms in different locales and thus there is no one form of “neoliberalism.” It is important to thus describe and analyze neoliberalization processes in relation to particular sites and situations, rather than discussing “neoliberalism” in sweeping catch-all ways (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2013). 3) Thus, it is not as simple as to say “neoliberalism did it.” As Peck (2013, p. 8) outlines, while “analytically inconvenient,” neoliberalism should be understood to operate alongside of and in hybridity with a range of other forces, which may also, or more so, be influencing the policy contexts (for example, globalization). Part of the variation in neoliberalization in differing contexts is due to the other political and policy trajectories it comes into contact with. 4) Despite these caveats regarding approaching neoliberalism as a frame of analysis, it is also useful to understand the “commonalities and connections across (local) neoliberalisms” in considering the political contexts into which other policies may be taken up (or not) (Peck, 2013, p. 11), including those of sustainability in post-secondary education.

Common manifestations of neoliberalism include the extension of market-based competition as well as commodification processes into many realms of social life, including education (Peck, Theodore,



1  
2 & Brenner, 2012; McKenzie, 2012). The new ‘competition state’ or ‘enterprise society’ then operates  
3  
4 strategically in relation to the globalization of economy through distributed forms of governance.  
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6 Resulting impacts in education include a rescaling of political authority from an emphasis on the state to  
7  
8 that of a ‘global education policy field,’ which is constituted through measures of comparative  
9  
10 performance as well as via networks of politicians and policy makers with similar “policy dispositions  
11  
12 and related epistemic communities” (Lingard, 2011, p. 368). A second impact of neoliberal governance  
13  
14 on education is the turn to ‘new public management,’ or the application of private sector management  
15  
16 practices in the public sector, including in administering education (Klees, 2008; Lingard, 2011).  
17  
18 Reframing educational institutions and bodies as competitive entities, a focus of accountability and  
19  
20 auditing enables oversight at a distance and fosters a culture of performativity. A third common aspect of  
21  
22 neoliberal educational forms is increasing privatization of education, including of educational policy and  
23  
24 policy processes. These trends are affecting post-secondary education specifically through new forms of  
25  
26 management and auditing, the commodification of teaching and research, amplification of relations of  
27  
28 competition, increasing privatization of campuses and research priorities, and an overall growing  
29  
30 emphasis on measurable outputs (Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006; Olssen & Peters, 2005).  
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38         Returning to earlier discussions of policy mobility, one can see the ways in which neoliberalism  
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40 both spreads through the circulatory systems of policy mobility as well as influences the situated  
41  
42 institutional environments and rule regimes in which other “mobile policies” may be developed or  
43  
44 introduced. Indeed, Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2012) suggest that the circulatory systems of policy  
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46 operate “across a now deeply neoliberalized terrain, from which promising local models are variously  
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48 seeded, scaled up, and stylized for emulation, more often than not under the aegis of multilateral  
49  
50 agencies, private consultancies, and expert networks” (p. 279). Thus, neoliberalization acts as a filter for  
51  
52 other policy initiatives or models, resulting in policies “strongly skewed in favour of market-oriented  
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54 rationalities and practices” (p. 279). Such policy models are thus carriers of globally endorsed  
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2 presumptions and are represented as replicable policy technologies, with both designs and outcomes  
3  
4 viewed as transferable from place to place. This leads to the worry that:  
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6

7 policy models pre-emptively disrupt what would otherwise be much more variegated, ‘local’  
8  
9 policy debates, (re)shaping the very terms in which such debates are constructed. This has the  
10  
11 (desired) effect of further depoliticizing the policymaking processes through the circulation of  
12  
13 prefabricated solutions, traveling in the disarmingly, apparently ‘neutral’ and post-ideological form  
14  
15 of evaluation techno-science and best practice pragmatism. (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012, p.  
16  
17 283)  
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19

20  
21 In these ways we worry that neoliberalization is filtering not only how education is conceptualized and  
22  
23 shaped through policy, but also for how sustainability in education is understood and addressed. In the  
24  
25 following section we discuss ‘sustainability’ as it articulates with neoliberalism and global policy flows.  
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### 30 31 **The Twinning and Mobility of Neoliberalism and Sustainability in Education Policy**

