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Woke Pedagogy: A Framework for Teaching and Learning

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The sociopolitical context of schooling demands that teachers acknowledge the ways their students' and their own experiences are shaped by the intersections of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other discriminatory factors. This is especially true during times of heightened civil unrest resulting from pervasive and persistent injustice experienced by minoritized populations. To engage students in pedagogy that connects with their lived experiences and that equips them to critically examine inequities, teachers must refute colorblind pedagogy in favor of woke pedagogy. Woke pedagogy, like critical multicultural education, is defined by teaching practices that integrate critiques of contemporary justice-related issues with academic content in a learning environment that encourages introspection, interrogation, and insurgence. This theoretical framework for woke pedagogy outlines a wide range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that equip teachers to promote critical thinking about complex issues—in other words, to be woke pedagogues. Grounded in Black feminist ideology, woke pedagogy distinguishes itself from critical multicultural education in important ways: 1) both teachers and students view their lived experiences as sources of knowledge and tools for knowledge creation, 2) teachers and students analyze injustice from an intersectional perspective, and 3) teachers exhibit activist care. This conceptual treatise includes suggestions for empirical research studies that will yield results that are crucial to the effective practice of woke pedagogy, a 21st century approach to critical multicultural education.

KEYWORDS: woke pedagogy, critical multiculturalism, social justice, intersectional analysis

Colorblind Pedagogy

As a teacher educator at a university located in rural Northeast Texas, I encounter students—pre-service and in-service teachers of various racial and ethnic backgrounds—who are at some level of colorblindness. Gordon (2005) defined what I deem to be the first level: “It is important to be clear. Colorblindness is not blindness: It is not an inability to see color. Rather, it is a refusal” (p. 139). Adherents to this colorblind ideology retreat, often with good intention, to the safety of statements such as “I don’t see color” or “I see all my students the same.” Unless they have a legitimate visual impairment, teachers *do* see race. Teachers at the second level of colorblindness acknowledge differences in skin color, but they see children as equal, the same. Their recognition of differences does not lead to further analysis of how children of color are disenfranchised by discriminatory policies, laws, institutions, and systems. This second level of colorblindness can be defined using Ullucci and Battey’s (2011) meaning: colorblindness is “the refusal to acknowledge the costs and benefits associated with one’s racial and cultural identity” (p. 1196). In other words, pre-service and in-service teachers acknowledge the *existence* of racial differences but not the *effects* of these differences.

Brown (2014), drawing upon the work of Bonilla-Silva (2006), elaborated on this idea. He described colorblind ideology as a belief system that recognizes race yet fails to avow its role in maintaining inequities. As an example, a teacher can acknowledge that he has 14 White students and 10 Black students yet not accept that because the United States is framed by racial hierarchies that result in White supremacy and Black inferiority, his 10 Black students' experiences are likely different from his 14 White students. Unfortunately, school systems themselves are exemplars of institutions whose policies and practices result in inequitable treatment of students of colors. Copious scholarship offer evidence of ways students of color are victimized by implicit bias and stereotypes resulting in discriminatory discipline policies and practices (DeMatthews, 2016; Ispa-Landa, 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011; Scully, 2016; Ware, 2017). This failure to fully recognize differences in how minoritized populations experience schooling promotes the myth that schools are places of equal opportunity. The truth is that public education in the 21st century falls short of being the great equalizer that Horace Mann, one of the earliest proponents of universal schooling, envisioned (Cremin, 2018). Though I will treat the subject of Black feminist ideology later in this paper, it is appropriate to draw upon Black feminist Audre Lorde's wisdom about differences at this point: "Certainly, there are very real differences between us But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences . . ." (Lorde, 1994, p. 115). When applied to teaching, it is not students' differences that suffocate teaching and learning; rather, it is teachers' inability to recognize, accept, and examine those differences that disenfranchise students.

Further, there is a third level of colorblindness in which teachers pretend that they *themselves* are colorless and cultureless, objective individuals immune to biases and prejudices. In this way, colorblindness creates supposed apolitical spaces where teachers are protected from acknowledging and responding to the ways various *-isms*, of which racism is just one, impact their own lives and the lives of the children they teach. A safe classroom is an openly political one—as opposed to covertly political one. This politically engaged, safe classroom is guided by a trusted teacher who promotes critical thinking about complex issues. A *woke* teacher.

