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## **Pedagogy of Discomfort as a Project of Citizenship Education: About Commitment to Social Justice from the Perspective of the Feminist Theories of Emotions**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the article is to describe the assumptions of the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ and to analyse its main theses from the perspective of its potential perception as a pedagogical ‘project’ of citizenship education. The theoretical context is provided by the feminist theories of emotions (e.g. by Megan Boler, Rosi Braidotti and Martha Nussbaum), which emphasise the importance of educational activities for social justice and the affective and ethical dimension of citizenship education.

The research problem of the article is focused around two questions: (1) what are the goals and assumptions of the pedagogy of discomfort and (2) what is the pedagogical potential of pedagogy of discomfort from the perspective of socially and democratically oriented citizenship education. The research was embedded in the paradigm of humanistic-oriented pedagogy and the research method used is a qualitative, thematic analysis of the sources selected for the sample, i.e. six original and co-authored texts by Megan Boler – the author of the concept of ‘pedagogy of discomfort.’ The research results indicate that feminist theories of emotions, including Megan Boler’s philosophy of education known as the ‘pedagogy of discomfort,’ carry implications that are important for pedagogical actions for social justice, democracy and the common good.

**Keywords:** feminist theory, feminist politics of emotions, pedagogy of discomfort, citizenship education.

*The kind of consciousness-raising required by a political subject in order to actualize a radical repositioning of his/her position is neither self-evident, nor free of pain. In post-structuralist feminism, this process has also been discussed in terms of dis-identification from experiences that may be negative, but also paradoxically familiar.*

(Rosi Braidotti, 2008, p. 17)

## Introduction

The current debate on citizenship education in pedagogical sciences is related to, among others, a discussion on the ways of defining and understanding citizenship and the models of citizenship education that are inseparably connected with it (Potulicka, 2010; Czech-Włodarczyk, 2012; Wiłkomirska, 2013; Starego, 2012; Wiśniewska-Kin, 2013; Kopińska, 2017, 2022; Rutkowiak & Starego, 2018). In the literature on the subject, there are different, dichotomous approaches, ranging from those where citizenship is understood instrumentally (emphasising individualism, autonomy and individual freedom), to approaches that address engaged citizenship, according to which rooting in the community comes to the fore, emphasising ‘relations with this community that form a sense of citizenship, civil attitude and concern for the common good’ (Wnuk-Lipiński, 2005, p. 109).

In reference to the debate, this article aims to propose a way of thinking about citizenship engagement that shows its ‘hidden’ aspects, which are the emotional and ethical dimensions. There is no doubt that citizenship education cannot consist only in the subjective enrichment of rational knowledge (Potulicka, 2010; Reut, 2014; Chutorański & Szwabowski, 2016; Starego, 2016a; 2016b; Kopińska, 2017; 2022; Rutkowiak & Starego, 2018). Acquisition of such knowledge requires strategies other than theoretical knowledge to absorb or ‘transfer’ it. It cannot be ‘transferred’ at all, that is, using someone else’s experience as a clear instruction. This is on account of the fact that it is practical knowledge, i.e. ethical in Aristotle’s terms (Górska, 2012). As Maria Reut writes, citizenship education is an area where ethical problems are clearly revealed, because ‘it allows us to see the complexity of an ethical situation, the importance of participating in it, the sense of being obliged by

it, as well as the importance of supporting other people's thinking and actions in a non-directive way' (2014, p. 10). This is a form of citizenship education, where learning means changing your vision of the world and losing confidence in what seemed to be an unshakable truth (Reut, 2014). In other words, the point is that education should include space for 'talking about what I know and what I do not know about my own knowledge' (Reut, 2014, p. 14). A similar approach to citizenship education is visible in Martha Nussbaum's works (2001; 2013; 2014; 2016a; 2016b), where we can find many arguments on the issue of educating citizens. The author of *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* directly asks the following questions: why do we lack institutions based on respect and equal legal protection? Why is there so much intergroup hostility, striving for control and domination, denigration and stigmatisation of minorities? (Nussbaum, 2014, p. 46). In response, Martha Nussbaum postulates to treat emotions as an important element of school education, which, in her opinion, can lead to overcoming egoism and reluctance towards the vulnerable, marginalised and excluded.

