Preface

Over the course of two recent weekends, I travelled to Vancouver to attend two very different meetings of members of the educational community. The first, a curriculum conference to honour the work of Dr. Ted Aoki, drew together students, teachers, teacher-educators and curriculum theorists from Terrace to Baton Rouge. During the two days that we gathered on the campus of the university, participants shared ideas, experiences, research findings, questions and provocations. The second, a professional development event for trustees from school districts around the province, incorporated keynote addresses and skill building sessions focusing on the ways in which school boards could intervene to improve student achievement.

As a curriculum theorist who has wandered beyond the secure walls of Academe to serve as a trustee of public education, I find myself, like Dante, muddling in that middle place, wondering if the way forward is truly lost.

I offer as a reflection on the two conferences, this interplay of voices.
provocations of the New Era

Voice Three: (with genuine enthusiasm) Welcome to “Provoking Curriculum, a conference promoting a new era in Canadian curriculum theorizing.”

(The second voice begins to speak before the first finishes his/her lines.)

Voice Four: (with even more enthusiasm) Today, as we move forward with the agenda for the New Era in the province of British Columbia, we must be certain that all of our energies are devoted to:

ALL: ACCOUNTABILITY, ACHIEVEMENT, ANALYSIS, ALLOCATIONS, ASSESSMENTS (mechanical monotone fading out) AD INFINITUM.

Voice One: As one who dwells in more than one place at a time—as one who is deeply connected to the world of imagining curriculum but who is working in the world of budget cuts, school closures, decisions that daily affect real teachers and real students in real classrooms, I know that it is one thing to talk about “a new era of Canadian curriculum theorizing” and quite another to live it out within the context of the New Era of governance in this province.

Voice Two: Be still. Still your bodies. Still your minds. Breathe. (Pause) Breathe. (Pause) Now focus on the words of the 13th century Persian poet, Rumi:

Today, like every other day,  
We wake up empty and frightened.  
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.  
Take down a musical instrument.  
Let the beauty we love be what we do.

Voice Four: The most recent Foundational Skills Assessment results...

Voice Three: Explaining Plato’s cave is no picnic at the best of times...

Voice Four: …tell us that we will never reach the New Era if teachers continue to use their professional development funds to attend aromatherapy classes.

Voice Three: Explaining Plato’s cave is no picnic at the best of times...

Voice Four: While we know that there are flaws in the instruments used in the Foundation Skills Assessment and while it is clear that the data do not truly reflect the levels of
achievement of many students, we will be looking seriously at the results as they relate to your accountability contracts.

Voice Three: Explaining Plato’s cave is no picnic at the best of times...

Voice Four: To that end we are providing all trustees with rubrics and results so that they can interpret and communicate the comparative performance of their students to the larger community. When they see the differences between performance standards of the privileged and underprivileged students in the province, they will surely understand the reasons that this government believes that it is necessary to force boards to make some hard decisions.

Voice Three: Explaining Plato’s cave is no picnic at the best of times, but, here it’s all up hill!

Voice One: So is the solution to close small community schools in remote rural areas?

Voice Two: “Our ‘individual’ performative, non-linear pieces interweave to create an em/bodied, evolving, collaborative sculpture. By intermingling in/in-between spaces of silences our work dis/rupts traditional ways of knowing, learning and researching.”

Voice One: Perhaps we could ask aboriginal students to stay home the day of the test.

Voice Four: What goals did you set?

Voice Three: Education is not an agenda of benchmarks or achievement levels.

Voice Two: “’Texts breathe, sentences dance, words bring worlds into being’ through he(art)ful embodied pedagogy.”

Voice One: Parents still believe that 25% of our teachers are incompetent.

Voice Three: Mark Twain said that the man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them.

Voice Two: “As we provoke curriculum through performative spaces of silence, speech, song, dance, meditation, prayer...there is a move out of the margins to spaces of healing and transformation.”

Voice One: Empty stomachs; empty heads.

Voice Four: How many goals did you set?

Voice Three: Mark Twain said that the man who cannot read is unfortunate; the man who does not read is unforgivable.

