

The tyranny of student satisfaction: Cruel optimistic fantasies in education

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Abstract

In this theoretical paper, we reflect on the optimistic neoliberal fantasies that are played out in today's education, even though that they rarely live up to their promises. Inspired by Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, and psychoanalytical thinkers as Slavoj Žižek and Ilan Kapoor, and their focus on concepts such as fantasy, desire, enjoyment, and the unconscious, we argue that there is a contemporary tendency for critical thinking and complicated conversations to be neglected or avoided in education, especially these forms of thinking and conversations that can question the neoliberal fantasmatic order and the cruelness as well as the enjoyment that come with it. Instead, educational institutions and educators must live up to the demands of the big (neoliberal market) Other and its desire for positive student evaluations that mirror satisfaction and quality regarding the educational "product" that students are promised. How it looks will be illustrated by means of examples that derive from a Danish educational context. On that basis, we claim that we are witnessing a form of satisfaction tyranny in education and discuss what it means if educational institutions and educators cannot release themselves from their neoliberal involvement.

Keywords

Educational quality, enjoyment/pain, intellectual flourishing, complicated conversations, critical thinking

Introduction

Today, the dominant neoliberal market order demands constant development and *surplus value*, which force educational institutions to come up with smart, innovative, and promising ideas and

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initiatives that allow them to legitimize their existence through their market attractiveness and competitiveness in terms of satisfaction scores, feeling good experiences, and their ability to produce human capital (Hall, 2021). What the consumers choose, and the market demands, or desires, have become an orientation, a driving factor, perhaps even a bedrock, for how educational institutions *internally* organize themselves, what they offer in terms of products and services, how they are managed and governed, and what they must struggle to achieve—and avoid—so they can look good *externally* (Power, Scheytt, Soin et al., 2009; Giroux, 2015).

Nothing must be kept sacred within the neoliberal market order besides this order itself. For example, the National Church in Denmark has in recent years been forced to promote itself through the agency of concerts and exhibitions; these include, for example, dubious religious paintings by a Danish designer, a sworn Germanic Neopaganist, and music and singing for babies and their parents on maternity leave. Recently, some Danish Lutheran bishops have even suggested a form of quick customized service in churches in which one can have a “speed dating session” with God (Weiss, 2021). This to attract new members and hold on to the existing ones. Like churches, education—in neoliberal market ways—must renew or reinvent itself, which is a common assumption, and must be able to satisfy students by providing them with good (and often) commodified experiences, so they choose to finish their education and not drop out (Alvesson, 2014). Stated differently, this is a way to *regulate* the students.

This is of vital importance in a Danish context given that institutional budgets depend on the number students enrolled and how many of them who graduates (Rüsselbæk Hansen and Bøje, 2017: 24).

What is more, politicians, interest groups, and educational institutions seem to be obsessed to measure and assess all levels of student satisfaction by means of statistical data, and evaluation schemes (Krejsler, 2021; Taubman 2009). Such measurements are being used by politicians to state whether educational institutions, and educators, deliver the “right” quality or not (Webster, 2012: 81). In this way, they can regulate academic funding (Collini 2018), that is, determine which academic areas that should be rewarded or punished economically for (not) responding to the (job) market’s needs and for (not) contributing to capitalistic accumulation by providing quality education to the students.

For instance, we have seen how Roskilde University (RUC) in Denmark has been shamed and blamed for its low graduate employment rate and its unsatisfied students compared to other universities in Denmark, which means that many students want to leave RUC and instead study in another university (Matzon, 2020). The Danish Chamber of Commerce, which is a network for trade, IT, industry, and service in Denmark, has critiqued Roskilde University since it cannot live up to what the market needs and desires (Eriksen, 2020), that is, deliver employable and productive students. What can be argued is that the market is ascribed “subjectivity” with its own needs and desires, which educational institutions must seek to live up to and fulfill. For example, they must produce satisfied students who are fit for work and ready to sell themselves on the (job) market. The underlying neoliberal logic behind such an aim seems to be *that satisfied people is also productive people*.

Public exposure and transparency (Han, 2015) by means of evaluations and ratings are often valued not only by politicians but also by the public for their potential to visibilize the quality of education, its value, its contemporary condition, and its success/lack of fulfillment. However, such exposure and transparency can, paradoxically, despite their assumed democratic potential as a starting point for complicated conversations about educational quality (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2020), encourage leaders and educators to improve their image by striving for positive reviews that can be brought into the open without consequences or risks (Mau, 2019). These could include evaluations

and ratings that mirror market alignment, harmony, wellbeing, and (student) satisfaction (Furedi, 2011; Hudson, 2004).