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33 The “pan global rhetoric” of sustainability<sup>2</sup> in education has been suggested to be deeply susceptible to  
34  
35 neoliberal influence (Huckle, 2008) in that it can maintain a façade of green politics while allowing for  
36  
37 the persistence of neoliberal relations to the environment (Irwin, 2007). The neoliberalization of  
38  
39 sustainability in education policy has been suggested as evident in the failure to engage with the  
40  
41 ecological limits to growth in the so-called sustainability focus of corporate social responsibility work in  
42  
43 schools (Manteaw 2008, p. 122), and in the curtailment of progress on sustainability education in  
44  
45 particular national or regional contexts (Huckle, 2008; McKenzie, 2012). Some suggest that “[e]ducation  
46  
47 is becoming more deeply connected to economic and security projects that are highly invested in projects  
48  
49 pushing unrestricted economic growth...in areas of science and technology, military/security apparatuses,  
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56 <sup>2</sup> We focus on the terminology of sustainability in this paper, however in some cases similar issues arise  
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58 and have been discussed in relation to ‘sustainable development’ and other sustainability-related  
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60 terminology. We draw on this broader literature in our discussion of sustainability.

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2  
3 and resource acquisition” (Pierce, 2012, p. 17). To unpack this neoliberalization of sustainability in  
4  
5 education policy, we might learn from analyses of economic framings of ‘sustainability’ in other areas  
6  
7 of environmental policy. Coffey and Marston (2013) show how the reform agenda of ecologically  
8  
9 modern discourses, where sustainability is at least still tied to environmental goals, may be co-opted by  
10  
11 the neoliberal framing of sustainability in exclusively economic terms. They conclude that policy  
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13 strategies that combine these discourses are “flawed because, in commodifying nature, limiting the  
14  
15 nature and magnitude of change required, and placing responsibility to act on to individuals, they offer a  
16  
17 constrained understanding of the challenge of sustainability and what needs to be done” (p. 196). This  
18  
19 suggests how neoliberal framings of sustainability can be subtly masked through their ad hoc synthesis  
20  
21 with other environmental policy discourses. The worry is that in these kinds of ways, the enterprise  
22  
23 society of neoliberalism is bringing ‘sustainability’ into its fold at a moment when “[t]he tensions of  
24  
25 capitalism are being played out on a global, biospheric scale and thus implicate the future of life on earth”  
26  
27 (Cooper 2008, p. 49 in Pierce, 2012, p. 24).  
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34 The global orientation of sustainability-related terminologies and the movement or stasis of  
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36 various understandings (Irwin, 2007; González-Gaudiano, 2005), demands in-depth research into the  
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38 mobilities, moorings, definitions and policy routes that allow for the movement of particular  
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40 understandings of sustainability and the immobility of others. Why do particular understandings of  
41  
42 ‘sustainability’ get to move across nations and institutions, while other conceptualizations are  
43  
44 immobilized? The complexity of this query may be interrogated by considering mobility not only as a  
45  
46 physical and communicative phenomenon but, also, as a discursive and ideological process that shapes  
47  
48 the kinds of ideas or actors that get to move and those which are rendered immobile (Frello, 2008). This  
49  
50 directs our attention to the ways in which language shapes the mobility or immobility of particular  
51  
52 understandings of sustainability, which we interrogate by considering the competing or facilitatory  
53  
54 discourses that variously shape its meaning in policy (Jorgensen & Phillips cited in Coffey & Marston,  
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3 2013). Thus, if we are going to direct our research imaginations to a future beyond the high carbon  
4  
5 societies of the neoliberal period (Urry, 2011), we need to remain mindful of the versions of  
6  
7 ‘sustainability’ that we draw upon to forecast preferable futures and remain vigilant to its’ co-optation.  
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9