The aim of this article is to present the assumptions of the 'pedagogy of discomfort,' which was proposed and described by Megan Boler in the groundbreaking work *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (1999) and was one of the first publications in the field of education, addressing the topic of the role of emotions in education and at the same time entering into the debate on political and citizenship engagement. Boler describes her approach as 'feminist politics of emotions.' Her proposal is extremely important and, in my opinion, has great educational potential, due to the fact that it emphasises the **emotional and affective dimension of citizenship education** (bolded by R.G.). This is a very clear and significant difference, considering that citizenship education in Poland, which is mainly carried out in citizenship education classes and focuses on mastering knowledge, skills and competences, has mainly a cognitive dimension (Starego, 2016a; 2016b; Kopińska, 2017). Taking account of the affective dimension of citizenship education is important because so far emotions and affects have been most often eliminated or perceived as factors disrupting the smooth functioning of democracy and the public sphere (Boler, 1999; 2014; 2017; Boler & Zembylas,

2016; Zembylas, 2012; 2013; 2015; Starego, 2016a). Megan Boler's educational proposal overcomes this deficit by legitimising the emotional dimension of experiences; it also suggests ways in which educational institutions can grow into a place where students become sensitive to the issues of inequality and injustice, learn to take responsibility and act for social change.

In the first part of the article, I present selected feminist theories of emotions that prove the socio-cultural-political dimensions of emotional experiences and constitute the theoretical considerations undertaken here. In the next part, I present the methodological assumptions of the conducted research, i.e. a qualitative, thematic content analysis embedded in the humanistic orientation. In the further part of the article, in response to the formulated research problems, I describe the assumptions of the pedagogy of discomfort (situating it in the context of other practices and discourses undertaken for emotional development), and then analyse its main theses from the perspective of its potential inclusion in educational theory and practice and of treating it as pedagogical project of citizenship education. In this article, I argue that feminist theories, including Megan Boler's feminist politics of emotions, carry implications that are of great importance to pedagogical activities for citizenship education, i.e. social justice, democracy and the common good.

### **Theoretical framework: the politics of affect and the feminist politics of emotions**

Contemporary feminist philosophies constitute a collection of extremely complex and intricately interrelated concepts. Reading and analysing the ideas of feminists is therefore not easy, full of meanders and turbulence of the complex history of feminist thought. In addition, the very concept of feminism in the Polish political and cultural context has received the worst form of a stereotypical image and is commonly associated with a radical, fighting, emancipatory trend in culture created by women who hate men (Derra, 2010). As a result, it makes the reception of feminist thought in Polish pedagogy

resistant, especially in the context of the homogeneous and conservative philosophy of education and pedagogical thought.

Aleksandra Derra – a philosopher dealing with feminist theories and the problem of gender in science speaks of three waves in the history of feminist thought. Each of them, although they share the belief in the emancipatory dimension of feminist theory and practice, is different and has different goals: (1) winning voting rights for women; (2) the establishment of women's liberation on the mental, political and social plane; (3) resolving the dispute over the female subject of feminism and dismantling the homogeneity and colonial dimension of feminist theories (Derra, 2010). Monika Glosowitz – a literary critic and researcher of the emancipation processes of minority subjects – describes the current transformations of the feminist movement as a post-secular turn in feminism (Glosowitz, 2012), which proposes a new approach to the issue of subjectivity and political agency of the individual and the community. To summarise, the diversity of projects within feminist theory is enormous. In the contemporary generation of feminists, the position of a woman is treated as the position of a subject who is a minority and is subordinated to the majority discourse that establishes current power relations, and is simultaneously occupied by a number of other entities: children, people with disabilities, marginalised people but also animals, plants, items, etc. which is a construct that represents a minority fighting for political agency (Glosowitz, 2012).

Currently, feminist initiatives not only forge strictly political postulates, but also focus on the problem of identity transformations, assuming that identity changes can be used as a tool to deal with today's challenges (Glosowitz, 2012).

