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Market-Capital beneath the Skin of "Fear Factories": The Autobiography of an English-Speaker-of-Other-Languages Educator

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Curricular theorist Kent Den Heyer's (2018) conceptualization of schools as "fear factories" has led me to contemplate whether and how the curriculum I experienced as a student might have cultivated fear in me. I have also wondered if and how the fear might have translated into my role as an English-speaking of other languages (ESOL) educator from the Global South. These wonderings led me to conceive this autobiographical study, wherein I reflexively examined my experiences of and with the curriculum as both a learner and a post-secondary educator from the Global South. I drew on my diary entries (Arndt & Rose, 2022; Bailey, 1990; Jarvis, 1992) to craft an autobiographical narrative (Pavlenko, 2007). I also made a collage (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999; Rijke, 2023) by gluing photos from the intersection of my personal and professional lives around a three-dimensional model of my head. Once the collage and the autobiographical narrative were complete, I interpreted them through the lenses of the critical theory of educational development (Rist, 2014; Walker, 2012). Reflecting on my own educational upbringing and professional experiences as an ESOL educator, I have found that apprehension has been developing within me since childhood. Also, a residue of apprehension remains in my adult educator life even today. The analysis suggests that the disability discourse and the developmental urge engineered a market-capitalist-oriented curriculum that has been the root of my educational apprehension.

Key words: Curriculum studies, Educational apprehension, Critical theory of education

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Prologue

During a 2023 Winter Term graduate course at the University of Alberta, I stumbled upon a reading about a contemporary educational impasse, in which the curricular theorist Kent den Heyer observed that "[s]chools, reflecting their surrounding communities, are to some extent *fear factories*, where the young learn to fear to fit in appropriately; we get socialized and we get appropriated" (den Heyer, 2018, p. 19, emphasis added through italics). This revelation about curriculum was all-consuming for me– I could barely stop thinking about how schools inflict fear and the educational impact this has on students. I placed myself in a learner's shoes and asked how the school curriculum I experienced since childhood might have, if at all, cultivated fear in me. I also wondered if and how the fear might have translated into my becoming an ESOL educator from the Global South. Since I did not have a ready answer, I found it meaningful to adopt a semi-guided explorative path to examine my own lived experiences by following previous researchers' footsteps in educational fear research.

The Scholarship on Educational Fear

Schools foster fear in students mostly by foregrounding academic failure. The fear of being unsuccessful and the pressure to conform to the societal value of success drive students in the UK schools to embrace academic challenges (Harber, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Putwain, 2009). Students' fear mostly concerns exams and evaluations (McDonald, 2001). For example, 68% of the interviewees in Jackson's (2010) study expressed anxiety of failure and performance-related anxiety over SAT tests. Another source of students' apprehension stems from their middle class parents' fear that their children will slide into the working class if they do not do well in school (see Power et al., 2003; Reay, 2001; Walkerdine, 2001). Additionally, cultural foreignness

(Steed, 2011) of North American classrooms and foreignness originating from the complexities of the classrooms' English-only policy (Bledsoe and Baskin, 2014), and the concern of being bullied (Bledsoe and Baskin, 2014) contribute to students' fear.

Students' curricular anxieties boil down to a single, overarching concern of missing out on economic growth due to not staying educationally competitive, which would lead to them failing academically. Neoliberal educational culture posits that failure stems from a lack of investment in "one's own human capital through education" and overlooks the impact of any structural injustice, such as the capitalist exclusionary practices based on class hierarchy (Harvey, 2005, p. 65). As a remedy, neoliberal education prescribes lifelong learning with the promise of assured competitiveness and financial prosperity through organizational documents such as *Lifelong Learning for All* (1997), published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). According to the model of lifelong learning, active educational pursuit from early childhood to retirement is the key to enhanced job opportunities and thus economic possibilities (OECD, 1997).

Walker (2012) associates the economic model of education with that of the human capital model which prioritizes individuals' skill sets to be transacted in the labor market for profit, placing consumption at the core of economic activity (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash, 2010). This model treats education as a means to economic growth and reinforces the economization of education by making correlations between "better educated" countries and their higher standards of life (Keeley, 2007). The economic model of education is politically compatible with market-oriented education (Lanzi, 2007) and market society (Polanyi, 1944). This makes it successful at strengthening its stranglehold on public education.

