Jiddu Krishnamurti and The Fear of Not Being a "Good" Teacher

ADRIAN M. DOWNEY
Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract: Fear is a ubiquitous but somewhat underexamined phenomenon in education. In this essay, the author draws on the holistic educational philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurti in order to reflect on the role of fear in his experiences as a classroom teacher. The author recounts experiences of difficult classroom management in which his fear was piqued. The author then draws on Krishnamurti's writing to suggest that there is a deep seeded fear of not being a good teacher at the root of the desire to control students' behaviour. The author concludes the paper by pointing to the need for serious and ongoing self-inquiry within education and society more broadly—a central tenant of Krishnamurti's educational thought.

Résumé: La peur est un phénomène omniprésent, mais peu examiné en éducation. Dans cet essai, l'auteur s'appuie sur la philosophie holistique éducative de Jiddu Krishnamurti afin de réfléchir sur le rôle de la peur dans ses expériences en tant qu'enseignant d'une salle de classe. L'auteur raconte des expériences difficiles de gestion de classe dans lesquelles sa peur s'est manifestée. L'auteur s'appuie ensuite sur les écrits de Krishnamurti pour suggérer qu'il existe une peur profondément enracinée de ne pas être un bon enseignant qui est à la base du désir de contrôler le comportement des élèves. L'auteur conclut l'article en soulignant la nécessité d'une auto-enquête sérieuse et continue au sein du monde de l'éducation et de la société en général – un élément central de la pensée éducative de Krishnamurti.

The Fear of Not Being Good

I have always felt uncomfortable when my colleagues talk about whether a particular teacher is good or bad. I never know how to respond. In the last school at which I worked, I had a unique vantage point from which to view the qualities of other teachers due to my transient position as the wandering music teacher. Not having my own classroom allowed me the opportunity to see snippets of how each teacher approached their class, but that did not give me any confidence in commenting on the quality of my colleagues' teaching. If anything, it made me more reluctant to judge. In my wanderings, I saw the inter-personal complexity they faced with their students, and I shared in their perceived difficulty or success.

Since moving from the classroom, I have noticed the prevalence of the good teacher / bad teacher dichotomy in teacher education as well. As a teacher educator, I present a version of what I understand good teaching to be. In the specific courses I teach, the foundations of education, this is an empathetic, open minded, socially progressive, and critically reflexive teacher. In other courses, I know the students pick up other ideals, and through participation in the teacher education program as a whole, they start to develop their own ideals of what it means to be a good teacher. The commonality I see is the prevalence of a dichotomous framing—that there are good teachers and bad teachers, and we aim to help you become good ones. Though I actively deconstruct that dichotomy with students, I often see them thinking in those terms, and that makes me deeply uncomfortable.

Returning to my classroom practice, another reason I have never been comfortable with the dichotomy between good teachers and bad teachers is because, if there is any validity to these judgements, I think I have fallen on the bad side more often than the good. When I reflect on my teaching career, I remember early mornings and frantic last-minute planning, late nights spent trying to meet marking deadlines, and worksheets more often than group work because I hadn't allowed myself time to be creative or thoughtful. I also have moments of which I am proud, but I have to be prompted to think about them. The images from my teaching career that come first to my mind are what I would consider "failed" moments of classroom management—instances in which I became flustered, frustrated, or angry. Those moments stay with me like cuts on my heart. They still elicit a physical reaction (Oh no, I can't believe I said THAT!), and they serve as a constant reminder of my

self-perceived position on the socially constructed good/bad teacher scale. Those moments share a common factor: fear. In my mind, fear is a ubiquitous, but perhaps under-examined, phenomenon in teaching, one I seek to explore here in more depth.

In this article, an act of reflexive theorizing, I attempt to highlight the ubiquity of fear in teaching. To do this, I discuss my own fear of not be a "good" teacher and draw on the educational philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1968, 1992). Although Krishnamurti is considered somewhat marginal as a philosopher of education in Western contexts (Kumar, 2013), his comprehensive writing on education and the significance of life offers a thorough treatment of fear (see also Kumar & Fisher, 2021). In that, I think his writing warrants more attention—attention I seek to offer here through the lens of my own experience.

