

Relinquishing the Fight for Public Education

Alison Van Rosendaal

University of Calgary

For as long as I can remember, I have loved the idea of public education.¹

As a teacher and school leader for more than 25 years, I've committed my life's work to creating democratic spaces for wonder, exploration, community building, and problem-solving. Striving for education that serves the common good, I have returned, time and again, to the enduring questions of curriculum theory. What is education for? What do we believe about the nature of human understanding? What forms of knowledge, ways of life, languages, experiences, cultures, and aspirations are sanctioned—and which are marginalized? What norms, power structures, and privileges are perpetuated? To whom are we accountable, and for what? In what ways might we organize ourselves for learning, such that the young people entrusted to our care live well in the world today, as well as into an unknowable future?

For the better part of my career, I held fast to the belief that we'd eventually figure things out—that all of these prickly questions around what it means to educate and to be educated would be answered with interesting, ethical, and humane ways of being with one another. What was required, I thought, was the collective

passion and commitment of people who were willing to fight for public education.

Recently, though, I've found myself getting old. The issues and ideals I found myself so ready to fight for in the early days of my career are becoming persistent nuisances. I don't think it's that I love education any less. Perhaps it's—disappointment.

I wanted it to be better than this. I wanted, at the very least, to do no harm. With so much yet to be done in education, and having taken my own sort of responsibility for it for these past 25 years, I'm not content to settle for the solutions that I've encountered or created to date. It's hard to see how the fight I thought I was fighting has really mattered at all.

Public education is remarkably resistant to change. In spite of repeated attempts at reform and revolution, modern schooling remains orientated towards a singular and impossibly narrow view of teaching and learning. Systematic attempts to modify, improve, or reimagine the project of schooling have taken place since its inception—with little to no effect.²

As with other social phenomena of the modern era, education is shaped by a neoliberal logic of hyper-individualism and economic determinism—a shallow meritocracy that reduces learning to its simplest commodifiable form.³ In schools, a barrage of distractions keeps us mired in the day-to-day, susceptible to an “amnesia-like forgetting” and a “sleepy taken-for-grantedness” that mistakes the current state of public education for the natural order of things.⁴ Like wood that is petrified through generations of stasis and sedimentation, we can't seem to find our way free from a self-perpetuating rhetoric where the

¹ In this article, the term *public education* is used to refer to any K-12 education system in Canada.

² Erin Raab, *Why School? A Systems Perspective on Creating Schooling for Flourishing Individuals and a Thriving Democratic Society*. (Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 2017), <https://purl.stanford.edu/dc307pg3829>.

³ David Smith, *Teaching as the Practice of Wisdom* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁴ David Jardine, “To Know the World, we Have to Love it”: *Playground Secrets from a Teacher and a Student* (unpublished manuscript, 2020).

ends justify the means, and the means, in turn, justify the ends.⁵

Disruption and Possibility

In March 2020, however, in response to the looming COVID-19 pandemic, schools around the world closed their doors. Almost overnight, schooling was reconfigured into a range of remote learning models. *Now*, I thought—if ever there was a time to pull back the curtain and critically examine both the aims and the means of public education, the time would be *now*. When the activities and exercises that constitute an instructional program were being beamed directly into the homes of our students and their families, how could they *not* be subjected to scrutiny? When assessment practices, and their necessity, were finally open to negotiation? When so many of the secondary functions of schools as social safety nets were suddenly thrust front and center? When inequity and injustices were more visible than they had ever been?

I waited, with bated breath, for revolution. From my vantage point, pandemic-related disruptions represented a singular and spectacular opportunity to re-imagine the whole project of schooling. Perhaps, I thought, we were entering Arundhati Roy's portal—a liminal space where transformative change might finally occur:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a

gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.⁶

Wrapping up my first year of PhD studies, I abandoned my original topic (which would have required field work in schools with teachers and students) and turned my attention to the question of how pandemic-related disruptions might prompt change within the stable and self-reinforcing structures of public education.

