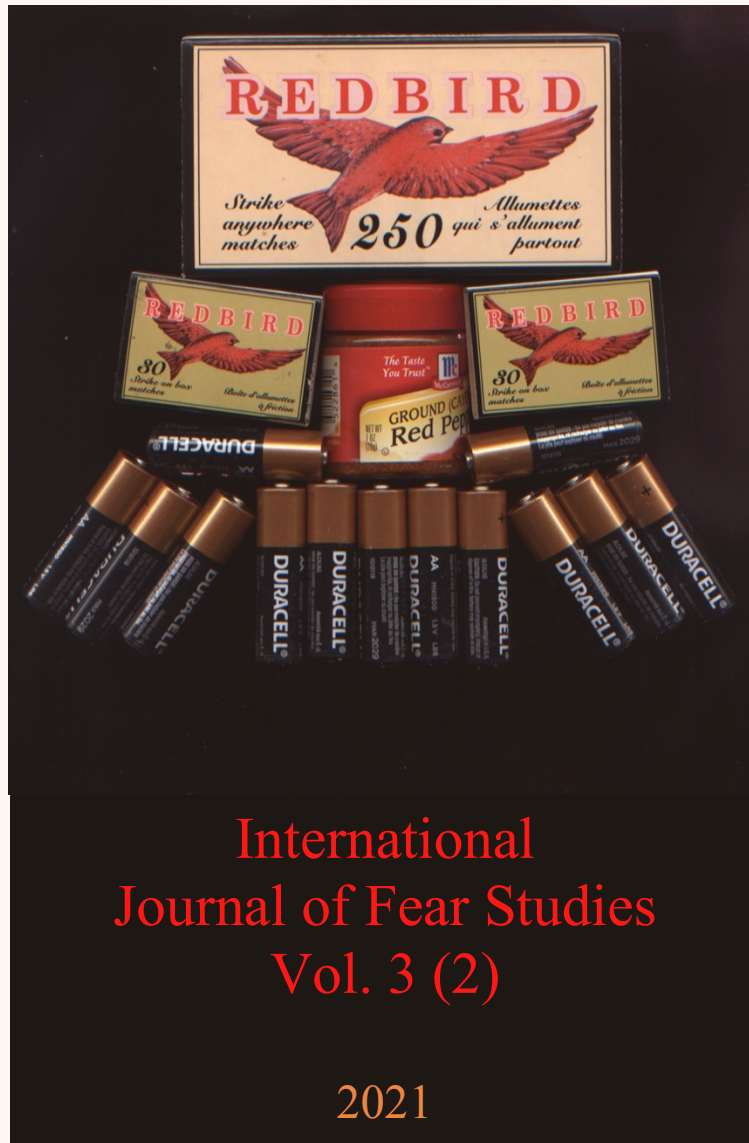


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Fear Disclosing the Fundamental Ambiguity of Being Human: Implications for Fear Education and Moral Education

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Fear has been a crucial and often mentioned emotion during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have felt, thought about, discussed, suppressed, provoked, manipulated, and feared fear. We often hear people say, “Be fearless!” “Don’t fall for fear-mongering!” These normative claims are all-too-familiar. Ethical and political claims and reflections regarding fear (how to understand and navigate it) almost always return to the center of the collective consciousness in human crises and uncertainty, along with issues of connection and disconnection with others in our social life. In other words, inquiries exploring and regarding fear as a deeply substantive ontological and epistemological state are intricately connected to democratic possibilities and perils in moments of humanitarian crises. This enables fear to occupy a privileged position in the humanist foundations of moral and civic education: what is the role of fear in one’s moral life and development? Is it true that fear is and could only be a self-centered sentiment? When educators address fear at school(s), how is it usually understood?

To answer these questions, we are going to challenge and problematize two propositions of fear. First, fear is and can only be the fear for oneself, which is ultimately related to fear for one’s own death; secondly, fear and the reflection of it has little or even no positive role in enhancing a student’s ethical sensibility. To do so, we will begin by using Rousseau’s *Emile* as an example to show how fear is interpreted in traditional, educational discourse. Then, drawing insights from Emmanuel Levinas, Hans Jonas, and Günther Anders, we present a different, unheeded view of fear in the Western intellectual history. After illustrating the significance of this distinctive approach of fear to moral education, we argue for the centrality of relational pedagogies in fear education.

