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editorial: wokeness in education*

On Education

Over the last few decades, students in secondary and higher education have become increasingly vocal about expressions of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, colonialism and other mentalities tied to inequalities in power. These forms of concern with social injustice, especially in its creeping, veiled or hidden forms, are often summarized under the heading of 'wokeness'. Lately, the 'woke movement' has been faced with fierce critique and is often cast in the role of a language police, leading others, for fear of saying the wrong things or using the wrong words, to keep their mouths shut. But what if these tensions are not an expression of the closure of an argument, but rather a sign that something is beginning to open up? Do we need to move/work through these tensions in order to foster free debate in educational settings?

Keywords: academic freedom, education, power, social injustice, wokeness

Seldom have philosophical claims been so thoroughly and so speedily falsified by history as Francis Fukuyama's claim that at the end of the Cold War humanity had reached 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989; 1992). Rather than "an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" and "the Triumph of the West, of the Western *idea"* (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 3), 'humanity' now faces the ecological and social consequences of neoliberalism and capitalism; and these are bound up in various ways with histories of colonialism and injustice that 'we' – societies and communities, collectively – have only just begun to own up to and respond to. Meanwhile, the power balance in the world is once again shifting, with China's growth to the status of the second superpower, besides the United States. All this, and the deep uncertainty that comes with it, inevitably gives rise to strong tensions, even in societies not ravaged by war or ecological disaster. Pleas and attempts to challenge the status quo, based on the conviction that our times call for a radical social, economic and political transformation, clash with conservative and sometimes reactionary tendencies. Today's culture wars (Hunter, 1991), in which 'wokeness' is one of the central and at the same time fiercely contested terms (Van Oenen, 2022), must be situated in this context. And inevitably, education is one of the key battlegrounds.

Over the last few decades, students in secondary and higher education have become increasingly vocal about expressions of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, colonialism and other mentalities tied to inequalities in power. These forms of concern with social injustice, especially in its creeping, veiled or hidden forms, are often summarized under the heading of 'wokeness'. While it is contested how and in which way 'wokeness' differs from earlier social justice movements (Martschukat, 2018), what is called 'wokeness' is faced with serious and sometimes overly emotional critique in the field of education. Critics of 'wokeness' accuse the movement of intolerance, fanaticism, dogmatism, and intolerance of other points of view, while advocates stress that they look beyond obvious instances of injustice to uncover much more insidious, deep-rooted structures and

mentalities that need to change if we intend to create a more just society (Frankenberg, 1993; Garner, 2007; McWhorter, 2021; Wekker, 2016). Much of the controversy circles around the notion of 'academic freedom', and the question of whether the 'woke movement' contributes to or rather endangers 'free' debate (as argued, for instance, by Noam Chomsky, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ignatieff, and many others in 2020, and by Luc Ferry, Pierre Nora, and others in 2021; see Ackerman et al., 2020; Ferry et al., 2021; another group is arguing against this fierce attack on 'wokeness' – with good arguments, see, e.g., Unsigned/NDA et al., 2020).

Teachers, in particular male white teachers, and especially in academia, may feel confronted with what they perceive as the righteous indignation of students. They may fear being 'held to account' for failing to honour other perspectives or knowledge traditions than the dominant 'white' perspective, for using terms or concepts viewed as disrespectful and demeaning, or for – as a white teacher – speaking for *or* against Black people (McWhorter, 2021). In fact, however, fear – not seldomly existential fear – has been described as a substantial part of the life and longstanding, generational experience of many students now labeled 'woke' in educational institutions. Protest against and criticism of deep and long-standing injustice or epistemic violence may not seem appropriate from the point of view of the non-woke or privileged, but for those who have been exposed to violence for a long time, it is nothing less than an inevitable survival strategy. Thus, what is often called 'disproportionateness' by critics of the woke movement, for the 'woke' signifies existential importance – the emotions involved are an expression of how much is at stake for Black people, trans and non-binary persons, gays, and other oppressed groups.

These – especially the emotions displayed in classroom discussions and academic controversies – are, in turn, often interpreted as an expression of political hypersensitivity with which students denounce microaggressions and cultural appropriations of all kinds, while themselves longing for nothing more than safe spaces, mindfulness and trigger warnings (see, e.g., Fourest, 2020). For some, this 'hypersensitivity' is an expression of the neo-liberalization of educational institutions, especially universities. We are now witnesses, or so it is claimed, to the fact that former 'philosophical minds' are turned into 'consumers', students are increasingly addressed as underaged children, and rigorously conducted academic debates degenerate into soft-boiled events of well-being (Rieger-Ladich, 2022).

Thus, much seems to be at stake here. Educational institutions face severe sociological, historical, epistemological and other disagreements. How to deal with 'wokeness' practically, how to position oneself as a teacher or student, and how to address the issues involved in educational settings, in classrooms, seminars, and academic discussions is heatedly debated. One question raised is whether there can or should be anything like a general policy on 'wokeness' in the classroom, or whether each 'woke' expression requires its own response. Both advocates and (strong) opponents of 'wokeness' are likely to favour the former. For advocates, the policy would have to be to let the truth of their message sink in and act accordingly. For some opponents, however, 'wokeness' is by definition beyond (academic) legitimacy (McWhorter, 2021; Weyns, 2021), because, according to them, 'woke' people cannot accept the possibility that someone truly understands what they are saying, yet disagrees; if someone disagrees, it means they (still) don't get it, and need to be re-educated (DiAngelo, 2018). In that case, or so the opponents of 'wokeness' argue, open discussion is pointless, in fact impossible. Those who seek a middle course might argue that expressions of 'wokeness' occur across a spectrum of legitimacy, meaning that each expression demands its own fitting response.

For many, the most pressing question seems to be how to prevent a climate of fear, of academic unfreedom, from spreading at educational institutions (see Ackerman et al., 2020; Ferry et al., 2021; and university magazines across the world feature items on this issue). The 'woke movement' is cast in the role of language police, leading others, for fear of saying the wrong things or using the wrong words (which is not the same thing), to keep their mouths shut. But what if the tensions are not an expression of the closure of an argument, but rather a sign that something is beginning to open up? Do we need to move/work through these tensions in order to foster free debate? How can educational institutions remain or become places where a fruitful discussion of different points of view is possible? (How) can educational institutions protect their identity as places where more demanding epistemic standards are to be met than in everyday life, while at the same time remaining or becoming more self-critical concerning this issue? How can they ensure that all students can do what they came there to do, and that all teachers can do their job (or live up to their calling)? How, as a teacher, can one navigate these waters, with their shifting power dynamics? Is there a role/place for (public) apologies (for things said, for curricular matters) in educational institutions? When might they be appropriate, and how would they affect educational and power dynamics? In short, and more broadly: Is there a way to move beyond polarization? Or (and that is a question of principle rather than practice) is the problem that the 'woke' and 'non-woke' evaluation of polarization differs, so that moving beyond it – rather than through it – can never be a shared goal?

The Editorial Team

*This editorial is a clean version of the header image depicted above. Not everyone on the editorial team shares the views presented there or would state them in the way they are found.

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