An example of a feminist concept addressing the issue of subjectivity is the project of Rosi Braidotti (2007, 2010, 2012), a philosopher and feminist belonging to the third wave of feminism, who defines feminism as 'a critical and life experience of discovering new variations of existence, creation and communicating knowledge that are based on a woman' (after: Derra, 2010). Braidotti's project has an emancipatory character, and – what is important for the considerations in this article – is closely related to practice and politics. Braidotti opposes the understanding of philosophy as a strictly theoretical

field and, leading the reader through a complex philosophical discourse, interspersed with artistic illustrations, enriched with personal experiences and views, describes her 'politically engaged feminist theory of the female subject' (Braidotti, 2009). The author of *Nomadic Subjects* focuses on the concept of identity and, putting forward strictly political postulates, proposes a redefinition of the concept of the subject. When defining subjectivity, Braidotti emphasises the aspect of its permanent unreadiness, lability, and instability, which is restored to be able to negotiate with dominant norms and values. The nomadism proposed by Rosi Braidotti is not (only) nomadism in the strict sense, the one related to the lifestyle, movement, travel; it is a kind of particularly **critical consciousness that wants liberation from the existing ways of thinking and behaving that are grounded in the philosophical and social tradition** (bolded by R.G.). This postulate enforces diversity, variability, multidimensionality, and even some contradictions. At the same time, this concept becomes a proposal to build a new (feminine) subjectivity and identity.

The most crucial from the point of view of the subject matter of this text is the role Braidotti assigns to emotions and affects in her concept of the subject. The researcher postulates: '**an ethical and affective** component[s] [are] at the core of subjectivity (Braidotti, 2008, p. 15). The ethical core of the subject is equal to relationality, the aim of which is empowerment, and the ethical ideal here is to enter into relationships with various *others*. 'Ethical relations create possible worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. They are the driving forces that concretize in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a system or an interrelationship network with others' (Braidotti 2008, p. 16). Affect is understood by Braidotti as a pre-personal driving force, an unformed potentiality, as that which has the potential to bind and divide subjects entering into various systems. Thus, Braidotti clearly refers to Baruch Spinoza (1994) – a precursor of research on affects and at the same time a clear instigator of contemporary affect theories. The study of his concept made e.g. by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Brian Massumi today forms the basis of much of the theory of emotions and affects. In the works of these philosophers, emotions are not treated as individual,

biological-psychic reactions or states, but as **socio-cultural and political practices** (bolded by R.G.). As Brian Massumi says, 'the concept of affect is politically oriented from the very beginning' (2015, p. vii). According to Massumi, the political dimension is already inscribed in the very definition of affect created by Spinoza, who states: 'By affect I understand body stimulation by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, as, at the same time, the ideas of these affections are' (Spinoza 1994, III, D3). Affects and emotions have the power to bind or 'separate,' or in other words, they have the potential for creation and destruction. In the Spinozian approach described here, affects are understood not as bio-psychic states, but as fields of affective tensions created, emitted, transported and felt by various communities (familial, institutional, political, ideological, etc.), increasing or decreasing their ability to act. Therefore, they have the power to shape entities and communities, and "the potential to bind and divide entities entering into various systems" (Glosowicz, 2013, p. 27).

The concept of affect originating from Spinoza became the basis of many philosophical (and not only) concepts and analyses that serve pragmatic and/or political purposes. Spinoza's understanding of affect is also at the heart of many contemporary feminist theories, especially those concerning politically engaged activity, including Sarah Ahmed, Teresa Brennan and Judith Butler. This is one of the most important trends in contemporary research on emotions and affect. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describe feminist studies and research as one of the eight main orientations of contemporary research on affect and emotions (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). A specific distinguishing feature of feminist theories of emotions is that they focus on material, institutional and cultural aspects/relations of power that are 'visible' in emotional discourses (Lutz, 2002, p. 105). Feminist researchers and activists are changing the current (not) present in science perception of emotions, strongly opposing patriarchal Western epistemologies and legitimising **emotional and affective experiences** (bolded by R.G.); they abandon all dualities (thought-action, reason-emotion, theory-practice); they stop searching for one unchanging truth and praise changeability, diversity, otherness. It is worth emphasising that feminist philosophies and practices are

critical and pragmatic (Lutz, 2002), opposing authoritarianism and orthodoxy; they promote emancipatory knowledge and critical awareness with the ability to transform individuals, institutions and social relationships. They oppose the silencing and exclusion of the voice of women and/or other marginalised actors in public leadership and civil rights movements. Importantly, they attack the very idea of disciplinarity for fragmenting and hierarchizing; therefore, they postulate the rejection of the idea of disciplinarity as a male way of seeing the world, emphasising the indivisible nature of knowledge. This research is therefore conducted in the vein of the new humanities; it crosses disciplinary boundaries and is supra/transdisciplinary in nature (Boler & Zembylas, 2016; Domańska, 2014; Nycz, 2015).