10 This can be explored further by considering sustainability as a vehicular idea, which foregrounds  
11  
12 a number of interrelated concerns. First, the ways in which ‘sustainability’ gives substance to new kinds  
13  
14 of cognitive labor in environmental policymaking, which we can analyze by following the facilitative  
15  
16 labor (Osborne, 2004) of various carriers and technocrats as they move through powerful epistemic  
17  
18 networks (Peck, 2011a). Second, its role as a ‘floating signifier’ (González-Gaudiano 2005; 2009) with  
19  
20 rather diffuse meanings across the discourses that gather under its name, which can potentially mask the  
21  
22 persistence of powerful ideologies like the invisible hand of the free market under variegated conditions  
23  
24 of neoliberalization (Irwin, 2007; Peck 2013). The policy discourses through which this masking unfolds  
25  
26 are incredibly complex, due to the disparate and diffuse connotations that have latched onto this floating  
27  
28 signifier.  
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33 Third, we can analyze the role of sustainability policy goals in de-politicizing local policy debates.  
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35 For instance, Temenos and McCann (2012) outline the ways in which mobile and neoliberal policies can  
36  
37 frame thinking on local issues, including in relation to which solutions might be sought or developed in  
38  
39 relation to sustainability policy. Other definitions of the problem and associated solutions can then be left  
40  
41 outside the conversation to the point where they are unable to be thought or raised. They suggest how  
42  
43 sustainability as a policy goal or concept can at times be used in these ways, to frame issues in a manner  
44  
45 that is both open and at the same time delimits the range of possible ways forward (Temenos and  
46  
47 McCann, 2012, p. 1393). Temenos and McCann (2012) suggest that “The utilization of vehicular ideas  
48  
49 like sustainability allows sometimes sudden breaks in policy direction to appear almost seamless, natural,  
50  
51 and inevitable, or alternatively, mask the fact that not much beyond the surface has changed” (p. 1402).  
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57 As a ‘vehicular idea’ or mobile policy goal, sustainability and related terms can be understood to be  
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3 formulated with purposive ambiguity or mutability so as to be able to move quickly between  
4  
5 policymaking sites. And unlike moral or theoretical vocabularies, vehicular ideas with their multiple  
6  
7 interpretations have a more limited shelf life: “They serve to make things happen at a particular time,  
8  
9 after which their time may be up” (McLennan, 2004, p. 435).  
10

11  
12 Finally, the notion of sustainability as a vehicular idea also highlights the ways in which the  
13  
14 language and power of neoliberalism brings ‘sustainability’ on board in a variety of consensual and  
15  
16 depoliticized ways that ‘fix’ the terms of debate around local environmental issues (Temenos & McCann,  
17  
18 2012) and mask the persistence of market liberalization (Irwin, 2007). This can be analyzed as part of a  
19  
20 broader depoliticization of the policy process and politics generally, which Swyngedouw (2010)  
21  
22 describes as “structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the  
23  
24 basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative” (p.  
25  
26 215). In an analysis of the transition from environmental education to education for sustainability in New  
27  
28 Zealand, Ruth Irwin (2007) argues that the framing of the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market by the  
29  
30 metaphorical vehicle of ‘sustainability’ serves to perpetuate a calculative, instrumental relationship to the  
31  
32 earth (Irwin, 2007). She argues, “the metaphor of the market gets subsumed in the rhetoric of  
33  
34 ‘sustainability’ and *all factors* are absorbed into the enframing rubric of potential resource” (p. 11). Thus,  
35  
36 there is increasing evidence that certain types of sustainability discourse are depoliticized in  
37  
38 policymaking processes, in ways that foreclose imagining or constructing a future that is more just and  
39  
40 environmentally sustainable than what neoliberalism has to offer, including in education (Irwin, 2007;  
41  
42 Coffey & Marston, 2013; Temenos & McCann, 2012). The remainder of this paper suggests the ways in  
43  
44 which sustainability may be functioning as a ‘vehicular idea’ in the context of initial data from a national  
45  
46 study of sustainability in the educational policy of post-secondary institutions in Canada.  
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### 57 **Researching Sustainability in the Education Policy of Post-secondary Institutions**