Leistyna (2002) explained that "the idea that personal politics can be left at the door gives the erroneous impression that teachers can in fact be neutral distributors of information . . ." (p. 19). Education itself is a political act (Freire, 1973). Attempting to separate the personal from the political results in pedagogical spaces that prevent teachers and students from introspection of the ways they of shaped by their culture, interrogation of oppressive systems and policies, and insurgency against systems that disenfranchise them.

Woke pedagogy is the antithesis and remedy to colorblind pedagogy. As such, it requires an unlearning that is only possible through critical reflection of self in relation to society (Choi, 2008). Importantly, while woke pedagogy clearly challenges *colorblindness*, it further repudiates other blindnesses as well—class blindness, gender blindness, sexuality blindness, religion blindness, and the intricate intersections among them. Woke pedagogy is based on the essential belief that teaching is necessarily a political act that should begin with "seeing" cultural differences and the myriad ways these differences impact both students and teachers (Gay, 2002; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

My woke pedagogical framework is built on three distinguishing practices: 1) the use of instructional methods that prioritize critiques of present-day inequities from an intersectional perspective, 2) centering of students' and teachers' lived experiences, and 3) demonstration of activist care. At the onset, it is important to clarify that this manuscript is not an empirical research study. Conversely, it is a theoretical treatise that attempts to answer a specific question: How can teachers create classroom environments that are characterized by *wokeness*, defined as

a continual state of recognizing and examining justice-related topics in a manner that leads to sociopolitical activism? To begin, I offer a rationale for using the term *woke* in academic vernacular.

***Woke* in Academic Literature**

Mainly, *woke* is a colloquial term whose meaning and use continue to evolve, even making its way into academic literature. In fact, the theme of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) 2018 conference is “Envisioning the ‘Woke’ Academy” (ASHE, 2018). Before examining its academic usage, however, I explore the term’s etymology and evolution. Pulliam-Moore (2016), in “How ‘woke’ went from Black activist watchword to teen Internet slang,” traced the evolution of the term to musical artist Erykah Badu in her 2008 song “Master Teacher”. Pulliam-Moore (2016) referred to the Urban Dictionary’s¹ definition of *woke*: “Being woke means being aware. Knowing what’s going on in the community” (Pulliam-Moore, 2016, para 3). Yet, he claimed that the meaning changes depending on who is using the term and with whom it is being used. He offered a definition of the term *stay woke*: “stay conscious of the apparatus of white supremacy, don't automatically accept the official explanations for police violence, keep safe” (Pulliam-Moore, 2016, para 4). Finally, Pulliam-Moore offered, “*Woke* can also refer, mockingly, to (White) people whose perspectives on race change suddenly after learning about historical injustice” (para 6). He observed that *woke* has taken on a more complex meaning in recent years, a complexity that is worth exploring.

One of the most trusted sources of definitions and etymologies, *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, added the term *woke* to the dictionary in June 2017 and regards the term as slang (Steinmetz, 2017). *The OED* defines *woke* as an adjective meaning “Originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice; frequently in stay woke” (Steinmetz, 2017). *The OED* followed the term *woke* used in this context to the 1960’s, declaring that it was used to refer to those who are aware or well-informed (Steinmetz, 2017). Similarly, Merriam-Webster (2018) defines *woke* as describing someone who is self-aware, questions the dominant paradigm, and strives for something better, noting the term became more widely used after the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014² (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

At the risk of co-opting the term from African American millennials, I apply the term *woke* to an academic context, specifically teacher education, to conceptualize a *woke* pedagogical framework. I am not the first academic to use this term in the field of teacher education. As a teacher educator in secondary English, Cherry-McDaniel (2017) conceived that woke pedagogy asks teachers to “reimagine [their] classrooms as spaces of social change and progress” (p. 42). She accurately recognized that the recent *woke* and *stay woke* hashtag movement, spearheaded mainly by African American youth and their allies, “echoes what public intellectuals and activists call critical consciousness” (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017). In conceiving a “woke classroom,” she identified three essential features: self-determination, citizenship in the classroom, and activism beyond the classroom.

Palmer (2018), who also used *woke* terminology in her work on social justice in the music classroom, explained that in order to *stay woke*, teachers must have a level of consciousness that allows them “to be aware and subsequently knowledgeable about injustices” students face (p. 23). She elucidated, “The fact is poverty, hunger, inadequate housing, violence,

¹ The *Urban Dictionary* is an online source for urban and Hip-Hop slang.