The above theoretical perspective has also become an inspiration for Megan Boler – a Canadian philosopher and critically oriented feminist researcher, whose philosophy of education known as the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ is both a promising theoretical perspective for researchers of educational processes and an inspiration for educational practice.

### **Methodological framework**

The research problems in the article are focused on two questions: (1) what are the goals and assumptions of the pedagogy of discomfort and (2) what is the pedagogical potential of the pedagogy of discomfort from the perspective of socially and democratically oriented citizenship education?

The research method used is qualitative content analysis, which I consider as understanding, systematised and programmatically analytical reading and perception of messages (Palska, 1999; Babbie, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Szczepaniak, 2012). The forms of communication subjected to research were scientific publications which, according to Earl Babbie, are a form of communication frequently used by feminist researchers (2004, p. 342). The research belongs to the group of non-reactive methods (Babbie, 2004) and is embedded in the paradigm of humanistically oriented pedagogy (Kubinowski, 2013; Malewski, 2017), in which it is difficult to delineate a specific and precise analytical procedure and determine an unambiguous methodological formula



(Palska, 1999; Łuczewski & Bednarz-Łuczewska, 2012, Kubinowski, 2013; Malewski, 2017).

The selection of the sample was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, Megan Boler's original publications on the website (<https://meganboler.net/>) were reviewed and, after careful analysis, books, articles and chapters in monographs were selected, where the criterion adopted was content limitation. In accordance with Silverman's postulate (2008), I significantly limited the research material and only those publications in which the author directly refers to the pedagogy of discomfort were included in further research. Finally, six texts published in open access were qualified for the study, including: (1) the book in which Megan Boler presented the theses of the pedagogy of discomfort for the first time – *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (1999); (2) co-authored article presenting the educational implications of the pedagogy of discomfort, written with Michalinos Zembylas – *Discomforting truths: The emotional terrain of understanding difference* (2003); (3) Megan Boler's autobiographical essay – *From Existentialism to Virtuality* (2014); (4) paper presented by Megan Boler at the conference at Vanier College in Montreal – *Pedagogies of Discomfort: Inviting Emotions and Affect into Educational Change* (2017); (5) article entitled *Feminist Politics of Emotions and Critical Digital Pedagogies: A Call to Action* (2015); (6) Michalinos Zembylas' interview with Megan Boler – *Interview with Megan Boler: From 'feminist politics of emotions' to the 'affective turn'* (2016).

In terms of identifying themes, a theoretical/deductive ('top-down') thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used, as it was clearly accordant with my research interests. In addition, the coding framework was quite clearly defined by the previously formulated research problems. The analysis consisted initially in a loose, later in a more structured reading of the texts, where new categories were added to the key as the research progressed and the research issues were clarified (Szczepaniak, 2012, p. 99). Creating the key was based on repeated, careful reading of the texts, with particular emphasis on the repetition of certain thematic categories and their mutual connections (Szczepaniak, 2012, p. 99). The basic unit of analysis was a single text, and while searching for and identifying meanings and issues, it was not individual

words that were important, but the general meaning of the utterance and its context (Szczepaniak, 2012, p. 98).

When analysing and interpreting the texts, I implemented the proposals of Virginia Brown and Victoria Clarke (2006) due to the fact that it can be used in various theoretical approaches. During the data analysis, I also used Tim Rapley's (2010) method of analysis, and therefore during the research my attention was focused both on what the texts 'say' and how arguments and concepts are constructed in them, and on what was not said in them, omitted and missing (2010, p. 213). The patterns of structuring and organising the issues raised in the texts and the techniques by which the text 'tried' to convince me of the credibility of the interpretation contained in it were also important (Rapley, 2010, p. 214). The qualitative nature of the analysis used resulted in the fact that I took into account the occurrence of characteristic content/categories that are important from the perspective of research issues and not the most common ones. In addition, I took into account the intentions of the author (and not the accuracy and reliability of the procedure) as well as the context and circumstances of the creation of a given content (Palska, 1999, p. 166). Non-mathematical analysis of the content that I used in the study that was based on the humanistic coefficient (Wnuk-Lipińska, 1967, p. 20) allowed me to interpret it quite freely, due to the fact that in humanistic-oriented research 'we must set the boundaries of the interpretative discipline by ourselves, each time defining our own procedures for analysing and interpreting the text and seeking theoretical support' (Palska, 1999, p. 166). Therefore, I did not carry out a detailed vivisection of each of the texts studied. Instead, after selecting the texts I looked for certain fixed conceptual categories, their configurations, ideological constructions and discourses (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004). The categories I was looking for in the texts were related to citizenship education understood as a process of critical emotional involvement, aimed at changing attitudes, beliefs and prejudices.