Hypnotized by market-education discourse, students embrace the cosmetically noble spirit of lifelong learning and overlook its exclusive focus on "economic rationale and the development of human capital" (Biesta, 2013, p. 65). By enrolling into an endless number of professional degree and certification programs, the lifelong learners dive into the whirlwind of a version of education that promises economic growth. The growth rhetoric of education characterizes growth as an innocent but necessary outcome of market-oriented learning that continues throughout one's life. Education that tags with the lifelong aspect and turns into the compound of "lifelong education" (Field, 2006) becomes the only valid form of education. The "silent explosion" of lifelong education into individualized lifelong learning that is devoid of any form of relationality (p. 45) eventually places the students in a lonesome and apprehension-provoking course of formal education.

The development discourse plagues educational institutions and their policies as well, which, in turn, cultivates fear. Teacher education programs are under the threat of being moved from universities to training schools in accordance with the popular theory that teaching is a vocational skill (Biesta, 2013). Policymakers' and politicians' increased attention to teacher education across the world signals the governments' controlling mindset over educational institutions "through a combination of curriculum prescription, testing, inspection, measurement, and league tables" (p. 121). According to Biesta, to avoid falling behind and achieving low rankings, schools are inclined to follow the OECD's methods for comparing educational performance. This leads the schools to adopt standardized systems such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The schools' tendency to have uniformity, Biesta argues, is "driven by *fear*, that is, driven by a lack of courage to think and act differently and independently" (2013, p. 123, emphasis added).

What Made Me a Reflexive Autobiographer

Although I felt drawn to scrutinize my own life stories to understand how schools instigate fear, I was hesitant to study my autobiography, questioning its onto-epistemological and axiological relevance. Fortunately, I came across educational researcher Robin Usher's text in a Winter term doctoral seminar which resolved my doubt about the reflexive practice. Usher (1996) informed me, "...research is not simply a matter of representing, reflecting or reporting the world but of 'creating' it through a representation" (p. 34). In this non-procedural and relational practice of making knowledge claims, the researcher's actions shape the research result(s) (1996). I found evidence of the relationship between the researcher and the research process in Steier's rhetorical question, "Why do research if you cannot say anything about what is out there and all research is self-reflexive? Why do research for which you must deny responsibility for what *you* have 'found'" (1991, p. 10, italics in the original). These ideas built up the premise for me that researchers themselves are integral to the knowledge derived from research (Usher, 1996) and that it is crucial to "reveal, understand and analyse not only the *product* of knowledge but its *production* and therefore, its *producer*" (Aldridge, 1993, pp. 53–54, italics in the original).

As I dived deeper, I learned that personal reflexivity helps surface the value-informed subjectivities underlying the researcher's process (Usher, 1996). Every research project is "often an expression of personal interests and values. Thus the topics one chooses to study are likely to derive from personal concerns" (Wilkinson, 1988, p. 494). Usher (1996) observes the researchers' omnipresence in the research methods they employ, the way they gather data, and the procedure by which they assess the research significance. Therefore, prioritizing data and aiming to achieve neutrality by excluding subjective elements from research means holding a

subjective stance based on certain beliefs (1996). This being said, personal reflexivity does not exclusively involve only the "personal". Reflexivity rather unveils the tacit "assumptions, values and biases" (Wilkinson, 1988, p. 495) attached to the research practice by making the researcher find answers regarding "[w]hat kind of world or 'reality' and what kind of knowledge is being constructed by the questions I am asking and the methods I am using?" (Usher, 1996, p. 37).

Toward Methodologizing the Autobiographical Inquiry

Reflexively examining whether and how my school curriculum cultivated fear in me as a learner and translated into me as an educator took me to my distant past as a child and student and the relatively recent past as an educator until 2022, when I left Bangladesh to pursue doctoral studies in Canada. I have consulted two types of data to study my lived experiences of schooling as a learner and an ESOL educator in relation to the notion of fear. The dataset consists of autobiographical narrative data (Pavlenko, 2007) documented in my personal diary (Arndt & Rose, 2022; Bailey, 1990; Jarvis, 1992), and a collage (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999) curated from photos from the intersection of my professional and personal life, glued around a three-dimensional model of my head (see Appendix A). The objective of examining my personal narrative is to delve into the "subject reality", which sets out to explore "how 'things' or events were experienced by the respondents" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 165). Concerning the subject reality for this study, I aim to interpret my own lived experiences of educational events both as a student and an educator and understand the relationship between fear and educational events. To me, anything in and beyond school that fosters "free intellectual pursuit, spiritual growth, or even critical consciousness" (Baszile, 2017, p. vii) is educational. On the other hand, collage values multiple, distinctive understandings beyond a singular 'Truth' in unimagined ways (Rijke, 2023).