It is well known that much time and resources are spent by educational institutions to strengthen their educational brand (Huzzard et al., 2017), their capital value in the eyes of others (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2020), by developing powerful, salable, and attractive narratives (Schostak, 2020). For example, narratives that promise they are special places in which quality education take place and in which dreams can come true. This is not without consequence for how power relations between educators and students are established, which often are orientated toward the agendas of performativity and satisfaction (Ball, 2016, 2017). For example, do educators perform and deliver the educational product as expected and are the students satisfied with the ways it is done?

And even though critical thinking, questioning, and complicated conversations ad infinitum (Pinar, 2015) without conditions (Derrida, 2002), and acceptance of features such as conflicts, controversies, and antagonisms (Žižek and Daly, 2004), are valued ideals on an abstract level in education, such ideals are often difficult to incorporate and embody in concrete practices. Part of the reason might be, as Brown and Murphy suggest (2012), “that students no longer study: they invest in courses, and have become customers ... rather than engage in intellectual development through the acquisition of difficult and dangerous knowledge”(219) that, for example, can expose the historically a priori structures and conventions “which determines how we understand how the world is disclosed to us” (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 25).

Against this background our paper focuses on the fantasmatic promises and “dark sides” that are attached to the neoliberal market order. How can optimistic neoliberal (market) fantasies structure, naturalize and depoliticize current forms and content in education? What space does it leaves for critical thinking, questioning, and complicated conversations about such forms and content? What consequences does it have for the students’ intellectual flourishing if they are not given opportunities to contest what can be named as the neoliberal order that subjectivize them as customers who must be offered educational products that can *satisfy* their desire for usefulness and capital value on the market? In other words, how can education, educators, and students break free from the neoliberal market order that is “reinforced through surplus-focused, performance indicators, impact and satisfaction metrics, and discourses of student-as-consumer”? (Hall, 2021: 46). An order, that contributes to (re)produce educational institutions that are poisoned with anti-intellectual and depoliticized forms and content that support conformist needs and desires that reduce the meaning of education and what it means to be educated.

To address these questions, we find inspiration in Berlant’s (2011) concept, cruel optimism. Further inspirations are taking from psychoanalytical theory and concepts such as fantasy, desire, enjoyment (jouissance), and the unconscious (contradictions, hidden logics, and blind spots) (Žižek, 2008ab; Kapoor, 2020). With this theoretical frame we illustrate by means of examples from a Danish educational context¹ that there is a contemporary tendency for critical thinking and complicated (and dangerous) conversations to be neglected in education since much of the focus is on how satisfied students are with the “educational products” they are offered, which has become a way to measure and secure educational quality. On that basis, we argue that such a tendency can lead to a satisfaction tyranny in education. Our claim is that if educational institutions should be able to contribute to students’ intellectual flourishing, which still is a valued ideal and a main purpose for such institutions, they must problematize their own and the students’ neoliberal involvement and customer-oriented attitudes.

When optimistic promises become cruel

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing ... it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (Berlant, 2011: 1)

As Berlant states, it is important to emphasize that all relationships are optimistic. That is why one reaches out to objects, such as fantasies, as they install a series of promises in which one can invest hope. This is highly apparent in the self-help industry, where gurus and a great range of books promise health, wealth, happiness, and a long life if one is willing to go “all in” and work on oneself and believe in it.

According to McGee (2013), we can find examples in typical diet books that advocate for reduced calorie consumption. The problem is that this in turn alters the dieter’s metabolism, slowing calorie expenditure and thus rendering long-term, sustained weight reduction all but impossible. That is why some optimistic relationships are *cruel* according to Berlant (2010), because they either prove “to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (94). Thus, instead of helping health to flourish they do the opposite. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, when one invests hopes in what Berlant calls “conventional good life fantasies,” it might stimulate motivation and belief. It is like running as fast as one can to catch the train. On the other hand, it becomes cruel optimism when the realities of the obstacles start to demonstrate that what we seek is eluding us. This is when the train gets further away; no one wants to stop and abandon one’s desires and hopes, even though we know that we will never be able to catch it.