² Michael Brown was an unarmed Black teenager who was shot by Darren Wilson, a White police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. After Brown’s murder, protests against police brutality against Black men and women erupted throughout the nation.

discrimination, mass incarceration, and police brutality are front and center in America, which means that these issues should be front and center in our music classrooms also” (p. 23). *Woke* teachers are skillful at designing curricula that allow them to weave these issues into their learning objectives without sacrificing important academic content. Palmer (2018) contended that even teachers in non-academic classes like music can be *woke*.

Similarly, in their collaborative critical auto-ethnography, Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) extended the use of *woke* as they examined their graduate school experiences. Their brilliant opening poem presented a nuanced consideration of the term.

To be woke
is not just a political ideology,
It is an unretractable existence
A contradictory remedy of healing and pain.
The cultivation of a deep and necessary consciousness of survival
that slices white patriarchal supremacy
and wounds the heart—opening minds.
Our eyes never shut. Our voices never seize.
We are courageous, we are fierce, we are exhausted.
And yet we persist. We are Alive. We are here.
We are WOKE (p. 89)

Their poem paints a picture of a corporeal existence of wokeness: the wounding of the hearts, opening of minds, eyes that continually open, and voices that are always in action. Being *woke* is a relentless state of being that results in exhaustion. In a further definition, Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) define what it means to be a *woke* person. “Specifically, to be a woke person is to hold an unretractable embodied consciousness and political identity acknowledging the oppression that exists in individual and collective experiences” (p. 90). Significant to note in their definition and the aforementioned meanings is the emphasis on consciousness, awareness, and acknowledgment.

As is evident from this review of academic literature, increasingly academics are finding useful applications of the term to convey sociopolitical consciousness. My framework for woke pedagogy extends these scholars’ usage of the term. By using *woke*, I emphasize the need for instruction that is relevant to students’ and teachers’ lived experiences and responsive to current developments that impact their realities. Simply stated, to be a *woke* teacher means to be sociopolitically and culturally aware and to demonstrate this awareness by delivering contextualized instruction.

Woke Pedagogy Theorized

My woke pedagogical framework describes teaching and learning practices in which teachers deliberately and skillfully integrate critiques of longstanding oppressive structures into their curriculum and fully acknowledge the present-day impact of these structures on the lived experiences of students and themselves. Although woke pedagogy is an emerging concept, examples of teachers doing similar work can be found in *Teaching for Black Lives* (Watson, Hagopian & Au, 2018). Central to the enactment of woke pedagogy is a teacher who is equipped

with essential dispositions, knowledge, and skills. In this next section, I expound on these characteristics.

A Woke Pedagogue: Dispositions, Knowledge, and Skills

Dispositions. To begin, a *woke* pedagogue needs what Boggess (2010, p. 79) called “activist dispositions” that are rooted in beliefs that successful teaching includes confronting discriminating and injustice based on race and class. Furthermore, those with activist dispositions incorporate “a critical perspective and culturally responsive curriculum into everyday teaching, and practicing teaching as an act of social change” (p. 79). A *woke* pedagogue has what Bartolome (2004) labeled “political clarity,” defined as “the ongoing process by which individuals achieve ever-deepening consciousness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to transform such material and symbolic conditions” (p. 98). Said differently, they are in a constant state of *wokeness*. An equally important disposition to hold is what I describe as cultural curiosity. A *woke* teacher is intrigued by how culture is enacted and acts upon, how cultures evolve and resist change, and how political structures influence cultures.

Additionally, *woke* pedagogues have asset-rich dispositions that allow them to see children and their families not just as *lacking* resources but as *being* resources. They realize that what is “wrong” may be found within systems and institutions surrounding children, not the children themselves (Groenke & Maimon, 2012). To have an asset perspective means to recognize the knowledge students bring with them to school and to believe that all students can be academically successful (Groenke & Maimon, 2012).

In addition to having an activist disposition, political clarity, cultural curiosity, and an asset-rich disposition, *woke* pedagogues also exhibit temperaments characterized by an openness to critical introspection. They bravely and continuously engage in critical self-examination to not only recognize their own power, privilege, and implicit biases but also to become cognizant of how they, too, are impacted by systemic inequities. This introspective disposition is not only important for White teachers but for teachers of color as well. For example, “if teachers of color experience internalized racism, they can unknowingly replicate racial hierarchies within schools” (Kohli, 2014, p. 368). Next, *woke* pedagogues are intellectually humble. Their intellectual humility makes way for continued growth, open-mindedness, and respect for atypical knowledge sources. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *woke* pedagogues hold caring dispositions that allow them to form genuine relationships with students. This care extends beyond an interest in students’ academic success. It manifests as compassion for the whole student.