Collage also helps "suspend linear thinking and allow elusive qualities of feelings and experiences to be addressed tangibly" (Davis & Butler-kisber, 1999, p. 1).

The Way My Schools Became Fear Factories

My Apprehension as a Student

The stepping stone to understanding how my schools (including post-secondary institutions) turned into fear factories is the type of curriculum offered at the institutions. My father largely influenced my academic learning principles. He was born in the countryside but moved to the capital city, Dhaka, with my grandparents to build a fortune. My father pursued post-secondary education, secured a job, married my mother (who was born and raised in the countryside), and settled down in the city. With the passage of time, my parents found confidence in the version of education that had "its roots in nineteenth-century industrialism and was conceptualized…under the general purview of market capitalism" (Donald, 2019, p. 5). My parents also grew apathetic about rural life, as they came to see it as "backward". Accordingly, they inculcated me with the predominant idea that rural education lacks the necessary curriculum foundations that would ideally enhance "the freedoms that people actually enjoy to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value" (Dreze & Sen, 1995, p. 13). Thus, as a young learner, I was oriented to a primarily market-economy-focused education.

The market-capital-centric education propagates that "liberal market ideology is the key to human freedom and happiness" (Donald, 2019, p. 5). According to this education philosophy, the value of formal learning is primarily limited to developing necessary skills to secure "good jobs". Therefore, I learned that without a good job I would be doomed to poverty. I also learned that economic freedom was the end goal of being educated, although my formal schooling

neither did explicitly define a good job, nor taught what would change one's status from "poor" to "rich".

I grew up perceiving the neoliberal model of education and reduced interaction with natural life as the panacea for impoverished agrarian life. Cultivation of the idea that rural life is an impediment to economic growth leads to seeing problems and their solutions through the lens of market calculus, according to Morarji (2010). The market economy establishes agriculture and rural life as residual, unfeasible, and compulsion-driven against realistic and profitable urban life. This engineers the destabilization of rural communities and allows neoliberal education's exclusionary and alienating aspects to inflict anxiety on rural schooling (Morarji, 2010). Thus, as a child I received schooling under a type of curriculum that spread the fear that my fellow students and I would miss out on access to economic privileges if we failed to pursue a mercantile form of urban education.

At the root of my apprehension were also "root metaphors" of individualism and progress (Bowers, 2010). The root metaphors provoked me to see the interdependent fountain of knowledge as a barrier and irrelevant to becoming an autonomous individual who aspires to economic growth. As a learner, I was concerned with missing out on becoming a self-sufficient individual who fits into the "New Class" (Gouldner, 1979). Gouldner informs that the new class is a dominant one made up of intellectuals. This is a "third class" that emerged out of the class struggle (Szelenyi, 1982) between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Gouldner, 1979). In such a "capitalocentric" (Haraway, 2014) context, the root metaphors put me into "double bind thinking" in which "assumptions from the past continue to frame current thinking" (Bowers, 2010, p. 4). To secure membership in the new class, I kept aloof from any intergenerational knowledge and skills. This, in turn, made me an alienated, "anomic individual who lacks the

community's fund of knowledge of how to live in ways that are less dependent upon consumerism" (p. 4). This explains why I did not master any of the intergenerational knowledge, such as basic carpentry, growing gardens, and needlework, which my parents and grandparents possessed. Curricular theorist den Heyer (2023e) argues that today's guiding root metaphors inherently reflect a positivist pattern of thinking. The root metaphors consider hierarchical scientific models, stripped of subjectivity, as the only way to make sense of the natural world, in which modalities such as play, drama, and arts are redundant.

In contrast, the "beaver bundle" knowledge system (Mandel & Tearney, 2015) recognizes that humans are constantly in the process of evolving with living and non-living beings in the natural world wherein the onto-epistemic knowledge relationship between humans and the environment is one of admiration and reciprocity (Haraway, 2014). Knowledge is likewise a relationship for den Heyer (2023a). In reference to Donna Haraway's "methodological individualism", den Heyer portrays the relationship as evolutionary, one that can be reconfigured into an infinite number of relationships. With the proliferation of market-capital-centric curricular frameworks, the relational character of knowledge is waning (Donald, 2011) and making way for "historical materialism" (den Heyer, 2023d).