Wholeness, lack, desire, and “hidden logics”

It is worth bearing in mind that order and disorder are always produced at the same time; there is no order without disorder, and vice versa. In other words, fantasies regulate how one—and in often unconscious ways—relates to oneself, others, and the reality; they structure the reality itself and contribute to making it orderly, meaningful, and bearable (Žižek, 2008b). Even though it is an empirical *fait accompli* that disorder (ontological antagonism, inconsistencies, and disjunctions) can never be avoided, fantasies support a belief that this is not the case. As long as one continues to desire optimistic objects, one might believe that it is possible (even when it is not) to overcome the disorderly lack one is experiencing as a subject within a socio-symbolic order (Žižek, 2008b). The point is, however, that such an object (or “object *a*”) can never fulfill one’s desire and cannot lead to redemption despite the promises attached to it. It will always be “lost” as a consequence of its *non-existence*. As Žižek (1991) states, an object of desire is

...posited by desire itself. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze ‘distorted’ by desire, an object that *does not* exist for an ‘objective’ gaze....The object *a* is ‘objectively’ nothing, though, viewed from a certain perspective, it assumes the shape of ‘something.’ (12)

Desire functions, as McGowan (2015: 28) has illustrated, in two related ways. First, by asking what does the Other want from me? Second, by incorporating what the Other seems to desire. If one

is convinced that the Other (here represented as an imagination of the market order) desires a particular neoliberal educational fantasy, one, on a subjective level, may start to desire this as well, even though one might find such a fantasy naïve, simplistic, or even stupid. That said, it offers “both closure (a foundation of meaning exists, life has a purpose, someone has a plan) and openness (utopia is possible, even if we haven’t created it yet)” (Clarke, 2020b: 154). It fulfills one’s need for enjoyment or satisfaction by promising orderly unity, wholeness, and harmony, even though it constantly reminds us of our lack in painful ways.

Since fantasies are mediated by language, they are marked by holes, gaps, and blind spots, which characterizes the unconscious (Kapoor, 2020: 7–8). What is more, the unconscious can be understood as the surplus/extra, the “hidden logic” that comes with a given communication. Let us take an example. When we are communicating that “one plus one equals two” ($1+1=2$), we are also in an unconscious way following “a system of numeration called the decimal system,” and not the binary notational system in which “one plus one, must be equal to one zero” ($1+1=10$) (Ogata, 2016: 3). Such hidden logic always has a “dark” underside, which means that it presupposes and excludes something. A similar hidden logic exists within the neoliberal market order, which we will illustrate in the next section.

Neoliberalism and its fabrication of promises

The term neoliberalism is broadly used to describe a focus on the market logic and on economical (human) capital as the driving force for societies and individuals (Vadolas, 2012). In psychoanalytical terms, the neoliberal market order can be understood as a form of “normality” that “stands for what Lacan called ‘the big Other’: the symbolic order, a network of rules and practices that structures not only our psychic lives but also the way we relate to what we experience as ‘reality’” (Žižek, 2021:126). What is important to stress here is that the reality is not just “‘out there,’ waiting to be discovered, but is mediated (‘constituted’) by our [neoliberal] symbolic universe” (126).

Neoliberalism offers, which also is the case in a Danish educational context (Krejsler, 2021), an optimistic fantasy that market relations must be adopted in all other spheres in our society, including education, so all our desires and dreams can be fulfilled (Brown, 2015; Berlant, 2011). Such fantasy can regulate how one should manage oneself and be managed by others so one can be, as Ball (2017) states, “lean, fit, and flexible, and indeed agile” (28). It also fabricates promises of *enjoyment* and satisfaction, which means that all, in principle, can be winners if they work hard enough and make the right choices. Besides the logical impossibility that there can be winners without losers, it is also well documented empirically that neoliberalism only leads to *a happy end for the happy few* (Piketty, 2014).

This is also the case in education in which privileged students (often) are favored and non-privileged students are seduced to think that luck, fortune, socioeconomic backgrounds, and different starting points do not mean anything for their way forward and upward or backward and downward. That means that one is encouraged to hold on to an optimistic fantasy that assert to support meritocracy and justice (Berlant, 2011), which to put it simply means that *you earn what you learn* (Sandel, 2020). It sounds like this; if one earns less than others, it is because one has not learned enough and made the right choices. *As if* such choices are freed from all forms of burdens and impossibilities (Salecl, 2011) and *as if* learning is only a question of demonstrating the right orderly will to learn. Following this fantasmatic logic might be one of the reasons why economists are often viewed and heard as being wiser than, for example, educators. Politicians are more likely to listen to such sacred and well-paid finance oracles than profane lesser-paid educational workers whose voices and views typically are unheard and overlooked.