Knowledge. Pedagogues with these dispositions are intellectually positioned to develop relevant knowledge that enables them to *stay woke*. In this sense, *staying woke* means being on the pulse of issues that affect students, their families, and their communities. Importantly, they know how global and national developments impact local communities and the students they teach. This knowledge of context is one of the seven C’s essential to Emdin’s (2017) reality pedagogy. In this sense, teachers of *woke* pedagogy embed themselves in and connect themselves to the communities in which their students live. Pedagogues who do not live in the communities where they teach can develop knowledge of context by reading community-run newspapers, watching local news, listening to students and families, paying attention to social media, and attending local events. Deep knowledge of community challenges and assets, coupled with deep familiarity of academic content, can help *woke* pedagogues create a *woke* curriculum with necessary relevance to students and to themselves.

Woke pedagogues must also possess historical knowledge about how past events have shaped the present-day experiences of marginalized communities. This knowledge can be gained through cultural studies and cultural history courses. When teachers possess historical knowledge, they are able to help students better make sense of their lived experiences. Last, *woke* pedagogues are knowledgeable about community assets and resources. They not only believe that communities possess assets, they are also knowledgeable about what these assets are. For example, they know about civic organizations, community leaders, and talents of family members.

Skills and Abilities. As a result of holding the aforementioned dispositions and knowledge, *woke* pedagogues develop a range of skills and abilities to enact *woke* pedagogy:

1. Facilitating difficult conversations about injustice and inequities with humility and aplomb. By establishing community guidelines, these conversations are structured opportunities for learning. Students learn to interrogate unjust systems, institutions, policies, and laws that affect individual's and groups' lived experiences.
2. Listening compassionately. She engages in open-minded and open-hearted listening that leads to understanding and empathy. Students learn to listen respectfully to multiple perspectives.
3. Centering her own personal experiences and the experiences of students as legitimate knowledge. Instead of attempting to "shut-out" students' at-home lives, she uses these experiences to engage students and connect them authentically with academic content. Students learn that their lives matter.
4. Leveraging community and family resources to accomplish goals. She realizes that this work demands collaboration and draws from home and community wells. Students learn the power of collective action.
5. Responding to students' interests in justice-related topics and current events. Instead of seeing students' concerns as distractions, she engages students in learning by integrating these topics with required curricula. She recognizes the urgency of political moments and responds accordingly. Students learn academic content in a meaningful way.
6. Placing thought-provoking questions about justice and equity at the center of dialogue. Students learn to grapple with complex questions that develop their ability to think critically and to produce, not just consume, knowledge.
7. Advocating for students who are disenfranchised and partnering with students in civic engagement. Students learn to effectively promote their interests and the interests of their communities.
8. Demonstrating the intersection of oppressive systems. Students learn how racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism are related and are able to see how their oppression is linked with other marginalized groups.
9. Incorporating a variety of tools for instruction and activism, such as Hip-Hop music, art, drama, and digital media. Students learn to draw upon a variety of sources for knowledge and activism. They learn that important knowledge doesn't just come from a textbook.
10. Giving academic importance to topics such as voting, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. Students learn about their roles and responsibilities of citizens of the United States and of the world.
11. Creating opportunities for student leadership. Students learn personal agency.
12. Integrating interdisciplinary concepts and thematic units. Students learn how skills and knowledge develop in one course can be used in another course and how certain themes are evident across disciplines.

Distinguishing Practices of Woke Pedagogy Informed by Black Feminist Ideology

Woke pedagogy and critical multicultural education are driven by similar ideological underpinnings, namely a belief in the need and potential for education to be an avenue for the critique of sociopolitical contexts and inequitable distributions of power. Nevertheless, woke pedagogy is characterized by several specific practices that answer the question: “What would it mean to have a #WOKE classroom?” (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017, p. 42). These practices, rooted in central tenets of Black feminist ideology, are absent from or not fully conceived in important discussions on critical multicultural education (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Leistyna, 2002; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

First, **both teachers and students view their lived experiences as sources of knowledge and tools for knowledge creation.** Teachers recognize that just as knowledge comes from established sources, legitimate knowledge can also come from them and their students, through personal narratives or testimonials, for example. These narratives are instructive for creating knowledge about how systems, institutions, policies, and laws shape their lived experiences. This belief in centering subjugated, experiential knowledge derived from lived experiences is fundamental to Black feminist epistemology (Allen, 2009; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Hill Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

It is important to point out in woke pedagogy, not only are students’ lived experiences a source of knowledge, teachers’ lived experiences are as well, a principle influenced by Black feminist bell hooks’ engaged, transformative pedagogy. It is the idea that teachers, as part of a community of learners, should judiciously share their experiences related to privilege, bias, discrimination, and disenfranchisement for examination. Said differently, students should not be the only ones who risk exposing their lives to the learning community. Author hooks (1994) espoused, “I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share” (p. 21). The practice of collective sharing empowers students and teachers to connect, empathize, and learn together.