## **Analysis**

The content analysis was carried out in accordance with the two research problems formulated above.

### *1. Goals and assumptions of the pedagogy of discomfort*

The aim of the pedagogy of discomfort is to involve individuals in the act of questioning their own beliefs, habits, prejudices and ways of seeing that sustain the structures of injustice, which leads to critical reflection and (re)cognition of how these beliefs and prejudices are shaped by the current and dominant value systems and socio-cultural norms. As Boler writes, 'pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting educators and students to engage in a collective critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotional attachments and investments define how and what one chooses to see and, conversely, not to see' (Boler, 2017, p. 11). The main goal of the pedagogy of discomfort defined in this way creates the possibility of social change in the area of micro educational environments and everyday life of students and teachers, and supports the process of involvement and development of critical social awareness in order to accelerate the dismantling of oppressive and unjust attitudes and beliefs, and consequently the social space and social structures.

According to Megan Boler, our emotional responses to discomfort, such as anger, rage, and guilt, are responses to an admission of injustice occurring in a particular set of social settings. The pedagogical proposal described here therefore encourages critical reflection on these 'uncomfortable' beliefs, assumptions and ways of seeing. Instead of alleviating discomfort, the pedagogy of discomfort calls upon us to endure it – or, as Boler puts it, 'learn to live with... discomfort' and treat it as valuable. By sustaining discomfort, enduring it and treating it as 'valuable,' we reject (or rather unlearn) arrogance, self-sufficiency, independence and thus build new spaces for (more) equitable social relations.

It is to be noted that while the pedagogy of discomfort offers ‘minimal hope’ that individuals will ‘examine their habits, beliefs, and values and how they came to be maintained,’ it does not require students to ‘reshape’ their current values and habits, and does not evaluate them. Instead, it calls for critical (self)reflection, it is an ‘invitation’ that students are free to accept or reject. The pedagogy of discomfort is therefore an invitation to dialogue and a call for critical reflection, in no way is its aim to unify views, subordinate otherness, invalidate or ignore difference.

An important objection raised by the author of *Feeling Power* is that the invitation to question one’s own beliefs, assumptions and ways of seeing is ‘reciprocal’ – it applies to both students and teachers. According to Boler, teachers’ beliefs, prejudices and habits are by no means immune to the process of questioning and critical reflection. In other words, the fact that a teacher initiates this pedagogy does not relieve her/him of the task of critical inquiry and (self)reflection. Perceiving the pedagogy of discomfort as a process of mutual exploration, Boler strives to place students and teachers on a common ground. Moreover, it emphasises that it is worth encouraging them to realise that their participation in disputes and conflict situations is not of an interpersonal nature; i.e. it does not address inappropriate actions by individual entities interacting with other ones. A more valuable strategy will be when people participating in educational processes reflect in order to understand how they are structurally (co-)responsible for the reproduction of injustice, social inequalities or exclusion.

It should be emphasised that a constitutive element of the pedagogy of discomfort is the process of critical thinking, inquiry and it can replace or precede work on destabilising unjust social structures. In other words, the ‘participants’ of this pedagogy can **question and transform their existing beliefs, assumptions and ways of seeing** (bolded by R.G.) and thus build less oppressive and less unfair social spaces and structures. (Self)reflection is the basis and key element here, and emotional involvement is necessary to realise one’s participation in unjust social structures. Assuming that efforts to destabilise unjust social structures presuppose that those who engage in this educational activity have such awareness, I argue that while cultivating

critical awareness may not be enough to build just and ethical communities, the process is a good starting point and that is why it is such a valuable (pedagogical) undertaking.