Structurally, I begin this paper with a brief review of some thinking on fear and education in general. I then present a short synopsis of Krishnamurti's educational philosophy before summarizing Krishnamurti's writing on fear. From there, I share a story from my own teaching to illustrate the way Krishnamurti's thinking has, and continues to, reshape my beliefs about fear and education. Ultimately, I conclude this paper by suggesting that teachers and teacher educators ought to focus on self-acceptance, however illusive a goal that might be (e.g., Downey, 2021).

Fear in Education

When I initially wrote this paper several years ago, I performed only a cursory review of the literature around fear in education. That review suggested that there had been some focus on external manifestations of fear—specifically, fear as a classroom management tactic (Putwain & Symes, 2011; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comadena, 2006), fear as related to bullying (Terranova, Morris, & Boxer, 2008), and teachers' fears of legal recourse to their disciplinary action (Holben, Zirkel, & Caskie, 2010) and administrative evaluation practices (Conley & Glasman, 2008). Fear also came up in discussion of anti-racist (DiAngelo, 2018) and social justice (Boler, 1999) education, where the students' fears, often expressed as resistance (Airton, 2020), can be framed as a barrier to learning. Despite these works, at the time, I considered comprehensive discussions of fear to be rare in the educational research literature.

While that impression remains true—most discussions are tangential or focused on courage rather than fear (e.g., Batagiannis,

2007; Hare, 1993)—in the subsequent years, I have encountered a number of robust discussions of fear in education worth attending here. Christou and Wearing (2015), for example, dialogically represent two distinct views on the role of fear in learning within the same paper: Christou the transcendental perspective that learning is inherently fearful; Wearing the biological perspective that no learning can happen while an organism is in a state of fear. For Christou, learning is a change of the self, which—to borrow the language of another curriculum theorist, Robert Nellis—"is loss, and loss demands mourning" (Nellis, 2018, p. 55). This change of the self is inherently fearful, says Christou. Indeed, Christou continues that in order for learning to be transformational, there must be fear involved. On the other hand, Wearing suggests that organisms cannot learn in a state of fear: "The biological definition of learning is adaptive behaviour to one's environment. Consequently, the suggestion that fear is inherent in learning is equivalent to claiming that fear is inherent in eating. From my perspective, this logic is not stable" (p. 45). Wearing and Christou offer much to consider on fear in learning but offer little discussion of what fear has to do with teaching.

Carl Leggo (2011), who writes in conversation with R. Michael Fisher's (2010) work around fearlessness, has more to say about fear and teaching. Leggo writes through the personal and the poetic, and he recognizes his own fears as a teacher and more broadly as a human being. He is afraid of many things—as are we all—and points to a wider culture of fear in dominant Western society. Fisher (2010) says that we ought to lean into our fears and learn from them, and Leggo (2011) finds heart in that but does so through love. For Leggo, "In order to learn how to live fearlessly, I must learn how to live with love" (p. 142). This resonates with my own journey and Krishnamurti's writing, but, as discussed later, rather than love, I might suggest a response to fear in self-acceptance.

There is, perhaps, a longer history of thinking about and engaging with fear in non-Western thought systems than from Western perspectives (e.g., Fisher, 2010; Hibbets, 1999). One non-Western thinker who has engaged fear and education together is Four Arrows. In a recent biography, Fisher summarizes the overarching trajectory of Four Arrows' thought thus: "Four Arrows' greatest concern is with the way the fear-based psycho-spiritual and political dynamics of the Dominant worldview have systemically hypnotized the human masses, as they submit to both self-deception and reality-deception" (Fisher, 2018, p. 125). Although dense with

ideas, the point on which I focus in the above quote is on Four Arrows' critique of dominant Western culture as based in fear and deception. This characterization resonates today at both micro and macro levels, suggesting anxiety and fear as normative states of being (e.g., The Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2017). Four Arrows' unique response to this culture of fear is to embrace, and even seek out, moments that induce fear as an authentic and fertile ground for learning. As I read it, Four Arrows seeks those moments of being fully alive, which are terrifying, because they teach us the most about ourselves.