Rousseau, Fear Education, and Medical Science

To address the educational significance of fear studies in the context of the pandemic, we would like to start this essay by returning to the classical educational treatise *Emile: Or On Education* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/2008). In this major educational work, Rousseau

condemns medical sciences for corrupting children's morals by inciting a fear of death. For example, he maintains, "I do not deny that medicine is useful to some men; I assert that it is fatal to mankind" (p. 30). He further explains, "I do not know what the doctors cure us of, but I know this: they infect us with very deadly diseases, cowardice, timidity, credulity, the fear of death" (p. 30).

Consequently, for Rousseau, the tutor would not send Emile to the doctors, "Would you find a really brave man? Seek him where there are no doctors..." (p. 31). One may wonder what shall we do when the child is sick? Rousseau claims, "This agreement made beforehand assumes a normal birth, a strong, well-made, healthy child... Give me a pupil who has no need of these, or I will have nothing to do with him" (p. 32). It might be surprising to see that the educational approach to fear in the case of *Emile* entails finding a strong and healthy pupil who does not need to see a doctor from the outset. This setup of Emile's education corroborates what Lucas G. Pinheiro (2017) calls "the ableist contrast" in Rousseau's theories where individuals who are considered by socially dominant groups as disabled or less healthy are excluded from fundamental political concessions.

Thus, Rousseau believes that the "ideal" student is someone who has little or no need to visit a doctor and is less dependent upon and influenced by society. What Rousseau does here is not to teach the child about how to overcome fear but to arrange an artificially natural environment where Emile is devoid of engaging any sense of fear and thus, does not need to learn how to cope with it. The tutor provides no educational guidance with regard to how to interpret and respond to fear in one's ethical life.

Unlike any other crises, a specific feature of the healthcare crisis is that the distrust¹ of medical sciences is often expressed through notions of fear and the pursuit of fearlessness. The current public antagonism toward medical science during and through the pandemic is *not only* a result of beliefs directly grounded in creationism or extreme views that mistake the tentative and fallible nature of scientific knowledge as completely unreliable, but also a deep *ethical and political* conviction based on a rich intellectual history of fear in Western intellectual history. In this paradigm, the object of fear is a dangerous and contagious disease. But it is ultimately a fear

¹ This distrust is also mitigated through a racialized lens, one shaped by concrete socio-historical contexts. In the US, Black and brown people are overwhelmingly aligned to Democratic constituencies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Democratic Party has universally and consistently promoted science-based decision-making and, as such, vaccinations and mask-wearing. However, as a [for the purpose of this point] racial-ethnic demographic, Black and brown people's rates of vaccinations are lower than White Democrats as reported over time on several metrics (Bump, 2021). A concerted effort is ongoing to ensure minoritized folks, People of Color, and vulnerable populations are given the educational resources and access to, as an example, sound vaccination information and the actual vaccinations themselves. Critical Race Theory scholars (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010) attribute such caution in terms of a deep-seeded and historicized context. Such distrust is grounded in the persistent betrayals fostered through racism as a dominant and continuous thread within US American culture. For example, Black and brown people have of the medical sciences to the horrendous betrayals and abuses of Black and brown bodies ostensibly performed by those same trusted medical sciences communities over time: a prime example often cited by Black and brown folks to this point are the 'Tuskegee Airforce' experiments, in which Black military officers were said to be injected with syphilis. Although strong evidence exists suggesting that this allegation is unfounded in fact, the perception of its truth remains persistent in the sociocultural collective mindset. A palpable cautiousness exists threaded through Black and brown communities which has cemented in the collective psyche of this demographic. This caution is certainly justifiable.

of one's own death, a fear of the other who might pass on the virus and induce one's death. In this conception, fear is and can only be a self-centered sentiment in the face of one's own insuperable possibility of death.

To be clear, this view of fear is well-grounded and deserves attention. When individuals are caught in the vice-grip of fear, they may see each other as nothing but a threat to their own beings. The wide contagion of such fear can engender alienation and diminish the possibility of democracy. Based on this conception of fear, it is reasonable and well-grounded to believe that the social and ethical cost of being attentive to information from medical science is extraordinarily high.