At this point, it should be said that Megan Boler herself treats her 'pedagogy of discomfort' as a feminist philosophy of emotions (Boler, 1999; 2015), which is closely related to the postulates of the so-called second-wave feminism, where it is emphasised 'how dominant discourses guard emotional norms and how rules of emotional expression are enforced by hierarchies of gender, race and power' (Boler, 2015, p. 1491). Boler calls her proposal 'an emotionally charged teaching job that challenges existing values and beliefs' (2015, p. 1494) and clearly defines her project as 'critical,' explicitly distinguishing her vision from other approaches to emotional development present in the theory of education and educational practice, namely the 'mental hygiene movement' and 'emotional literacy' programs (Boler, 1999). The mental hygiene movement, popularised at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'sought to control emotions,' forcing students to assimilate 'civilising' norms, emotional rules and ways of expressing emotions that were supposed to be controlled and in line with the dominant ideology and emotional culture. Emotions were, or rather are perceived here as 'irrational' and therefore should be subjected to disciplinary control, suppressed or ignored; in sum, one should manage them rationally and express them in accordance with the applicable rules. Supporters of the mental hygiene movement see students' emotions as a 'threat to social balance' and the main cause of 'social conflicts.' Within this movement, emotions are the 'space of social control,' which leads to technically trained obedience and subjugation of 'rebellious,' militant or revolutionary students. The purpose of such emotional education is to replace 'irrational' or so-called deviant emotions with those that are in line with the applicable norms and socio-economic conditions.

The second approach, from which Boler strongly distinguishes her proposal of the pedagogy of discomfort, is the program of 'emotional literacy.' In reference to the book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman (1995), this approach is aimed at developing various emotional competences recognized as valuable and useful and allowing for success in life. However, it only happens

to the extent that these responses can be adapted to 'existing social hierarchies and... interests in efficiency and social harmony.' The aim of this approach is to address 'violence' and 'cultural differences' by enhancing students' emotional-social, diplomatic and communication skills. Among the emotional 'skills' that this approach seeks to cultivate, fundamental is 'empathy,' through which a person learns to 'identify' with the suffering of the 'other,' trying to understand it. According to Boler, by instilling these skills in students, emotional literacy programs function as a form of instrumental modification (or rather manipulation) of behaviour. The above examples of emotional education are characteristics of the adaptive-instrumental discourse (Góralaska, 2020), which describes emotional education as the development of emotional and social competences that facilitate functioning at school and/or professional career. Both the mental hygiene movement and emotional literacy programs share a reluctance to question the system of differentiated privileges and social hierarchies that are indicators of social injustice. Instead, this approach has a 'calming' effect on students facing these injustices. It conditions them to perceive these injustices as fixed or, worse, as attributed to the 'natural' disparities of particular social groups. Emotional literacy programs do not address issues of social justice and/or citizenship, while ignoring, or rather excluding, ethical and political issues.

Responding to the undoubted shortcomings of instrumental discourse, Boler points to the need for other emotional education projects that 'bind' emotional experiences with the social context and power relations, while creating opportunities and educational spaces for openness, critical questioning and self-criticism and giving the possibility of transforming subjects. The proposal of the pedagogy of discomfort meets this need by inducing individuals to question their beliefs, assumptions and ways of seeing, and calling for critical engagement with the values of the dominant culture and/or structure. This approach to emotional education is a humanistic-critical discourse (Góralaska, 2020), which emphasises that emotional experiences can be a tool for personal development, but they also have deep social and political entanglements. This discourse creates opportunities for developing critical and reflective (self)awareness and (self)questioning, opening the way to building trust and solidarity in the school culture.

The pedagogy of discomfort, as a feminist manifesto and critically oriented approach, strongly opposes emotional education treated instrumentally and in place of 'emotional literacy' it proposes another, new 'space' for combining research on emotions, pedagogical research and educational practice.