Though far from complete, this review of some theorizing on fear in education suggests that many in the dominant Western view of education are still somewhat reluctant to engage thinking about fear, despite its ubiquity in Western society. Part of this may be the general avoidance of negativity in education (i.e., Saul, 2021), the relative recency of affect as a realm of interest to educators (i.e., Dernikos, Lesko, McCall, & Niccolini, 2020), or the strained relationship between psychoanalysis and education (Morris, 2016), but regardless of the cause, the reality is that more discussion of fear is clearly warranted—particularly from the teacher's perspective. While perhaps not unique in his message of self-acceptance, Jiddu Krishnamurti's thinking is one avenue through which to understand fear in teaching and, as such, serves as a valuable addition to the wider conversation around fear in education. In what follows, then, I seek to contribute to that wider conversation by engaging Krishnamurti's thinking around education and fear in my own classroom experience toward a continually deepening reflexive praxis.

Krishnamurti, Education, and Fear

Born May 11, 1895, in rural India, Jiddu Krishnamurti was soon adopted by then president of the Theosophical Society—a group devoted to the unsectarian pursuit of truth—Dr. Annie Besant (Melton, 1990). From the time of his adoption, Krishnamurti was prophesized to become the world teacher, someone who would guide the world into enlightenment. From age 16 to age 26, Krishnamurti was educated in England. In his early career, Krishnamurti retained connection with the Theosophical Society, but in 1929 Krishnamurti renounced his prophetic title and severed all ties to the organization. From the time of his break from the Theosophical Society until the end of his life in 1986, Krishnamurti traveled the

world sharing his philosophy through lectures, books, and other media (Blau, 1995; Kumar, 2013; Miller, 2000).

Krishnamurti's writings have been taken up in a variety of academic contexts (Blau, 1995), but most interesting for the conversation here is Ashwani Kumar'si (2013) recent application of Krishnamurti's thinking to the study of curriculum toward a meditative approach to teaching and learning that centers self-inquiry in the educational experience. Below, I make use of Kumar's work and Krishnamurti's own writing to present a brief synopsis of Krishnamurti's thought on education and fear.

Krishnamurti's Educational Philosophy. The general thrust of Krishnamurti's work—a call toward self-inquiry—is not an uncommon one in educational thought (e.g., Lyle, 2018; Neiman, 2000; Pinar, 1994). What makes Krishnamurti unique is the position of his thinking outside both Western academia and orthodox wisdom traditions. Krishnamurti makes a call for self-inquiry and self-acceptance in his own terms, and in that there is novelty and nuance worth considering.

One of the major theses of Kumar's (2013) writing is that the world is in crisis and that the crises in which our society, environment, and selves are engaged are a result of our fractured psyches. Kumar, drawing on Krishnamurti, points to our internal conflicts as the reason for the structural inequality existent in society. The task of education, then, is not to give students the ability to succeed in a technical capacity within our deeply flawed society, but rather to help them understand themselves and their relationships. Here, Krishnamurti's (1992) educational philosophy suggests that "education should not encourage the individual to conform to society or to be negatively harmonious with it, but help him [sic] to discover the true values which come with unbiased investigation and self-awareness" (p. 15).

For Krishnamurti, the purpose of education—and, more broadly, the significance of life—is to come into contact with one's truest self as a whole: "Education should bring about the integration of these separate [fractured] entities [within ourselves]—for without integration life becomes a series of conflicts and sorrows" (Krishnamurti, 1992, p. 12). Krishnamurti suggests that our society has created all kinds of divergent ideas within us—what he calls conditionings. These conditionings act as lenses through which we view our experiences; they colour our understanding of our lives, our emotions, and ourselves. One's true self is free of these

conditionings, and true intelligence is the ability to see through those conditionings. This true intelligence is the project of Krishnamurti's educational philosophy. On the path to intelligence, however, there are many obstacles. We are essentially trying to see what is, both within ourselves and in the world, but our society tells us that we need to be a certain way: we must be hard workers, we must be good teachers, and we must be loving spouses. Krishnamurti states that these ideals engage us in a process of becoming, which prevents us from actually observing what is. Drawing on Krishnamurti, Kumar emphasizes this point: "when we look at ourselves with an ideal in mind, we have already gone against ourselves" (Kumar, 2013, p. 11). Becoming, this constant state of comparison between what we perceive in ourselves and what society tells us we should be, results from our conditionings and demands psychological time, removing us from the present moment and making it impossible to see things as they are without projecting our desires, fears, and emotional reactions onto them.