It is well known, as [Berlant \(2011\)](#) and [Sandel \(2020\)](#) argue, that success is not an individual achievement. However, there still exists a seductive belief that much is a question of the subject's individual sovereign will and the educational institutions success in promoting such will. The tendency to individualize success/failure in these ways can remove focus from the systemic and structural conditions that surround education and how they influence on students' chances of success/failure in various ways. How this occurs in educational contexts has been problematized and widely discussed (see e.g., [Apple, 2013](#); [Ball, 2017](#); [Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990](#); [Freire, 2017](#); [Pinar, 2008](#)). That said, neglecting such problematizations can make it difficult to grasp the different forms of "hidden logics," oppression and exclusion mechanisms that are embodied in and frame today's educational power relations and order of things. Worth mention is that such relations can come in many blurred forms as they can be "both harsh and supportive, public and personal, technocratic and emotional, that is both the hard disciplines of measurement and visibility, and the softer entreaties of mentoring, coaching, self-management, and self-improvement" ([Ball, 2016: 1050](#)).

Another well-known critique of neoliberalism is how it has decoupled the historical close link between democracy and education ([Biesta, 2007](#); [Brown, 2015](#)). This is despite the fact that a central educational task is to support and establish living democratic practices on a daily basis ([Clarke and Phelan, 2017](#); [Heimans, 2020](#); [Uljen and Ylimaki, 2017](#)) and provide students with opportunities to engage intellectually and critically, as political subjects, in complicated and democratic conversations about the purpose of education and what education can and should be about ([Rüsselbæk Hansen and Phelan, 2019](#)). Stated differently, the students must be able to problematize what has become self-evident, they must risk losing what they thought they knew, they must be willing to leave their position as customers, they must critically reflect on their objects of desires, and they must address "dangerous" issues and knowledge that resist neoliberal forms of symbolization. That said, they must be stimulated to raise critical questions, for example, to the dominant neoliberal fantasies that reduce democratic conversations and produce logic of oppositions, binary formalizations, and obscure simplifications that regulate the institutional reality in which they are enrolled ([Žižek, 2008b](#)).

Enjoyment, simplicity, and cruelty

However, this is not an easy task as many educators might have experienced. We, as educators, have, for example, experienced how some students, which participate in the Master program for leaders² in which we teach, hold on to a cruel optimistic—a simplistic and naïve—fantasy that complex questions concerning good leadership can be clearly answered. Such fantasy can contribute to make them *blind* to the messiness, inconsistencies, and antagonisms that from a psychoanalytical perspective is a "real-ontological" part of the reality, in which they are expected to live up to their symbolic mandate as a leader ([Žižek, 2008a](#)).

Perhaps it is no surprise, though, that some students find *enjoyment* in holding on to a fantasy that provides them with a belief that complex questions such as "What is good leadership?", "How can I be a good leader?", or "What will work best for me as a leader?" correlate with clear answers. Such a correlation is idealized through so-called "evidence-based" literature about heroic leadership, gurus, and best practices that promise clear answers regarding how one can become a good and effective leader ([Goethals and Allison, 2019](#); [Pfeffer, 2015](#)), which often is difficult to resist as this literature supports dreams and desires in terms of fulfillment and redemption ([Ancona et al., 2017](#)).

In psychoanalytic terms, such answers (or objects *a*) do not exist and never will. Saying this to students can, as we have experienced, evoke skepticism, disappointment, and utterances such

as “How come?”, “Are you sure?”, and “You might be right, but I still believe it is possible.” Here, one may ask if the students to whom we are referring really believe in such simplicity and unambiguity. What we must not forget here is that students can be particularly upset and frustrated when “their capacities for enjoyment are questioned or pressured” (Berlant and Ngai, 2017: 242). As educators, we might be tempted to avoid complicated, dangerous, and difficult knowledge in order to “satisfy students’ (predicted) desire for courses geared to employment” (Brown and Murphy, 2012: 219). Yet we must not neglect either that education—which has become big business—sometimes sells cruel optimistic fantasies when seeking to attract new students. For example, the underlying salable fantasy behind the above-mentioned Master program is that the students on the one hand will learn to handle complex and unpredicted challenges. On the other hand, they are promised that they will become better leaders if they take this course as well as they are promised that the course can increase their opportunities of getting a job that fit with their capacities, competences, and dreams. The point is that it is difficult—if not impossible—to sell such a program to students without promising them anything (Berlant, 2011).