The main goal of the Megan Boler project is to draw attention to the central place of emotions in the way in which educational institutions (and not only) maintain social inequalities, divisions, hostile attitudes and prejudices. In the autobiographical essay we find the sentence: 'This persistent concern with feelings, emotion and affect dogged me and went from being a pebble in my shoe to being the focus of my doctoral study and book *Feeling Power*' (Boler, 2014, p. 34). The educational project proposed by Megan Boler consists in sensitising to the issues of inequality and injustice through 'inviting emotions and affect into educational change' (Boler, 2017, p. 9). Recognizing that emotions and affects are of strategic importance for learning and education and combining them with socio-political analysis is, in my opinion, the greatest value of the pedagogy of discomfort. As Boler writes, 'by neglecting emotion and ignoring the centrality of emotion in learning and education, dominant systems of oppression have ensured that the oppressed cannot name their oppression. To ignore emotions' roles in education is to severely limit and constrain social change' (Boler, 2017, p. 9). Megan Boler's educational proposal is undoubtedly a pioneer in this area.

## *2. Pedagogical potential of the pedagogy of discomfort from the perspective of socially and democratically oriented citizenship education*

Megan Boler maintains that education always has some social or political agenda, and that social change comes as a result of a struggle that involves paying attention to and critically reviewing our emotional (discomforting) experiences. In addition, school programs and educators have ethical responsibilities, including the duty to risk their own comfort in order to help excluded and disadvantaged people. In this way, the pedagogy of discomfort constitutes a viable and feasible **strategy for citizenship education** (bolded by R.G.), in other words, it encourages **the practice of citizenship** (bolded

by R.G.). It is important – as Boler argues – to ‘share a concern with what is silenced, which is the marginalised and muted, with the ways in which power shapes what is heard and unheard, seen and hidden’ (Boler, 2014, p. 32). Elsewhere Boler writes, ‘the right thing to do is risk one’s own comfort for the sake of others’ freedom’ (Boler, 1999, p. 195). In other words, she believes that educational institutions have an ethical obligation to engage emotionally in the (sometimes uncomfortable) task of challenging their own beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives in the name of social justice.

The justification for the fact that the pedagogy of discomfort has a pedagogical potential from the perspective of socially and democratically oriented citizenship education can be found primarily in the paper presented by Megan Boler at the conference organised on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017 by the research team of The Critical Diversity in Higher Education (CDHE) at Vanier College in Montreal entitled *(Dis)Comfort Zones: Negotiating Tensions and Cultivating Belonging in Diverse College Classrooms in Quebec*. During the conference, Megan Boler gave an introductory speech, due to the fact that the theoretical basis of speeches and discussions during the conference was the ‘pedagogy of discomfort.’ In the post-conference text, the author writes, among others:

- ‘The concept of a “pedagogy of discomfort” developed as a result of diverse teaching experiences. It has become eminently clear how affective investments in identities and differences shape our openness to unlearning racism, sexism, and homophobia, which each of us internalize regardless of national and local contexts’ (Boler, 2017, p. 11).
- ‘The work of social justice and transformation, particularly in educational contexts, requires understanding how emotions shape social relations and hierarchies—how fear can thwart the kinds of interpersonal relations and historical awareness required for social justice, just as hope can open possibilities of connection and social change’ (Boler, 2017, p. 9).
- ‘A pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting educators and students to engage in a collective critical inquiry regarding values and cherished



beliefs. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotional attachments and investments define how and what one chooses to see and, conversely, not to see' (Boler, 2017, p. 11).

- 'An ethical aim of a pedagogy of discomfort is willingly to inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self' (Boler, 2017, p. 12).

Thus, the pedagogy of discomfort is not a "regular" educational experiment, but rather a normative project that situates individual acts of critical questioning in relation to the broad social good, and that maintains the concept of 'learning to live with ... discomfort' and treating it (discomfort) as a 'worthy educational ideal.' Megan Boler's pedagogical proposal is therefore 'a role model of commitments to social justice in [its] thinking and scholarship and community engagement' (Boler, 2014, p. 38).

A similar stance is held by Martha Nussbaum, according to whom education enhancing responsible citizenship may be the remedy. As she writes: 'we need to cultivate students' "inner eyes," and this involves careful developing of teaching methods in the arts and humanities that are appropriate to the child's age and developmental level and that will bring students in contact with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural experience and understanding' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 108). According to Nussbaum, educational institutions should develop 'the sense of personal accountability, the tendency to see others as distinct individuals, and the willingness to raise a critical voice' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 44). And although, as she argues, 'we probably cannot produce people who are firm against every manipulation, but we can produce a social culture that provides a strong "external circumstances" that will strengthen the tendencies to fight against stigmatization and domination' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 44). An indicator of the maturity of democracy, however, are attitudes related to social sensitivity and prosociality, which can and should particularly concern those who are excluded, function on the margins, are unable to cope with the hard rules of the neoliberal world for various reasons (Szpunar, 2022).