As it is observed in the pandemic, both wearing masks, quarantining (or self-isolation), and vaccination have been growingly associated with signs of fear as a selfish sentiment. At the same time, masks emblazoned with the amusing message "worn by force not by fear" are in popular demand. Here we see a collective, moral struggle (and a societal bifurcation) with regard to medical science and interpretations of fear. Additionally, public intellectuals and writers (Asghar, 2021) have further reified this line of thought with considerations of philosophical contexts in human history. What's more, this is not just characteristic of the contemporary intellectual milieu as we have already seen in Rousseau's *Emile*.

There is one note before moving onto the next section. In the interpretative paradigm of fear as a self-centered, alienating pathology triggered and potentially galvanized by medical science and governmental intervention, Rousseau, Foucault, Agamben, and many others have failed to mention that not only fear, but also the pursuit of fearlessness exists in the fabric of politics as well². For example, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's (2013)

² Earlier in September, 2021, the Texas law enacting a near-complete ban on abortion went into effect (Graham, 2021). The law deputizes "private individuals to sue anyone who performs the procedure or 'aids and abets' it. They are entitled to \$10,000 and their legal fees covered if they win" (Graham, 2021). It is anticipatable that one could argue against women's reproductive choice through the invocation of "fear for the fetus."

This shows how easily conceptions of fear can be mobilized into justifications for violent political ideologies (often, but not always, branded through religious doctrines). It should be kept in mind that for Levinas, ethics and politics are *not* the same thing. The other-regarding fear (or fear for the other) in his radical ethics refers to the experience in face-to-face encounter with a *singular Other*, which is a relation of ethics rather than justice. Justice involves the attention to the third party, calculations of the incalculable, and comparison of the incomparable. That is, one is not justified to turn away from women and deny their lives and individualities in the name of fear for others *in the exclusion of women*.

Nevertheless, one of the most contentious parts of Levinas's theory for feminist philosophy is that while he provides the theoretical possibility of interpreting birth beyond mere biological repetition of the same, there is a debilitating silence regarding the exploitation of maternal generosity. In *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*, Lisa Guenther (2006) provides feminist, Levinasian analyses regarding philosophy of birth and reproductive justice. She not only demonstrates how Levinas can be of use for understanding maternity, birth, and ethics, but also goes beyond Levinas to provide an original philosophy of birth that challenges the androcentric philosophical tradition that prioritizes death over birth and defends women's reproductive choice. I join her in arguing that coercing women into motherhood can bring about the foreclosure of the possibility of justice, where women are reduced to reproductive capacities and deprived of the *singularity* of the *I* as a precondition for one to engage in ethical life, including maternal relationships.

Further suggested readings on these topics include Mara H. Benjamin's (2018) *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, Tina Chanter's (2001) edited book *Feminist Interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas*, and Claire Katz's (2003) *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca*.

explicates how acts of war can function as a refusal to transform a nation's vulnerability and wounds into affective response(s) of fear through eliminating the source of fear. Another example would be the case where in the beginning of the pandemic, Donald Trump refused to wear masks to project a fearless and macho image (Cillizza, 2020). To prevent fear and the search for fearlessness being manipulated to benefit people in positions of power, Rousseau's educational imaginary serves as a classic example of a "no fear" education not through quelling fear but by minimizing the possibility of experiencing fear in a child's life. The underlying belief is that if a child has not (or seldomly) encountered fear in his or her life, he or she might be less likely to fall into fear mongering and political campaigns that mobilize people's desire to overcome and transcend fear. That being said, there are two basic assumptions in *Emile*: first, fear is and can only be the fear of death for oneself; secondly, fear and the reflection of it has no positive role in enhancing a student's ethical sensibility. These are the propositions we intend to problematize in this essay.

Fear of the Other and Fear for the Other

The first line of complication is about the existence of another type of fear. As Yan and Slattery (2021) have demonstrated that Levinas's idea of the "fear for the other as an essential moment for ethics" (p. 81) has been overlooked. The fear for the other is the emotion that comes to oneself when one engages in the unreflective encounter with the face of the other: it is the experience where I fear the death of the other and fear myself causing violence and death onto the other. Levinas maintains that it is a fundamental, other-oriented mood that serves as an essential moment for ethics.