Such a fantasmatic promise will become cruel if it is an obstacle to the students’ intellectual flourishing, for example, by promising them that the program can make them better leaders if they just learn to use the “right stuff” and the “right tools”—as if such desirable objects exist and can be delivered to them smoothly. Problematizing such fantasy and its (cruel) promises may be problematic for us as educators as it is the same as admitting that you are trying to sell the students an *impossible product* (Berlant, 2011).

However, if the students are encouraged by so-called “evidence-believers,” as we guess they sometimes are, to hold on to an optimistic fantasy that claim that so-called “evidence-based” research literature can provide them with clear answers about “what works” and “what best practices look like,” it may have a negative impact on them and lead to a form of intellectual misery in that they may refuse to listen to those who cannot provide them with such answers or *objects a* that can overcome “the gap between promise and delivery” once and for all (Bauman, 2007: 47).

What is more, as leaders—or upcoming leaders—they are expected to come up with such precise answers. For example, the *Leadership Commission* (2018) in Denmark, set up by the government, concluded that contemporary leaders have to step up, point out directions in a more focused manner, and give clear answers to complex questions. In trying to live up to the neoliberal market order (or the Big Other), that is, what it desires and demands, educational institutions might contribute to reproducing what can be named as a “hamster wheel of cruelty.”

Such cruelty can be enforced if educational institutions, and we as educators, disavow the fundamental *contradiction* between the market and education and just perceive it as a false opposition that we can overcome. If we take products on the market, typically they must be “‘problem-free’ for its purchaser” and “delivered ‘ready-made’ for ‘instant easy use’” (McMurtry, 1991: 40). On the contrary, this is not the case with education given that it can never be “‘problem-free’ by its nature, and poses ever deeper and wider problems the higher the level of excellence it achieves” (McMurtry, 1991: 40). As educators, we must not ignore either that the aim of the market is to maximize profits and to satisfy customer needs and desires, whereas the aim of education (at least in principle) is understanding (McMurtry, 1991: 39) and intellectual flourishing. Such flourishing does not always feel good and evoke enjoyment and satisfaction. Rather it can induce frustration, discontent, and radical doubt because it *cannot* “satisfy the thirst for wholeness” and fulfill the lacking subject’s desire for “a final satisfaction” (Schostak, 2020: 17). When it comes to freedom, opposing promises are also in play:

Freedom in the market is the enjoyment of whatever one is able to buy from others with no questions asked... Freedom in the place of education, on the other hand, is precisely the freedom to question, and to seek answers, whether it offends people's acquired routines of enjoyment and profit or not. What is the best policy for buying a product – to assert the customer's claim as 'always right' – is the worst possible policy for a learner. What is the best policy for selling a product – to offend no-one and no vested interest – may be the worst possible policy for an educator. The principles of freedom here are contradictory, and become the more so the more each is realized. (McMurtry, 1991: 40–41)

That said, students might be ascribed pre-given positions and classified in pre-determined ways, for example, as customers that need to be satisfied so that they stay positive and uncritical and thereby not threaten the institutional reputation. One way to do this is to avoid offending the students' acquired routines of enjoyment. That is, not to question them and accept their claim as "always right," or at least "right" in some sense.

Nevertheless, the students must not within a neoliberal market order feel to satisfied—some "dissatisfaction" must be maintained so they continue to want the educational (promising and fantasmatic) products we are offering them. Even though that the students are encouraged to look for satisfaction, educational institutions and we as educators might, paradoxically, fear the kind of (customer) satisfaction that would stop them from looking for more of the same (Bauman, 2007: 98), for example, educational products that can be used and produced easily without too much frustration.