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3 As part of the contextual dynamics of Canadian political and institutional factors, and in the context of  
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5 this special issue, we are concerned with the extent to which processes of neoliberalization may be active  
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7 in how sustainability is understood in education, and to what extent these two ideas may be traveling  
8  
9 together in their global mobility and local uptake. Our discussion here draws on year one data collected  
10  
11 from the 220 accredited post-secondary institutions in Canada<sup>3</sup> based on their publicly available policy  
12  
13 documents and websites (see Beveridge, McKenzie, Vaughter, & Wright, in review). Of the 220  
14  
15 institutions, 110 had sustainability policies or plans (hereafter referred to jointly as ‘policies’). In our  
16  
17 analysis of the policies, the most frequent terms used in the policy titles were: environment (49 uses),  
18  
19 sustainable development (38 uses), and sustainability (41 uses)<sup>4</sup>. For the purposes of this discussion, we  
20  
21 are focusing on the language used in the titles and sustainability definitions in order to begin to examine  
22  
23 the mobilities of the aims and language of the policies. Building on our discussion of sustainability as a  
24  
25 vehicular idea, we ask to what extent the conceptions of sustainability in education policy texts may be  
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27 keeping up with the neoliberal times.  
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33 Figure 1 shows temporal changes in the terms used in the sustainability policy titles, with earlier  
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35 policies more commonly using the terminology of environment and sustainable development, with these  
36  
37 terms decreasing in usage as the term sustainability emerged in the mid-2000’s. The width of the bars  
38  
39 indicates the relative number of policies developed in a given year, with most current policies developed  
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41 after 2002. Sustainability is the most frequently used term in the titles of policies created over the past  
42  
43 five years. Of the 110 institutions with sustainability policies, 69 policies included definitions of the  
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45 terminology used in the policy titles. While a number of the definitions were environment-specific or  
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47 specifically used the language of sustainable development in alignment with the policy titles, almost a  
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53 <sup>3</sup> Data were collected in 2012 from all 220 post-secondary institutions in Canada accredited with the  
54 Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) and the Association of Canadian  
55 Community Colleges (ACCC)

56 <sup>4</sup> Policies which focused on sustainability goals but did not include any of the above terms in their titles  
57 totalled 6. Some policy titles included more than one of the terms and thus the numbers add up to more  
58 than 110.  
59  
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third of the policies included a definition of sustainability which included a focus on the natural environment, society, and economy, or what is often called a “three pillars” definition of sustainability (Sneddon et al., 2006). Given the suggested emergence of sustainability as a dominant terminology, in what follows we examine the definitions in the policies to extend an analysis of sustainability as a potential vehicular idea. In particular, we discuss three pillars definitions and ask how the priorities of neoliberalization may be shaping the construction of ‘sustainability’ as defined in these post-secondary education policies.

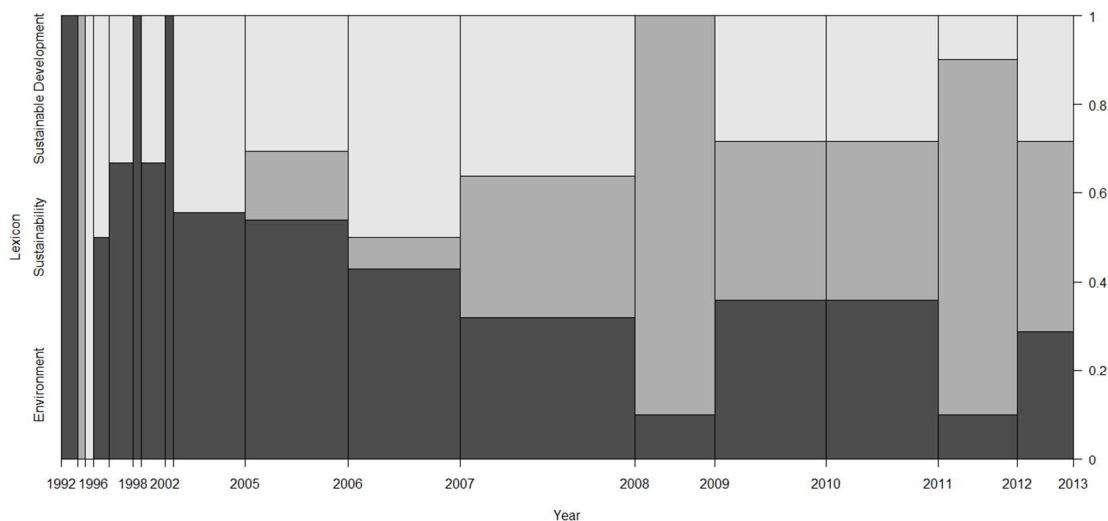


Figure 1. Policy title terminology by year and displaying relative number of policies per year (from Beveridge, McKenzie, Vaughter, & Wright, in review)