In other words, when we see something in the world or within ourselves, we react to it or cast judgment on it (conditionings), then try to be rid of it (becoming). Our reactions prevent us from seeing things as they are. Krishnamurti argues that, internally, rather than trying to be rid of the things that we don't like about ourselves (becoming), we should accept them as pieces of ourselves and, in our acceptance, their control over us will evaporate.

An analogy may prove helpful here. Imagine a vase. In this analogy, the vase will represent something within us, say fear. There is a fear; it exists (it is). We see our fear as negative because we hold brave as an ideal (conditioning), and so we should be brave rather than afraid. We, thus, try to become brave (becoming). In so doing, our vase becomes obscured by a handkerchief. Our fear does not go away; it is simply suppressed. As time goes on, we cover our fear up with more and more of our reactions, and eventually it looks like something else completely. Krishnamurti's argument is that rather than reacting or judging what we see, we ought to simply accept it as a piece of ourselves or our world, "without understanding what is you cannot find what is real and without that understanding life has no significance" (Krishnamurti, 1968, p. 215).

When we are able to see what is without casting judgment or labeling, we exist in meditative awareness. It is only through meditative awareness that we can truly come into contact with ourselves. For Krishnamurti (1992) and Kumar (2013), this

meditative awareness is not a purely intellectual state. As Kumar rightfully points out, Western understandings of society (the Marxist tradition) and the self (the psychoanalytical tradition) have ultimately failed to engage these problems on anything more than an intellectual level. For Kumar and Krishnamurti, our engagement with self must be holistic, that is to say, integrating the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Krishnamurti points out that our current engagement with education is purely intellectual, but even in that regard it is overly technical, leaving us, "subservient, mechanical and deeply thoughtless" (1992, p. 15) and on a spiritual or emotional level, the present model of education "leaves us incomplete, stultified and uncreative" (1992, p. 15).

The Nature of Fear. Fear, for Krishnamurti, is a lack of understanding in relationship, which arises out of the conditionings I have described above (see also Kumar & Fisher, 2021). Toward elaborating this point, Krishnamurti's response to a question around fear, found in The First and the Last Freedom (1968), is worth discussing at length. In response to the question, "How am I to get rid of fear, which influences all my activities?" (p. 186), Krishnamurti states, "fear is not an abstraction; it exists only in relationship" (p. 186). All fear, even the fear of the unknown—one manifestation of which is death (Kumar & Fisher, 2021)—can be viewed as a lack of understanding in relationship between oneself and the universe. Krishnamurti further illuminates this point:

> Are we afraid of the thing as it is, or are we afraid of what we think it is? Take death, for example. Are we afraid of the fact of death, or the idea of death… Am I afraid of the word 'death' or the fact itself? Because I am afraid of the word, of the idea, I never understand the fact, I never look at the fact, I am never in direct relation with the fact. It is only when I am in complete communion with the fact that there is no fear. If I am not in communion with the fact, then there is fear, and there is no communion with the fact so long as I have an idea, an opinion, a theory, about the fact [emphasis original]. (p. 187)

Our conditioning around death, what society tells us regarding death—namely, that it is something to be feared or avoided (Fairfield, 2015)—clouds our understanding of the relationship between ourselves and the universe, where death is simply a fact of

our existence. The fact of death is no more to be feared than the fact of air's existence, nor the necessity of breathing. Yet, our conditioning blinds us to that simplicity.

For Krishnamurti, the root of our fear is the state of not being and the process of becoming described above: "Ultimately we are afraid […] of not being, of not becoming" (p. 186). Take, for example, not being good enough or not fulfilling the expectations others have of us. Because we are always trying to become some manifestation of the ideals we hold or that others hold about us, we fail to realize, appreciate, and accept the reality of what is. Fear of death, to continue the example above, is the ultimate fear of not being, as no longer being of this world necessarily precludes the achievement of our ideals. The dead can no longer become.