Status of students, standards, and evaluations

What characterizes the current status of students, though, is often *confusion*. Are they a market product to be sold, or are they buying a product as customers that will increase their market value, gear them for employment, and guarantee them exciting and well-paid jobs? Are they being brands for educational institutions, are they being used as indicators for measuring quality, are they customers that must be satisfied, "are they subjects-supposed-to-be criticized (or even failed)" (Power, 2010: 3) or are they, which is (still) a valued ideal in many educational contexts, offered a political position from which they can be heard and seen as intellectuals?

There are, however, rich descriptions of how a particular form of thinking and talking about students' status is framed by neoliberal promises to, for example, drive up standards through an increased focus on evaluations and comparisons in all levels in education (Clarke et al., 2020). The question is: Who has the power to decide what "fictive" standards are most worthy and count more in the educational reality? A further question involves how to measure whether the standards have been achieved. Is it only the standards that can be measured that count?

A focus on standards, however, can place institutions in a cruel catch-22 situation (Taubman, 2009). If the institution on the one hand lives up to the political expectations, for example, by raising the students' feelings of satisfaction to the top, it can be accused of satisfaction inflation. On the other hand, if the students' feelings of satisfaction are falling below the average, the institution can be accused for not doing their best to satisfy the students enough. Is this not an exemplary example of how a form of cruelty is played out and (re)produced in education today? No matter what you do you will never be able to deliver the *impossible* outcome. And the more you try the lesser you will succeed.

Nonetheless, it is assumed that teaching being evaluated systematically and effectively by students will increase the quality of education and its (job) market relevance and usefulness (see University of Copenhagen, 2021). One problematic aspect of such an assumption is that a certain

standard discourse can be produced by/among the students and with help from the institution. The institution can, for example, encourage students to focus on certain aspects and neglect other ones, which will affect the results per se. Thus, high-ranking institutions can use specially designed and biased evaluation schemes to promote themselves in certain ways. Therefore, it makes *no sense* to compare institutional results given that comparison in this way becomes *nonsense*. However, such comparisons are made repeatedly. There seems to be no alternative to comparisons within the neoliberal market order. Perhaps it is why it is so difficult to resist.

Education's raison d'être

A common and expected task in education is to transcend personal idiosyncrasies by introducing the students to new knowledge, insights, and provocative ideas and dangerous perspectives that can broaden their intellectual horizons and support their abilities to critical thinking and political and democratic engagement (Rüsselbæk Hansen and Phelan, 2019). What is odd is that this is not an issue that seems to be interesting at a political level. What seems to interest politicians are how satisfied students are with the teaching they are offered. Let us take an example to illustrate this. Every second year, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science in Denmark conducts a survey called the Learning Questionnaire among students to gauge their satisfaction on education programs they participate in.

The optimistic fantasy that lies behind this questionnaire is that the students are able to provide politicians with simplistic and clear answers on whether they find the course content stimulating, whether they get useful feedback from their educators, whether they know what they are supposed to learn, and whether they experience that their educators are enthusiastic about what they teach, etc. (see Fristrup et al. 2020; Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2021). Such student answers tell us little about what goes on in education regarding complicated and critical conversations that can enrich the students' horizons intellectually and lead to new ways in which they can understand themselves, others, and the (educational) reality, in which they participate. Instead, it tells us how questions related to motivational psychology place students in a position as customers from which they are incited to answer how satisfied they are with the educational quality that are supposed to be delivered to them and what they learn, experience, and feel in this case.

This mirrors a dominant tendency described by Biesta (2020), who argues that “*judgement* about educational quality” has been “‘translated’ into the question how one can *measure* the quality of education” (9). Measuring how satisfied the students are with what they learn, experience, and feel become a sign of quality itself (Denson et al., 2010).

Worth to bear in mind is that not all teaching educates and can be measured in terms of satisfaction. To educate and support the students' intellectual flourishing mean that we as educators must refuse to deliver simplistic instructions, information, and answers and instead confront them with unpleasant, painful, and “disorderly” views and insights that can question or even led to a break with their ordinary knowledge, conceptions, and beliefs (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2020).

To engage in experiences of enjoyment and pain

In order to live up to the neoliberal market order, educational institutions and we as educators can be tempted to deny the unconscious desire and the enjoyment that we invest and find in such order (Kapoor, 2020: 39). The problem is that if we are trying to live up to the neoliberal market order and the desires and demands it produces, which becomes our desire as well, we might silently and

uncritically accept *the gaps* and the *blind spots* in the socio-symbolic order from which such desire originates.