The three pillars are often introduced in the literature as a nested concept – the largest circle being the ‘natural environment,’ which the ‘society’ circle is then placed within, and ‘economy,’ is in turn, as part of society (Adams, 2006, p. 2). They are placed in this hierarchy based on the understanding that without a natural environment human beings would not exist, and without a society to create it, there would be no economy. However, within the policies reviewed, there was no mention of any hierarchy or prioritization of these three elements. We might attend to the ideological implications of this

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2  
3 indeterminateness: is an invisible hand supposed to organize coordination between the three pillars? The  
4  
5 vagueness of this type of sustainability definition corroborates our understanding of it as a vehicular idea  
6  
7 (McLennan, 2004). We can read the elasticity of this three pillars definition as suggesting that  
8  
9 sustainability, like environmental education before it, has become a ‘floating signifier’ with diverse  
10  
11 meanings in each of the numerous discourses that gather under its umbrella (Gonzalez-Gaudiano, 2005,  
12  
13 p. 248). This purposive ambiguity is an important variable to consider in studying their mobility, since it  
14  
15 is the indeterminateness of vehicular ideas that allows them to travel quickly across policymaking sites  
16  
17 (Temenos & McCann, 2012) and “move with the times” (McLennan, 2004, pp. 488-89).  
18  
19

20  
21 In addition, we also want to draw attention to the segmentation of the “pillars” and as a result, the  
22  
23 boundaries that are established between them. As Scott and Gough (2006) write, “it is important not to  
24  
25 mistake a convenient representation of something for the thing itself. There are no clear boundaries  
26  
27 between environment, society and economy, and each is fundamentally dependent on the other... Thus,  
28  
29 the solid lines by which this model is normally divided are very misleading” (p. 276). The division of  
30  
31 sustainability into three spheres can thus also be read as a kind of boundary maintenance activity,  
32  
33 wherein the blurry boundaries between these domains are hardened at the policymaking level. The  
34  
35 segmentation of these areas as ‘pillars’ can reduce reflection on the meaning of sustainability in one of  
36  
37 these areas from the perspective of the other: for example, reflection on the meanings of ‘economic  
38  
39 sustainability’ from the perspective of ‘environmental sustainability,’ or the latter in relation to ‘social  
40  
41 sustainability.’ Whereas the nested hierarchy model implies at least some reflection on the  
42  
43 interrelationship of the three pillars, the absence of any such model in the definitions themselves leaves  
44  
45 open for any open area to take priority in moving toward ‘sustainability.’  
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52  
53 Returning to the discussion of the previous section regarding the potential twinning of  
54  
55 sustainability with neoliberalism, three pillar definitions thus run the risk of enabling sustainability as a  
56  
57 vehicular idea in problematic ways. It can function both as a floating signifier through its ambiguity  
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1  
2 (anything goes), as well as enabling sustainability to be ‘fixed’ in certain ways through the creation of  
3  
4 the boundaries between pillars (i.e., giving priority to a particular pillar). This enables sustainability to  
5  
6 get onto the policymaking table as it is seen as flexible and not in conflict with economic and political  
7  
8 priorities of neoliberalization, and practically can result in situations where, for example, a local  
9  
10 administrator believes they can appropriately check off policy requirements to address sustainability if  
11  
12 they have done work on economy, society, *or* environment. The boundaries of the three pillar definitions  
13  
14 can thus insulate the economy pillar from those of social and environmental sustainability, enabling a  
15  
16 form of neoliberal sustainability (Coffey & Marston, 2013). If the boundaries around the three pillars are  
17  
18 allowed to harden, and there are no structures for critical reflection on their interrelations, there runs the  
19  
20 risk of a relative dominance of a neoliberal framing of sustainability within such policy definitions.  
21  
22