The market-economy-oriented curriculum further circulates the fear of economic regression by constructing a "developed" vs "underdeveloped" binary with the help of a development measurement tool called Gross Domestic Product (GDP). I was inculcated with the idea that education leads to development. In other words, the transitive idea of development, which indicates action performed by one dominant actor over the dominated, correlates with the concept of "underdeveloped/ underdevelopment" (Rist, 2014). In hegemonic discourse, the idea of development appears as a byproduct of the "developed" vs "underdeveloped" dichotomy, in

which the “underdeveloped” is merely an incomplete or embryonic form of the concept “developed” (Rist, 2014). Rist (2014) analyzes that neocolonial development discourse calculates underdevelopment using GDP as the standardizing tool. Failure to meet the economic standard leads to denigrating labels such as “poor” or “underdeveloped”, the fear of which pushes an individual to pursue the developmental model of education (Walker, 2012). Feminist economist Marilyn Waring (2017) critiques this type of unidimensional economic fabrication through GDP on the grounds that it portrays an inaccurate image of development. GDP also fails to address the crises related to primary healthcare, environmental cleanliness, and so forth, and flattens the extremities of capitalocentric practices (Haraway, 2014).

However, while pursuing post-secondary education back home in Bangladesh, I experienced intergenerational fear. At East West University, a professor in the graduate course Teaching Practicum preached that a teacher should always respond with the phrase, “I am doing well” or something similar when students ask, “How are you doing?” This professor made it clear that “I am doing well” is the appropriate response even when a teacher does not feel good physically or emotionally. Almost 10 years later, when I look at the teacher’s statement through Ranciere’s (2000/ 2004) notion of “Distributions of the Sensible”, I can sense his fear. Social order, which Ranciere metaphorized as police order, determines what sensible is and what is not by approving particular kinds of bodies and disapproving others. den Heyer (2023b) exemplifies that the Euro neoliberal model of family defines family as a combination of man, woman, and child(ren). Exceptions to this norm, e.g., gay or lesbian parents and child(ren), are rejected as family. Likewise, police order patronizes a particular version of sensible and sensibility, and dismisses anything deviant as nonsense. Therefore, my professor’s sanctioning of what feelings

and how these feelings a teacher should share in the classroom are a manifestation of fear of the police order prevalent within the educational institution.

Traditional curriculum, which marginalizes learners' subjective experiences and presets educational goals in a one-size-fits-all manner (Pinar, 2020), creates a similar hierarchical binary between "able" and "disabled" learners (Erevelles, 2005) and engenders apprehension in the latter, treating them as inferior. This is exactly how the slow pace of my handwriting got me categorized as a "slow" learner in the school. Being singled out as a slow learner haunted me for years, even during my post-secondary education. Goffman (1963) analyzes this act of identity creation as society's manipulative effort. The deficit characterization is done so gently and subtly that the learners with "disability" begin to believe that they are incapable of attaining so-called success. Erevelles (2005) argues that the capitalist system categorizes a segment of the population as psycho-somatically, socially, and technically unfit for economic gains: exclusion of the unfit body of people as surplus helps reduce operational cost and thus maximize profit.

Educational practices imbued with Euro-American male chauvinist attitudes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) aid the capitalist form of structural marginalization. The goal of such marginalization is to legitimize the social privileging of certain races, classes, and gender in the workforce (Erevelles, 2005) and ultimately to favor the corporatocracy (Baszile, 2017; Elfreich, 2019; Pinar, 2012). For example, liberal multicultural education in Canada erases Indigenous and non-Anglo Saxon perspectives in promoting whiteness (Abawi & Brady, 2017), while a neo-liberal form of education promotes an anti-Blackness principle (Giroux, 2003). History further suggests that education has had links to oppression, for instance, in actualizing cultural assimilation through residential schools in Canada (Bombay et al., 2014; Wilk et al., 2017). In disability discourse the privileged-class-designed education system, actually an "instrument of

oppression" (Freire, 1968), commits "abjection" of the vulnerable– a process by which the disable "body becomes separated from another [able] body" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10). den Heyer opines that this has to do with privileging the capitalist system rather than the intrinsic aspect of disability (2023c). Hence, responses such as "not so good" or "I am not doing well" from a teacher might be categorized as signs of disability or vulnerability, which could threaten that teacher's position, including possibly being excluded from the profession, leading to economic suffering. My teacher feared economic loss from showing signs of "disability". He did not want his students to risk such a loss, and thus, in his efforts to offer me help, my teacher passed on to me his own intergenerational fear.