The original question to which Krishnamurti responds here is about the alleviation of fear. In this regard, he proposes that there are two approaches: to fight against fear and to accept fear as a part of your being. To fight against it ultimately results in the process of becoming and trying to be something other than what you are— trying to be without fear. In accepting it as a piece of your being, however, its control over you becomes non-existent. Your spirit becomes free of fear. In this, there is a zen-like thought of trying not to try, but this acceptance and interrogation of fear is not an intellectual exercise, nor an attempt to clear one's mind. It is a holistic response to our basic human condition, and furthermore an approach to education and life that has the potential to bring about radical change.

Fear and Control in my Classroom Experience

As suggested above, when I reflect on my own classroom experiences, my mind is immediately drawn to those instances in which I was less than graceful. There are many of these moments, but one particular morning comes to mind vividly. Below, I share this story from my classroom experience in order to highlight the ubiquity of fear in teaching through the lens of my particular fear(s).

One Thursday morning, I walked into my grade six music class to discover that the classroom teacher was out for the day. Teaching the class had generally been one of the more pleasant experiences in my year as a music teacher. The regular teacher was young, enthusiastic, genuinely cared for their students and knew how to show it. The respect they gave the students showed in the students' behaviour toward me. The teacher usually stayed in the room working at their desk while I taught. Even though they never made

any attempt to discipline students during my class, their presence ensured that the students wouldn't deviate too much from their regular respectful behaviours. Despite being well prepared for the lesson and being a generally confident teacher, the absence of the classroom teacher on that morning started to bring up an anxiety in me.

I started the lesson with enthusiasm, and things went well for the first 30 minutes. We were working with ukuleles on popular songs, and the students were relatively engaged. Toward the end of the period, however, several students sensed their teacher's absence and asked where they were. I told them the teacher was out for the day. The smiles on their faces spelled mischief, and I immediately regretted my truthfulness. For the remainder of the period, the students tested me in small and subtle ways (writing on file folders, misusing instruments, and singing loudly during practice time). These tests were relatively insignificant when compared to the kinds of behaviours I encountered in the rest of the school. In that moment, however, I began to unravel. Rather than responding with kindness and patience or a joke, as was my normal response, I shouted at the students. I immediately felt hard earned relationships start to break down and realized I had lost them, probably not just for the rest of that period, but also for many afterwards as well.

In retrospect, I know it was my fear that led me to lash out at the students. I had, in my mind, an ideal of what a good teacher was expected to do: control their classroom. For me, control in the music classroom looked like students focused on practicing the songs I'd selected for them, treating the instruments with care, playing together and stopping when prompted, and helping to put the materials away at the end of the session. In that moment, I felt my control slipping, and I felt the fear of not being—not being in control and not being a "good" teacher. As Krishnamurti suggests, my fear was also a misunderstanding of my relationships with the students. In the moment described above, I saw our relationship as fragile and reliant on the classroom teacher. I also saw the students as attacking my concept of self, my ideal self as a teacher, and thus sought to defend my ideal by tightening control. Krishnamurti's concept of fear as not being thus became fully manifest in my approach to classroom management, teaching in general, and life more broadly.

When I initially wrote this essay, I was inclined to suggest that thinking with Krishnamurti about my fears had started to change

the way I acted in the classroom. I said that as I read and reflected, I started to release my control, both in the classroom and in life. It no longer bothered me, I claimed, if students spoke when I did, nor if they were disrespectful with the materials. Ultimately, these actions were an expression of their humanity, I said, and I honoured that. While largely true, that initial reflection ignores some nuance—that learning in the way that Krishnamurti frames it is not just an intellectual act, but a holistic engagement, and that meditative inquiry is not a state as much as it is an ongoing process (Kumar, 2013).