23  
24 While we recognize this discussion is based only on sustainability definitions in the policies and not on  
25  
26 an analysis of the full policies or of practices in institutions<sup>5</sup>, it is intended to provide an example of  
27  
28 concerns about the twinning of sustainability with neoliberalism in education policy, as well as to help  
29  
30 generate further questions and modes of analysis for researching how such definitions of sustainability  
31  
32 become prioritized and mobilized.  
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38 In closing the discussion of this research, the initial analysis suggests that increasing numbers of  
39  
40 post-secondary institutions in Canada are developing sustainability-related policies, and that increasingly  
41  
42 frequently, the terminology used to name these policies is ‘sustainability.’ While this may appear  
43  
44 promising on the surface, peeling back just one layer to look at how sustainability is defined in these  
45  
46 policies, suggests that priorities of neoliberalization may travel with and into how sustainability is  
47  
48 conceptualized. Further analysis is needed to determine the extent to which this may be borne out in the  
49  
50 policies in their full, as well as to consider more nuanced questions of mobility and uptake, such as to  
51  
52 what extent sustainability networks, policy actors, virtual communications, or other conduits of mobility  
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58 <sup>5</sup> A content analysis of 50 of the 110 full sustainability policy documents is underway.  
59  
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3 are facilitating the ways in which sustainability is adopted in localized contexts; as well as how regional  
4  
5 or municipal policies and priorities may also be influencing the specifics of how sustainability is  
6  
7 articulated and practiced. We see shifts in the language of sustainability-related policy over time as  
8  
9 shown in Figure 1, but there are also trends in the language and definitions used regionally, as well as in  
10  
11 the numbers of institutions within various provinces/territories which have policies (see Beveridge,  
12  
13 McKenzie, Vaughter, & Wright, in review). The terminology used in international or national policies  
14  
15 and declarations, assessment bodies such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in  
16  
17 Higher Education (AASHE) or Cégep-Vert in Québec, or the UN-affiliated Regional Centres of  
18  
19 Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development, are some of the factors which may be influencing  
20  
21 the movement and translation of particular versions of sustainability (Peck & Theodore, 2010). Claims of  
22  
23 a sustainability focus are also increasingly a selling point in attracting students, faculty, funders (Kerr &  
24  
25 Hart-Steffes, 2012, p. 12), in an age where post-secondary institutes operate in conditions of  
26  
27 commodification and market-based competition (Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006). In the worst case  
28  
29 scenario of institutional greenwashing, sustainability policies and related high level initiatives such as  
30  
31 signing of declarations, may function as ‘sustainability fixes’ (While et al., 2004), in which there is an  
32  
33 appearance of taking steps towards protecting the environment while the higher prioritization given to  
34  
35 economic considerations in the institution as a whole means that little may have changed. In a better case  
36  
37 scenario, the ever growing focus on sustainability in post-secondary education is an opportunity for  
38  
39 ‘moving things on’ (Tremenos & McCann, 2012) through the institutional prioritization of  
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41 environmental considerations.  
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## 52 **Implications for Research**

53  
54 Given these multiple potentialities of sustainability in education policy in current conditions of mobile  
55  
56 neoliberal policymaking, we are left with questions of the possible implications for policymaking,  
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1  
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3 practice, and research. Or more specifically, if we consider the mobility of both neoliberal and  
4  
5 sustainability policy, how can we guard against their inevitable pairing? If neoliberal forms of capitalism  
6  
7 are increasingly tied to biological life through our dependence on extractive science and technology  
8  
9 (Castree, 2007; Pierce, 2012), disassociated three pillar versions of sustainability which do not require  
10  
11 the disruption of the logics of neoliberalism seem wholly inadequate. In a national political context  
12  
13 which has lost even the veneer of sustainability<sup>6</sup>, the elasticity of the three pillars definition with its  
14  
15 ability to ‘keep up with the times,’ is not promising.  
16  
17

18  
19 We suggest that an exploration of policy mobility can be helpful in considering how and why  
20  
21 certain ideas travel and in enabling more intentionality in which ideas are taken up, or possibly ruptured.  
22  
23 Guarding against being mere neoliberal ‘network dopesters’ (Peck, 2012, p. 25), we can then better ask  
24  
25 which actors, associations, policies we are mobilizing and why. Such analytic frames also enable us to  
26  
27 better consider the value, not only of mobile policies, but those which are also community and place  
28  
29 specific. With an orientation to policy which considers the contexts or origins of policy as well as its  
30  
31 enactment through practice, we propose the following kinds of questions that may be asked about the  
32  
33 origins and mobilities of education policy:  
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- 37  
38 - Can the policy or policy mandate be traced to a beginning, and if so, who was responsible for its  
39  
40 genesis and the writing of the text?  
41  
42 - What are the typical and unconventional routes followed by sustainability-related education  
43  
44 policy in their movement from one institution to another, or from one country to another?  
45  
46 - How are sustainability-related education discourses synthesized with other policy agendas and  
47  
48 discourses, and what are the effects of such hybrid policy discourses?  
49  
50 - How is sustainability articulating in relation to neoliberalization in local contexts?  
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54  
55 <sup>6</sup> The Canadian federal government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper has revoked the protection of  
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57 99% of Canada’s waterways and dismantled federal agencies responsible for environmental science and  
58  
59 environmental assessment over the last several years to facilitate oil and tar sands development (Land,  
60  
2013).

