

Emotions, Interactions, Experiences: Educational Contexts

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Contemporary research in the social sciences and humanities demonstrates that education and socialization are inextricably linked to the cultural and structural dimensions of human emotionality. For decades, the sociology of emotions has examined the social conditions underlying the emergence of emotions, as well as their dynamics and duration across interactional, individual, social, and organizational contexts. Emotional life, in turn, constitutes a fundamental dimension of society and culture (Stearns and Stearns 1985; Turner and Stets 2005). The accelerating pace of social and technological development, together with the commercialization and commodification of living conditions, generates tensions, stress, and uncertainty. At the relational level, social bonds are increasingly eroded and require continuous reconstruction, contributing to heightened feelings of alienation and estrangement. Consequently,

managing one's own emotions—as well as those of others—has become a crucial competence in both professional and everyday life. Against this backdrop, the study of educational processes requires moving beyond traditional transmission-based and cognitivist theories of education.

This special issue responds to the need for a critical reflection on the emotional dimension of education. The articles collected here are grounded in interpretive and critical approaches. From these perspectives, emotions cease to be regarded as a marginal aspect of social life and instead emerge as a key driving force of institutional processes, shaping the subjectivities of social actors.

Our understanding of emotions is informed by philosophical and sociological theories of emotion, particularly the scholarship of Arlie Russell Hochschild

(1983, 2024), Eva Illouz (2007, 2023), and Megan Boler (1999). Their work not only redefines emotions as social, relational, and discursive phenomena, but also demonstrates that emotions are inextricably intertwined with sociopolitical conditions, structures of power, and ideological mechanisms of control and discipline. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) was among the first to demonstrate how, within a service-based economy, emotions—once considered part of the private sphere—became commodified and incorporated into paid labor. She also identified the detrimental consequences of this process for workers, including alienation and burnout. Meanwhile, Eva Illouz (2007) argues that contemporary culture is characterized by a profound entanglement of affective and economic relations, in which emotions become instruments of evaluation, self-regulation, and market productivity. She conceptualizes this as “emotional capitalism” and defines it as follows: “Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (Illouz 2007:5). Within such a culture, emotional experiences are alienated, commercialized, and subordinated to the institutional logic of efficiency. Likewise, in her foundational contribution to critical pedagogy, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, Megan Boler (1999) demonstrates how educational systems and pedagogical theories throughout the past century have regulated, suppressed, and ignored human emotions. Boler argues that education is inherently political and that, to study emotions in education, one must expose the ways in which power—par-

ticularly in its neoliberal and bureaucratic forms—colonizes individuals’ affective well-being by imposing institutionalized rules governing emotional experience and expression.

Focusing on the academic context is particularly timely given the continuing consolidation of the neoliberal agenda in higher education, characterized by an increasing emphasis on productivity, performance, excellence, and entrepreneurship (cf. Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2010; Giroux 2014; Kwiek 2015; Szadkowski 2016; Bonfanti, Cannito and Naldini 2025). Capitalist logics and practices have permeated the academic field to such an extent that the future of the public university appears increasingly uncertain (Shore 2008; Wright and Shore 2017), while academic staff are compelled to engage in emotional labor in order to align their feelings with the emotional norms governing their workplaces (Gill 2018; Steen-Johnsen, Magnussen and Trysnes 2025).

Sociological and philosophical theories of emotion draw the attention of educators—and not only educators—to the (non)presence of emotions within educational practices and institutions. They encourage critical inquiry into the ways in which power, particularly in its neoliberal and bureaucratic forms, appropriates individuals’ emotional well-being by imposing institutionalized norms regulating how emotions should be experienced and expressed. Such questions are especially pressing today, in an era marked by relentless metrics-driven evaluation, bureaucratization, and enforced competitiveness, where a market-oriented emotional discourse increasingly permeates educational institutions and where experiences of uncertainty, anxiety, guilt, shame, and exhaustion have become ever more pervasive.

The theoretical perspective outlined above provided the foundation for the Interdisciplinary IDUB Research Grant *Engagement and Burnout as (Un)Expected Consequences of the Emotional Labor of University Teachers*, conducted between 2023 and 2026 by a team of educational researchers and sociologists at the University of Lodz. The project's primary objective was to reconstruct the emotional experiences of university teachers. It rested on the assumption that these emotional experiences serve as a distinctive "mirror" that reflects the challenges of the contemporary corporate university, where emotions have become harnessed to the imperatives of institutional productivity and managerial control. One outcome of the project is the present issue: *Emotions, Interactions, Experiences: Educational Contexts*.

The issue opens with an article by Renata Górska, who draws on Shiloh Whitney's philosophical work and the theory of affective injustice to reconstruct the emotional experiences of university teachers, focusing on trajectories of engagement and burnout among academic staff. The article portrays the university as an alienating environment and calls for renewed discussion of more equitable educational practices. It exposes the neoliberal university as a site of alienation and affective exploitation, arguing that academics' emotional labor—as manifested in trajectories leading from engagement to exhaustion—provides a compelling point of departure for reimagining more inclusive and just working conditions within higher education.

The theme of institutional pressure and its emotional consequences is further developed by Beata Pawłowska in her article, *Acquiescence to Criticism: The Meaning of Emotions in the Multidimensional Evaluation of an Academic Teacher's Work*. Addressing the

issues of performance evaluation and audit culture, she argues that the developmental purpose originally attributed to employee evaluation has gradually eroded under neoliberalism. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the article reveals the mechanisms through which emotions—from pride to anxiety and shame—are managed within an environment characterized by permanent competition.

This theme continues in the two subsequent articles. Małgorzata Kosiorek centers her analysis on the concept of empowerment in the work of university teachers. Her article explores the dichotomy of emotional experiences associated with teaching and research, locating them along a continuum between subjective empowerment and institutional subjugation.

Alina Wróbel, in turn, examines the phenomenon of manipulation in academic practice. She conceptualizes manipulation at three interconnected levels: the macro level, encompassing the consequences of top-down educational policies; the mezo level, involving hierarchical institutional relations and abuses of power within universities; and the micro level, referring to interpersonal interactions among academic staff. Proceeding from the premise that autonomy and agency constitute indispensable conditions for the development of a thriving academic community, the author demonstrates the destructive effects of both micro- and macro-political practices of manipulation on university teachers' professional identities.

The account of university teachers' emotional experiences is complemented by a curricular perspective in the fifth article, authored by Violetta Kopińska. She examines the extent to which affective and re-

lational dimensions are incorporated into the process of fostering young people's civic identities. Through a comparative analysis of the Polish national core curricula for civic education introduced in 2018 and 2025—developed under markedly different political circumstances—the article reconstructs the institutional potential for promoting citizenship as a shared and relational experience. The analysis demonstrates that although both curricular documents provide space for affective categories, the 2025 reform offers a substantially more comprehensive and structurally integrated representation of concepts central to a relational and political understanding of civic subjectivity. In doing so, it reveals a continuum in which affect is systematically

embedded within earlier stages of institutional socialization.

Taken together, the articles assembled in this issue offer an interdisciplinary map of contemporary educational realities by exposing the mechanisms through which emotions are systematically governed within academic institutions. The findings and analyses not only diagnose the emotional costs of neoliberal audit culture in (Polish) higher education but also contribute to broader debates on the humanization and democratization of the university. At the same time, they offer an impetus for rethinking prevailing institutional practices toward greater agency, empathy, and affective justice.

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