One might argue that fear for the other is ultimately an extension of the fear for oneself, since the ones about whom we usually care are often related to us or perceived as similar to us in some way: they are family members, friends, or people who share the same group memberships or identities. However, this is not what Levinas is referring to. He is concerned with the kind of fear that transcends one's self-centered categories: in his words, the fear for a *stranger* whose alterity has been fully recognized, the fear that helps one to question the self-righteousness of the *I* and incites an ethical disturbance of being.

Emmanuel Levinas is not the only person who articulates this dimension of fear. German-born American Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1985), for example, in pointing out the limitation of Hobbesian conception of fear, emphasizes the significance of "a spiritual sort of fear:"

The fear in question then cannot be, as in Hobbes, of the 'pathological' sort (to use Kant's term), which compulsively overcomes us in the face of its object, but rather a spiritual sort of fear which is, in a sense, the work of our own deliberate attitude. (p. 28)

Based on this "spiritual sort of fear," Jonas proposes the concept of *heuristics of fear*, which guides the human agent to respond to the presence of the other and for the other. Both Jonas and Levinas's work are situated in the phenomenological tradition following Martin Heidegger, in Jewish Theology in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and, as Ernst Wolff (2011) points out, in philosophical

approaches to ethics subsequent to the crisis of “the death of God.” As we can see, both of them have disrupted a long-standing line of thought in Western philosophy: Fear, understood as the fear of one’s own death (or the fear of something threatening for one’s own death), is the real danger in life compared to threats in hazardous environments. Instead, fear for the other can guide us toward ethics of responsibility for the other.

Fear and fearlessness illuminate each other. The more we detest fear, the more we yearn for and idolize (unconditional) fearlessness. While fear is often discussed in great detail (perhaps in a very narrow way), the lack of it and/or we see fearlessness tends to be mentioned only in passing, leaving it treated as unproblematic or a manifestation of an ideal state of being. But how shall we understand one’s fearlessness about actions that might put others in danger? Violence often subsists on individuals’ apathy. For example, as noted by Elena Pulcini (2013), German philosopher Günther Anders has made a rather counterintuitive observation that “today we are in the presence of the unavailability of fear” (p. 116). Reflecting on the creation and use of the nuclear bomb and the horror of Hiroshima, Anders cautions us against “the Promethean gap,” which refers to the rift between knowing and feeling, between individuals’ immense knowledge of the catastrophic consequences of the bomb and the minimal feelings for the suffering and death of countless human beings in the past and future. Together, Anders and Pulcini concern involves “the era of the inability to feel fear” (p. 118) integrated with the hubris of *homo creator*. In this sense, fear may be not only benevolent but also necessary for one’s ethical life and for democratic possibilities in the world.

To emphasize fear *for* the other does not mean to deny the existence of fear *of* the other. Indeed, individuals do experience the fear *of* the other as the threat to oneself constantly. What we would like to emphasize is the co-existence of these two types of fear, which disclose the fundamental ambiguity of one’s ethical life. As Welten (2020) makes it clear, “Levinas’ non-violence is nothing but the messianic promise that appears in the tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of causing violence” (p. 369). The *oscillation* between these two are intimately related but radically different types of fear is what gets overlooked in traditional thought.

One might offer the critique that there are justifiable types of fear based on self-care and survival instincts. Of course, fear conceived as fear of death can be justifiable. We do *not* argue that self-oriented fear is wrong. What we try to bring to focus in this paper is the omission of fear for the other, which challenges the interpretation of fear through primacy of ontology. That is, we question the tendency of conceiving the existential dimensions of fear only through survival instinct or care for the self.

Rethinking the Education of Fear

If fear is ambiguous, meaning that it is structurally constituted by ego’s self-perseverance against the call of the other, and a subject’s response to the other despite self-centered concerns, then what does this new understanding of fear mean for the education of fear, including and especially in moral education; how does it challenge premises of the nature of human beings and the world in traditional approaches to fear?

As R. Michael Fisher (2001) has noted, issues around fear have been largely marginalized in educational discourse. This is in part due to “the long-held Enlightenment belief that negative emotions (like fear) are merely non-educable irrational interference in the real task of education and civil high culture” (p. 3) as in the case of Rousseau’s *Emile*. Apart from the historical devaluation of negative emotions in general, another contributing factor to the paucity of research on fear, we believe, is due to the categorical omission of fear for the other.