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2  
3 - How does the mobility of sustainability-related education policy intersect with community and  
4  
5 place-based ‘policies’ of sustainability education?  
6  
7 - What are the most significant moorings (retreats, conference centers) and platforms (websites,  
8  
9 magazines, journals, etc.) for the development, branding, and selling of sustainability-related  
10  
11 education policy; or alternatively for dissensus and dialogue?  
12  
13  
14 - What are the various roles played by different policy actors, both locally at an institutional level,  
15  
16 but also across institutions and nations through global policy networks?  
17  
18  
19 - How can environmental education researchers engage diverse communities in the process of  
20  
21 reimagining the meaning and scope of sustainability-related policy in education?  
22  
23

24 Although beyond the scope of the current paper, another host of detailed questions surrounds the related  
25  
26 sphere of policy enactment or practice - in what happens on the ground in particular institutions and  
27  
28 communities as policies are adopted and interpreted in local contexts, including in relation to how  
29  
30 policies are combined, modified, resisted, and otherwise informed by situated actors, places, and  
31  
32 practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992).  
33  
34  
35

36 Much of the existing research on policy mobilities focuses on unique urban planning, social, or  
37  
38 health policy initiatives which can then be traced in their uptake across different locales – for example,  
39  
40 workfare policies in the US (Peck & Theodore, 2010) or urban design policies such as smart growth or  
41  
42 business improvement districts as they have spread globally (McCann & Ward, 2012). Likewise, the  
43  
44 uptake of sustainability in educational policy can be studied to better understand when and where various  
45  
46 terminology and models emerged and the means through which they have become more distributed and  
47  
48 with what effects. Methodologies for studying policy mobilities are still nascent, but have tended  
49  
50 towards qualitative ethnographic and case study approaches which “follow the policy” within and across  
51  
52 sites (McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012). McCann (2011) advocates for “global  
53  
54 ethnographies” that study relationships between sites while maintaining one site as the primary  
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1  
2  
3 perspective (p. 121). Temenos and McCann (2013) suggest that most policy mobilities work to this point  
4  
5 has largely employed “‘standard’ qualitative case study methods” (p. 351), and that there is additional  
6  
7 need for more detailed empirical research. McCann (2011) also suggests the value of analyzing policy  
8  
9 documents and websites to better understand the structural and historical contexts within which policy  
10  
11 mobilities have emerged and are active, as well as the potential of quantitative methods in examining  
12  
13 some data (p. 122). Finally, mobile methods also involve following the actors and their techniques  
14  
15 (Büscher et al., 2011), honing a deep familiarity with the specific techniques used by actors to organize  
16  
17 the movement of policy.  
18  
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20  
21 By better understanding how current sustainability policies in education emerge, travel, and are  
22  
23 adapted in particular national or regional contexts, including in convergence or divergence with  
24  
25 processes and discourses of neoliberalization, we can perhaps offer more critical and imaginative  
26  
27 interventions in how sustainability is mobilized in education (McKenzie, 2009). Arguably, we need a  
28  
29 rupture or dissensus with the limited terms of debate around ‘sustainability’ in education policy, which  
30  
31 we might imagine as a widening and redistribution of those who have a say in the unfolding of de-  
32  
33 politicized education policy (Stevenson, 2013). Philosopher Jacques Ranciere (2009) says “dissensus  
34  
35 brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the  
36  
37 distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared  
38  
39 world” (p. 49). A dissensus with consensual understandings of sustainability would involve a radical  
40  
41 reconfiguration of who is able to have a voice, and of what is expressible in public discourse around  
42  
43 ‘sustainability’ in education policy. It will require drawing upon many dynamic understandings and  
44  
45 practices of social, cultural and environmental sustainability (Dillard, Dujon, & King 2009; Monani  
46  
47 2011; Stoekl 2007) in order to move beyond these neoliberal times.  
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