A recurring dream I have illustrates my point. In the dream, I am at the front of a class, continually raising my voice, but no matter how loud I shout, the students simply do not respond. Sometimes, in the dream, I'll try other tactics to get the students' attention, but no matter what, I can never break through. This dream persists even a decade since the experience described above, four years since my last experience in a K-12 classroom, and about as long since I first wrote this paper.

I see the dream and its persistence as a representation of how deeply entangled the notion of control is with my ideal of a good teacher. Despite the facts that at a cognitive, intellectual level I'm not terribly interested in classroom control, and my teaching style today tends toward unstructured conversation, my deepest fear in teaching—at least as suggested by this dream—is not being able to control a class. The dream suggests that even after intellectually divesting from classroom control as a marker of a good teacher—and the idea of a good teacher in general—that I am still haunted by the fear that I will be unable to exercise control and thus will not be seen as a good teacher. The acceptance of our fears, then, is not a simple, one-time intellectual endeavour, but rather something with which we must contend in ongoing and recursive fashion (see also Downey, 2021).

While not everyone shares my particular, largely unconscious, need for classroom control, we all have ideals toward which we strive and the fear that we may not reach those ideals. Perhaps we envision ourselves as a teacher defined by our intelligence, compassion, or ethical integrity. These are admirable qualities, certainly, but there will always be moments in which we fall short of those ideals. Krishnamurti suggests that rather than going against ourselves with those ideals in mind, we ought to move toward self-acceptance. That, I think, is a journey worth pursuing, even if our arrivals are only fleeting.

Conclusion: Toward Self-Acceptance

Krishnamurti's thought can be difficult to grasp; it constantly runs against the discourses into which we have been indoctrinated and encourages us to question everything about who we are and what we think. There are, of course, many counter arguments to what Krishnamurti posits as well. Among the most significant is that the idea of self-inquiry amounts to navel gazing, or what Adorno called (referring to phenomenology and existentialism) bourgeois interiority (Skirke, 2017). Another critique is the idea that self-inquiry doesn't engage the material circumstance of oppression directly enough. These critiques tangentially speak to the limitations of the current paper. Here, I am not trying to argue for self-inquiry as a panacea to fear, nor the larger systemic issues that manufacture and enhance it. I am merely suggesting a value in self-inquiry in my own experience and, perhaps, in education more broadly. For me, Krishnamurti's thinking has been transformative in the way I approach life and teaching. Like Leggo (2011), Fisher (2010), and Four Arrows (Fisher, 2018), I am trying to lean into my fears to see what I might learn and, following Krishnamurti (1992) and Kumar (2013), what I am learning through my fears is the value, and difficulty, of self-acceptance.

I no longer think of myself as a "good" teacher because that label and trying to fulfill all the internal and external expectations that go along with it have led to nothing but turmoil for both my concept of self and for the students I teach. Now, I think of myself as I am: a flawed, imperfect human being journeying toward self-acceptance but often getting lost along the way. The core of Krishnamurti's thought is the idea of self-inquiry. The most fundamental lesson to learn from Krishnamurti's thinking is that the answers to the external problems in society and in our lives are within ourselves, not external sources. Krishnamurti asks us to sit with ourselves and discover the core of who we are as individuals apart from the societal conditions that have been placed on us. In my mind, and Krishnamurti's (1992), this self-inquiry ought to be the true purpose of our education system. Modern provincial curriculum discourses focus far too much on the economic imperative that education must train students for the jobs of tomorrow—despite the duplicity of doing so amid futures made uncertain by the climate crisis (Saul, 2021). For Krishnamurti, the purpose of education is to dig deeply into ourselves and come in contact with our true being, not to be trained as efficient cogs in an exploitative economic machine. These systems have no time for fear,

and thus we have been asked to suppress it. Krishnamurti invites us to embrace our fear as part of our being and to watch as it evaporates into the cosmos, if only for a moment.

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[i] I use Kumar's work here both because he is one of the most well-known scholars writing about Krishnamurti's thinking in education and because Kumar's work, and my work with Kumar (Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019), was my introduction to Krishnamurti.

Author and Affiliation
Dr. Adrian M. Downey
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education
Mount Saint Vincent University
Email: Adrian.Downey@msvu.ca
ORCID: 0000-0003-0838-0709