Implications of neglecting and dismissing this dimension of fear are multifold. First and foremost, it results in an insufficient understanding of the relation between fear and *moral motivation*. Moral motivation is a concept central to contemporary moral education. It concerns the force(s) that motivates (or fails to motivate) people to act morally in our everyday lives (Heinrichs, Oser, & Lovat, 2013; Rosati, 2016). In addition to moral judgment and reason underlined by cognitive-developmental explanations of moral motivations, an increasing number of researchers have demonstrated that *emotions* can play a fundamental role in the ethical development of an individual (Blasi, 1999; Prairat, 2008; Pulcini, 2013; Turiel & Killen, 2010).

When it comes to fear, *fear of punishment* has been perceived as a motive that often guides one to search for appropriate responses to others in particular situations, as in the case of the stage one of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development. In Thomas Hobbes’s political philosophy, the fear of violent death is given a primacy regarding the State of Nature since, as Hobbes maintains, it is what drives people to the covenant. Fear for the other, for the most part, is inaccessible, forgotten, or even inconceivable.

Recent sociological studies (Warr, 2000; Warr & Ellison, 2000) have shown that it is essential to distinguish between *personal fear* and *altruistic fear* in understanding human behaviors. While analyses on altruistic fear are still focused predominantly on one’s fear for *familiar* and significant others and silent about the fear for *strangers* as emphasized in the concept of fear for the other, they complicate our interpretations of how fear is implicated in an individual’s everyday moral judgment making and actions.

Furthermore, claims regarding the emotional aspect of moral motivation entail philosophical presumptions of what a human is and can be. In Western philosophy, fear is treated as one of humans’ most basic and powerful emotions, a primitive one as Nussbaum (2012) commented. To focus only on the role fear plays in our lives with regard to keeping us safe may involve a restrictive postulation of an ontological vision of *human*: for example, human beings in the deepest sense are motivated solely by self-interest for bare survival to which the other is often a threat. Cosmologically, it is also related to the worldview critiqued by Patrick Slattery (1995) as “a series of adversarial fragments that compete with one another for domination or privilege” rather than “a unity of related plurality” (p. 179).

These presuppositions of the role fear plays in moral motivation in connection to the nature of a moral agent and cosmos can immensely limit our capacity to understand practices in ethical life and moral education. While schools may promote fearlessness implicitly or explicitly, they often cannot succeed in quelling fear for children. On the contrary, fear is often incited in a specific way in schooling systems but typically is rendered untraceable in discourse(s). In general, they align with the deep-rooted tradition of individualism that prioritizes competitive, adversarial social

relations. For example, schooling environments that encourage students to join a relentless race with peers to get ahead on the social ladder accentuates an individual's perception of others as potential threats, rather than one's own responsibility. In these situations, fear *of* the other is more profoundly experienced than fear *for* the other.

When schools become the places to equip students with skills to pursue self-interest in institutional settings (Labaree, 2010), it is natural to feel fear primarily as an egoistic passion. This in turn can lead to a general suspicion toward fear and its value in one's ethical life, and consequently contributes to an anaesthetizing approach of fear in education, as what R. Michael Fisher (2020) calls the "avoidance-learning" methodology of fear.

Last but not least, it is crucial to mention again Rousseau's deliberate selection of a healthy student in *Emile* to explore the relationship between conventional understanding of fear, sickness, and the moral development of an individual. Rousseau's negation of childhood illness and his dismissal of medical science originate from his worry about the corruptive influences of the fear of death. However, sickness (including childhood illness) and dependency on the familiar or anonymous others (including doctors, nurses, and other essential workers) constitute basic human conditions and are impossible to escape or will away. Further, it is necessary to recognize that our embodied vulnerability and intersubjectivity in which fear takes roots, opens the possibility for not only egoism but also fear for each other, a kind of affective sensibility that is significant to one's ethical and civic life.

Toward a Relational Approach to Fear

If fear can be self-oriented and alienating as well as other-oriented, disinterested, a crucial emotion that motivates an ethical response to another person, and even "the secret of sociality" (Levinas 1998, p. 131), then it is an educational task to get a grip on fear, to approach and embrace its ambiguous role in the development of one's relational capacities and ethical sensibilities.