My Apprehension as an Educator

The curricular fear induced by the development and disability discourse has had implications for my curricular practices as an educator, as demonstrated in this anecdote about an experience from my professional life. It was fall 2019, a cool weekday morning in my former university office in Bangladesh, and still, I was sweating. This was unusual, as were my previous semester's faculty evaluation reports. An hour earlier those had been handed to me in a brown envelope with the word "confidential" typed on it. As I broke the seal, removed the reports, and glanced at them, I could not believe my eyes. They locked on to the percentage— 67 — my poorest-ever evaluation performance, nowhere close to the average score of 87% for all of the teachers in the institution. My appalled eyes took in that my students, whom I had supported in the classroom and during office hours, accused me of failing to cover all the content in the syllabus. For the first time in my teaching career I came to know that I was not available for consultation outside the class, and added to that, I did not use technology while teaching. I realized my senses were slowly being numbed by the feelings of shame and mistrust on the

students. By no means could I accept that my efforts to help the students even when I was extremely sick were taken for granted. Those days when I had high fever, but still showed up in early morning classes and met students in the office in the afternoon went into oblivion. I placed the evaluation reports inside the envelope, cast the packet in the dark locker, and got busy with the official work I needed to complete.

This particular event captures my education anxiety in two ways. First, the economized model of education that had shaped me since childhood instilled in me a score fetish and the tendency to synonymize it with achievement. To me, the accumulation of material goods became the primary measure of success which I believed could only be achieved, as Williams (1999) puts it, by adhering to the tenets and principles of market capitalism. Accordingly, I developed the belief that if scores, irrespective of whether they were of educational assessments or of faculty evaluation, were not "high" enough, opportunities to grow economically would be halted, and I would lose opportunities, including the opportunity for promotion in job.

Second, the growth-oriented education, actually the fear of falling behind, constantly pushed me to keep working for progress. The idea of advancement was so strongly entangled with productivity that any essential break, e.g., sick leaves, stimulated the feeling of missing out. The fear of missing out was so intense that I would show up even if I was running a fever of 40. This feeling was aggravated by the annual performance appraisal that counted the number of classes missed/not conducted: more misses meant more negative scores. I feared that the appraisal would negatively impact annual increments, pay raises, or even job security during periods of faculty retrenchment. Thus, the market-capital-shadowed education shaped my ontological understanding of what it means to be a human being (Donald, 2019) in market economic terms.

Implications and Conclusion

Although apprehension was at the core of my score fetish and money-economy-driven ontology, it remained opaque in all the curricula I came across as a child, a student, and an educator. This implies that the traditional curriculum nurtures fear as an abject, which is analogous to psychoanalyst David Lewkowich's analysis of teacher's sweat being considered an abject in teaching (2015). Abject as a "sensation and attitude" (Gross, 1990, p. 87) bears a repulsive and thus expulsive image (Kristeva, 1982). Therefore, the abjected fear remains covert in the curriculum. For educators, the curricular practice of masking fear as an abject turns out to be "disguised love, and…defense against an unwanted, unconscious desire to appear as distant, overly intellectual, conventionally professorial…" (Lewkowich, 2015, p. 43). Suppressing fear through abjection cuts out the relational and experiential properties it carries, paving the way for an anthropocentric curriculum. This dominant and reductionist curriculum is responsible for giving birth to what Donald (2019) identified as *homo economicus*—the "rational, individualistic, utilitarian, calculative and instrumental" human species (Houston, 2010, p. 842) that reinforces market capitalism.

Being intergenerational in nature, fear not only affects the curricular experiences of students but also the curricular practices of educators. The market-capital operates fear opaquely in the curriculum in a way that the fear helps money economy keep circulating. Instead of producing creative minds, the resultant growth-oriented education moulds learners into uniform beings who can be governed by the principle of production and prepared to serve the capitalist industries in a money-economy-driven consumer culture (Harouni, 2015). I do not intend to reject education outright, but I want my readers to see through schooling's market-capital aspect with a view to inspiring curricular activism. Active involvement in personal, professional, and

community spheres as a mode of resistance requires various intangible skills and resources that inclusive education can provide (Walker, 2012). To achieve this inclusivity it is crucial that we raise critical questions about the version of curriculum that patronizes the economic growth model of education and disseminates fear-stricken, consumerist knowledge.

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Appendix A

The Collage

Note. The collage represents the inside part of my head containing the imprints of my fear