## Conclusions

In an interview about the relationship between emotions, education and politics, conducted by Michalinos Zembylas, Megan Boler said: 'I chose this approach because of the longstanding cultural and historical associations between women with emotions, not to mention the fact that at the time I commenced this work it was solely feminist scholars who dared to treat emotion as a legitimate scholarly topic. In the early 1980s when I began graduate studies in philosophy, it quickly became clear that despite increasing interest in pushing epistemological boundaries (e.g., within philosophy of science), the idea that emotions might play a substantive role in our economies of attention, in our conceptualizations of knowledge and processes of knowledge acquisition, in ethical and moral evaluation—such notions were not yet popular by any stretch of the imagination' (Boler & Zembylas, 2016, p. 18).

Today, more than two decades after the publication of the book *Feeling Power*, which calls for a sensitive and critical (self)awareness of inequality and injustice, it is safe to say that this feminist project has a great educational potential and, what is more, it can become an educational multi-tool. It allows not only to mobilise subjective resources, search and construct new norms and citizenship values, but it also becomes an impulse to build alternative, community ties and, as Rosi Braidotti, mentioned earlier, 'a new global alliance for sustainable futures' (Braidotti, 2008, p. 14). Megan Boler offers researchers of education new, untapped opportunities to build political subjectivity in terms of agency and responsibility, especially in the areas of structural injustice.

The pedagogy of discomfort is an important 'offer' (for) of citizenship education that, instead of the negativity and opposition ubiquitous in our public sphere, promotes building bonds, trust and creates a policy of reciprocity. The strategies proposed in the pedagogy of discomfort are definitely positive, affirmative and focused on mobilising the resources of students, on introducing 'micro-political practices of daily activism or undertaking interventions in the world we inhabit – for ourselves and for the future generations' (Braidotti, 2008, p. 16). Maybe that's why, when describing the pedagogy of discomfort, I keep thinking about the similarity of Megan Boler's project to the 'affirmative

humanities' described by Ewa Domańska (2014). In this way, I join and deeply support the appeal of Ewa Domańska to go beyond negative emotions when conducting research and educational practice: melancholy, violence, mourning and negativity, oppressive actions of the authorities, etc. and treat them rather as a creative crisis or conflict and as mobilising forces (Domańska, 2014, p. 121). I fully agree with Ewa Domańska, who argues that it is worth researching, discovering and pointing to positive, affirmative places and situations (also educational), which show not only war, domination, violence and oppression, but also self-agency, potential to act, the transforming power of changing oneself and the environment: 'it is worth showing what actions strengthen the agency of the individual and the community and lead to establishing relationships and building bonds of solidarity' (Domańska, 2014, p. 122). It is also worth not to succumb the politics of fear, overwhelming negativity and helplessness towards uncontrolled processes taking place in the modern world: in a world where, as Andrzej Leder, the philosopher of culture, writes, 'contempt for those who are lower and collective hatred for those who are considered as enemies is the main source of satisfaction and joy for many' (Leder, 2014, p. 117); in a world where politics is obscene, shameless, referring to the power of the majority and ignoring the rights of minorities and the rights of individuals to decide for themselves (Szkudlarek, 2018, p. 48).

In the Polish educational system, subordinated to the logic of the market and consumption, definitely geared towards efficiency, there is promoted passivity and practised learned helplessness (Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2010; Reut, 2014), and thus the causative power of civic participation is taken away. In institutions responsible for education, 'the complex and subtle skills necessary in creating a civil society and liberal democracy are pushed into the shadow or non-existence: independence, criticality, understanding cultural achievements, but also human harm and wounds' (Maliszewski, 2019, p. 75). From this perspective, the pedagogy of discomfort seems to be extremely interesting. Especially since 'it is not about promoting naive ideas of reconciliation and consensus, but (with further examination of negative phenomena) about focusing more on positive phenomena, which could show us how it is possible to live together with conflicts' (Domańska, 2014, p. 129).

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