For example, we might act like everyone is given equal opportunities in education if they are allowed to speak from a position as customers (Berlant, 2011). The cruelty that can be referred to here is if we uncritically materialize a neoliberal fantasy by which we are diverting our attention away from political, cultural, and socioeconomic matters that have influence on the students' intellectual flourishing or their lack of it.

If such matters are neglected and if students' voices are only brought to life through prefabricated evaluation forms and surveys, and if they are only seen and heard when they voice satisfaction or dissatisfaction as customers with the educational products they are offered, they are not being educated intellectually—and intellectual misery may be the consequence. The point is not, though, to dismiss evaluations and surveys as they can inform us of about

student perceptions and allow us to rethink and possibly restructure the courses we teach.... But student evaluations must not drive our curriculum choices, must not dissuade us from assigning numerous and serious texts, and, then, from carefully (if creatively) examining students' study of them. (Pinar, 2008: 172)

Students' voices and views are vital in education and for their intellectual flourishing and political participation and democratic engagement, but not if they are seen and heard from a position as customers. Students are not customers and should not be satisfied as customers, thus allowing them to show and tell the world around us how satisfied they are with and how good they feel with the "educational product" they are offered. Education *is not* a product that can be offered and used as products typically can. That is why education can become cruel when it refuses to acknowledge this and continues to promise such *usefulness* as a way to increase their capital value and worth on the market.

On the contrary, educational institutions must encourage and allow students to critically engage in complicated conversations about the cruel optimistic fantasies that bring forward the idea that the customer is always right, which means that educational institutions had better listen to the students. By asking and listening to the students as customers, it is assumed that they know "how they want to be taught and have ideas about how techniques can be improved" (Furedi, 2011: 3). But what knowledge do they possess in this regard? From where does such knowledge originate? And what role does their socioeconomic and cultural legacy as well as their different privileges play for their (lack of) knowledge, their beliefs, and their unconscious desires that are inherent in their answers?

As educators, we must take part in such conversations, so it can be problematized and discussed how the students and our own *unconscious* investments in such fantasies allow us to operate with certain beliefs of what quality is and how it can be articulated and achieved. That said, as educators we might find enjoyment, a sort of "narcissistic pleasure," when we are seen as some who are delivering quality, for example, if we get positive student evaluations and if our students feel satisfied with our teaching because it seems like it lives up to what the big market Other desires and demands (Nixon et al., 2018). At the same time, though, we can be haunted by a painful experience that reminds us of our neoliberal involvement and objects of desire that support such narcissistic pleasure.

Confronting such and similar experiences mean that we must "acknowledging, and to some degree embracing, the constitutive role of lack and loss in our being" (Clarke, 2020a: 65). The point is that such lack and loss can never be avoided by living up to promising and often cruel fantasies. The problem is that we, as educators, might find *enjoyment* in such fantasies even though that the

enjoyment they can provide us with can give us a lot of *pain* at the same time. They can remind us about the intellectual misery we might contribute to (re)produce in education, when we are trying to live up to the tyranny of student satisfaction by giving them what they ask for, but at the same time they can convince us that education will be much worse without our presence, critical stance, and intellectual capacity. Perhaps, though, it is in such forms of pain that we can find strength to problematize our own efforts and relations in education and find enjoyment in such an act because it can give us a chance to transcend the neoliberal fantasies that produce “impossible” and tyrannical objects of desire for us that never can be fulfilled. Worth to bear in mind is that this is not an easy process, which Berlant has described in this way. “When your pen breaks, you don’t think, ‘This is the end of writing’. But if a relation in which you’ve invested fantasies of your own coherence and potential breaks down, the world itself feels endangered” (Berlant, 2012:1).

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Notes

1. It is important for us to emphasize that our examples, which stem from higher education (HE) in Denmark, are mainly chosen to strengthen our argumentation. That means that we are not drawing any general conclusions about HE on that basis. But since both authors are working as educators in a HE context in Denmark, we have a professional interest in engaging with these examples. Hopefully, such an engagement might start a complicated conversation about the ways in which we as educators on the one hand can support intellectual flourishing, but on the other hand can level out such flourishing because of the way in which we (unconsciously) embody and support neoliberal logics in our daily teaching practices.
2. It is important to mention that the students, or the schools in which they are employed, pay the fee for their participation in the above-mentioned master program. It might be a reason why some of them act more like customers than other students.

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