Practical, day-to-day curricular and pedagogical implementations for PK-12 teachers regarding an applicative embrace to engage their students in discourses substantively grounded in Fear ('Fear') Studies (Fisher, 2006), as we here have conceptualized it, are generally lacking and, certainly, further relegated by necessary considerations of trauma (i.e., racialized, religious, sexual identity, psychosocial, to name a few) and the student or trauma (and, through, and within the classroom community) and high-stakes testing and standard/s/izing accountability measures within the US, and also, trans/internationally. Certainly, and as an underscored acknowledgement, both warrant further serious inquiry, yet are beyond the scope of our present exploration. Discourse *on* fear as discursive curricular and educative utilities, which is distinct from the discourse *of* fear (Fisher, 2006), has been summarily unrecognized, overlooked or poorly used in-service pedagogues and within pre-service teacher programs—impugning the need to further examine the issue across more broad ideas and contexts. It is paramount to introduce it as a category of useful pedagogical stratagem with an awareness and valuation of the existence of fear for the other.

A caveat remains in the curricular and pedagogical approaches to fear. The education of fear should not perpetuate the solipsistic tendency in the process of understanding and learning

how to respond to fear. As aforementioned, it is worthwhile to reflect on how *individualizing* practices in schools collectively constructed students' experiences of fear in the process of competing for accomplishment and hoarding for knowledge and skills. We join feminist scholar Megan Boler in arguing that emotions should not be perceived as "located solely within the individual" (p. 2). Rather, they are inseparable from the complex social dynamics of one's lived situation. *Fear always entails the presence of others*: classmates, teachers, strangers, family members, nonhuman animals, the environment, and so many more. We argue that educational approaches to fear should commit to *relational pedagogies* that place students in responsible, more aware, interdependent relationships which foster transformational learning, growth, and well-being.

We find resonance, in particular, to feminist theorist Michalinos Zembylas' (2015) proposed *pedagogy of discomfort* as an actualizing epistemological asset which, in its intended approach to educationally and transformationally broach issues of social justice in classroom and curricular spaces with students, has the additive potential benefit of reducing the prevalent and, as we imply, fear of fear of its use—of its purposeful integration towards a more cohesive, established, and authentically manifested relational foundation in education.

In applying a pedagogy of discomfort onto our develop/ed/ing hermeneutic of fear, Zembylas thereby invites us to consider our crafting of fear through the lens of the practical purpose of advancing curricula:

[...] there is often the expectation that there should be a frame of 'classroom safety' when engaging social justice issues (Jansen 2009). Although it is not always clear what this safe classroom space entails, there is a tension here that deserves our attention: on the one hand, there is the assumption that transformation will not take place in the absence of safety; on the other hand, as Davis and Steyn (2012) point out, when people expect comfort, the possibilities of growth may be actually foreclosed. (p. 3)

While Zembylas focuses his analysis of discomfort as a pedagogical approach (which we here conflate with curriculum/a as an active, dynamic, and ongoing process or exchange) specific to education and social justice issues, the pedagogy itself invokes questions of its use on any number of curricular topics not explicitly-tied to social justice issue. If we perceive education's lack of fear, fear of the other, fearlessness discourse and applied integrations to a root motivator, and an explanation—we might arrive at the privileged, perhaps even entitled, position, and one arguably grounded in empathy, of the human propensity, whether natural or conditioned, toward an avoidance of that which is seen as uncomfortable, causing discomfort, interrupting homeostasis. Zembylas recognizes this, extending this to the concerns educators may rightly have around avoidances of trauma with and among students. Citing Judith Butler's notion of ethical violence, he asserts poignantly that an intentional use of discomfort, here translated within our framings of fear, can both engage students and exact fundamental growth as a Deweyan educational principle.

We recommend, as an exploration of applied discourses *on* fear³, that the pedagogue strongly consider inclusion of discomfort pedagogies through the lens of a fear hermeneutic.

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³ Fisher (2006) makes a critical distinction between “text (curriculum and pedagogy) that uses a ‘discourse of fear’ (ideologically, not so good) and a discourse *on* fear (educationally, more useful). The former, presumably reproduces fearism, the latter interrupts fearism” (p. 52).

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