While Leistyna (2002) contended that in critical multicultural education, instead of using abstract objects and practices, teachers view the students themselves as texts for exploration and debate, I stress the importance of teachers *also* centering their lived experiences. Woke pedagogy requires a vulnerability from which teachers are not immune, especially when their identities relate to course topics (White, 2011). This level of openness demands that teachers act with integrity and honesty.

Next, teachers and students **analyze multiple forms of oppression and the intersection among them.** They understand that oppression is a result of complex system with multiple factors at play. For example, an intersectional perspective allows learners to see that although all girls can be victims of sexism, Black girls can face racist sexism, sexism that occurs because of one’s race. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) aptly held that it is necessary that teachers “understand that racism, sexism, classism, etc., are always operating in every social setting,” but they failed to recognize the importance of understanding intersecting -ism’s (p.101). A crucial feature of woke pedagogy is its insistence on analysis of the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. In this way, woke pedagogy is birthed from the work of Black feminists and womanists who were among the first scholars to articulate the belief that all oppression is linked (Hill Collins, 2000; Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982). In 2000, hooks named this thread *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (p. 46). Instead of taking a unilateral approach to understanding injustice, woke pedagogy urges intersectional analysis.

Last, **woke classrooms are led by teachers who exhibit activist care.** The concept of care as a basis for social activism is derived from Beaubouf-Lafontant’s (2005) theory of

womanist³ care. Woke pedagogy hinges on care as “affect and advocacy” in which caring is more than providing affection to students (p. 442). Care, in this manner, requires engaging in political action on behalf of students and advocating for and with them. “Womanist caring is deeply contextual, responsive to particular instances of injustice, and tied to concrete action” (p. 443). Woke teachers know that care is not just a warm feeling of admiration. It is a commitment to students’ holistic wellbeing; it is shown in their advocacy and activism.

Implications and Next Steps

As stated previously, this manuscript is philosophical in nature. Woke pedagogy responds to the need for a pedagogical framework that draws upon an intersectional perspective to critique present-day inequities that impact students and teachers. It is informative for teacher educators who aim to go beyond multicultural education courses for pre-service and in-service teachers to justice education courses. With implications for both curriculum and instruction, this framework may be useful for teachers who seek to add a critical approach to their work with students.

Several qualitative research questions point to directions for next steps for empirical studies:

1. What does woke pedagogy look like in practice?
2. What are some barriers or challenges to implementing woke pedagogy?
3. What effects does woke pedagogy have on student learning?
4. How can woke pedagogy be actualized in different school settings: rural, urban, and suburban?
5. What are some factors that influence teachers’ decisions to practice or to not practice woke pedagogy?
6. How can teacher educators help aspiring and in-service teachers develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to practice woke pedagogy?

Conclusion

I have outlined a woke pedagogical framework that opposes teacher blindness. Block perceived that “To ignore the lives of young people and the current state of affairs is to fail students and miss the potential for education to inform, challenge, and inspire change” (2016, para 2). Woke pedagogy refutes this neglect. Woke pedagogy allows teachers to link students’ home lives, political developments, and academic content to increase engagement, create agency, and produce knowledge that can lead to civic engagement and social activism. Nieto (2004) purported that separating students’ reality from their sociopolitical context is “like hiding one’s head in the sand” (p. 196). If this is true, woke pedagogy is teaching that requires not only a lifting of one’s head from the sand, but also an opening of one’s eyes to see multidimensional realities.

In a society where social and political decisions oftentimes have urgent and direct implications for minoritized students, schools need woke pedagogues who can connect socio-political structures and students’ lived experiences. To do this work, pre-service and in-service teachers need more than a course in multicultural education that often leaves them at some level of colorblindness. I contend that in order to create impactful and transformative learning opportunities for increasingly diverse student populations, teachers should develop competence in woke pedagogy.

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³ Womanism is a philosophical orientation similar to Black Feminism.

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