Voice Four: Why did you select those goals?

Voice One: We need to help the community understand
that the performance of most children who enter kindergarten is pre-determined by the amount of time that parents spend reading to them.

Voice Two: “What will it mean to be considered literate in the coming decades?”

Voice Three: We are limited in our ability to access the consciousness of others.

Voice Four: What evidence did you have to support your choice of goals?

Voice Three: We ought not to be concerned about utility.

Voice Four: What data did you collect?

Voice One: Students are not commodities.

Voice Four: What was the relationship between the data that you collected and the goals that you set?

Voice Three: “Collectively, we are provoked to expand our thinking and acting in ways that are both meaningful and evocative, resisting simple, certain and effective responses to increasingly complex and intricate events.”

Voice Four: We would like the researchers from the university to gather some quantifiable, reliable measures to show the effect of school boards on student achievement.

Voice One: I wonder what that has to do with fostering the development of global citizenship.

Voice Three: Education should not be equated with the accumulation of knowledge.

Voice Four: The assessment at all grade levels is designed to measure cumulative learnings of grade groupings.

Voice Three: The challenge is to press against the constraints and avoid cynicism.

Voice One: Avoid cynicism?

Voice Four: “Leadership is about establishing direction, aligning people, motivating and inspiring people and producing change.”

Voice Two: The images that the students created challenge (even threaten) “traditional orientations towards curriculum, teaching and learning.”

Voice One: That’s hopeful.

Voice Three: Citizenship is no longer based on shared blood lines, shared beliefs or law but on a willingness to participate in creating a vibrant social web.

Voice Four: A good education system provides ethical
shaping and skill development.

Voice One: We are all part of the web; what happens to one...

Voice Four: Teachers and administrators are expected to be involved in systemic renewal of the curriculum providing appropriate scope and sequence to ensure improved student performance and higher order thinking.

Voice One: ...happens to all.

Voice Three: You can’t force prisoners to be free.

Voice Two: The curriculum can “be infused with opportunities that encourage students to deal with life’s ultimate questions of heart and soul.”

Voice One: Listen...to those who are absent! Listen...to those who are silent! Listen...to those who are silenced! Listen!

Voice Three: We are not in a cave.

Voice One: No?

Voice Three: We are on the heath.

Voice Two: Alone.

Voice Three: Vulnerable.

Voice One: Fragile.

Voice One/Three: Together alone.

A postscript on finding the loving wisdom

During the years that I have been involved in public education—as a student, as a teacher, as a teacher-educator and, most recently, as a trustee—there have been many social, cultural, economic and environmental changes. There have also been many attempts to change the education system—some progressive, some regressive, most resulting in minimal systemic reform. What I have learned through all of this is that the most progressive education is, at the same time, the most regressive because it grows out of an ancient understanding that at the heart of education is what does not change, what has been, what is, and what will continue to be central to the whole enterprise of teaching and learning. At the heart of education is the relationship of the one who teaches with the one who is taught.

Ted Aoki has described the teacher as a wise leader, what the Chinese call sei-jin—one who indwells with others. It is with this image of the teacher in mind that I imagine an education system where students are provided with opportunities to grow intellectually, socially, emotionally and spiritually, where students are encouraged to be curious, creative, expressive, transgressive, passionate and compassionate. The loving wisdom that I have found leads me to believe that the work of education is
to inspire and to equip our young people so that they are able to construct meaningful conceptions of the world and are willing to contribute to its transformation into a peaceful and just global community.

It is understandable that some believe that the true way has been wholly lost but, for the present at least, I will hold to the notion that as long as some of us continue to do everything in our power to preserve and foster that relationship between the teacher and the student, there will continue to be a playing out of a most divine comedy in classrooms from sea to sea to sea.

(Note: Quotation marks have been used to indicate text taken directly from documents provided at the two conferences.)

About the Author

Jeanette MacArthur Scott lives on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia where she serves as a school trustee and continues to work occasionally in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. Presently, she is engaged in the creation of a video documentary which focuses on the mentorship of Ted and Harry Aoki.