Originally, my interest in this topic had to do with *what*—what new pedagogical, structural or organizational patterns might emerge in the wake of this disruption? What innovations, improvisations, or reconceptualizations might come into being? What approaches to teaching and learning might become possible that were previously considered impossible? Over time, however, my focus shifted to questions of *how*. How are well-established feedback loops interrupted? How do new structures and relationships emerge? How might new images of public education enter our collective imagination?

Ultimately, my curiosity came to rest on the question of what it might mean to participate in “an enlarging of the space of the possible around what it means to educate and be educated.”⁷ Osberg suggests it requires that we “experience and experiment with the possibility of the impossible.”⁸ What would it be like, I wondered, to

⁵ Madeleine Grumet, “Where Does the World Go when Schooling is about Schooling? Talk Presented to the School of Education, Louisiana State University, March 17, 2005,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 22, no. 3 (2006), 47–54.

⁶ Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” *The Financial Times*, April 2, 2020, para 49, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fecfcd274e920ca>.

⁷ Brent Davis, Renata Phelps & Kristopher Wells, “Complicity: An Introduction and a Welcome,” *Complicity* 1, no. 1 (2004): 4. <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/complicity/index.php/complicity/issue/view/559>.

⁸ Deborah Osberg, “Enlarging the Space of the Possible Around what it Means to Educate and be Educated,” *Complicity* 6, no. 1 (2009): vi, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/complicity/index.php/complicity/article/view/8799>.

experience and experiment with the possibility of the impossible? How do we recognize, create, or imagine the spaces where such experiences and experiments might occur? Could pandemic-related disruptions serve as a catalyst between current ways of thinking and novel adaptive forms?

Disappointment

If you too were enthralled with the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic might occasion transformative change in education, and if you too have watched with anticipation to see how events might unfold, then you won't be surprised to learn what I have learned—nothing of educational significance has really changed.

Ok. That's not entirely true. It's not that *nothing* changed, but there was no systematic questioning of our educational means or ends, no drawing back of the curtain to reveal the inner workings of the machine, and no collective pause to consider things as though they might be otherwise. A year and a half into this pandemic, it seems clear that Roy's image of the portal was nothing more than a mirage. In the wake of the biggest upheaval in the history of contemporary public education, schooling remains essentially unchanged.

This is not to say that the pandemic was benign. Routines were disrupted, additional duties were heaped onto the backs of teachers and administrators, and there was a dramatic surge in mental health concerns. The cancellation of field trips and clubs, athletics and arts were experienced both as a curricular loss and a loss of community. Where assemblies, excursions, and celebrations would typically have shaped the cadence of the school year, the COVID school

year was characterized by an unsettling monotony, interrupted by abrupt but temporary shifts to online learning. Through it all, there was a painful and palpable sense of loss as communities isolated themselves from one another, and from the world.

In the political and bureaucratic responses to school closure and reopening, we encountered the familiar pull of well-established educational dichotomies. Peddling nostalgia for the instructional practices of "the good old days," there were those who pushed for increased standardization and factory model accountabilities.⁹ There were also those who continued to practice a return to relationships and place—to context and circumstance, to wonder and whiling, and a sense of great care for the curricular topics we are entrusted to teach.¹⁰

But there were no marches in the streets. No rallying cries for change. No toppling of dynasties. In my first year of data collection, a common thread amongst all school-based participants was the distinct sense of suspended animation—just waiting . . . patiently . . . for all of this to end.

Letting Go

As the pandemic drags on and hope for transformative change fades away, I'm left asking myself, *what if things don't ever change?*

If not through reform or revolution, and not through an adaptive response to extraordinary disruption, is transformative change in public education actually possible? What if, in spite of everything, nothing *ever* changes? Could I relinquish hope for a better educational future? What kind of love and commitment would be appropriate to this kind of letting go?

⁹ See, for example, "Taking Steps to Improve Student Learning," YourAlberta, August 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsF3G24fSUG>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Jardine, "Playground Secrets."

Sitting in the garden with curriculum scholar David Jardine in the early days of my research, I ask what we should do—how should we seize the opportunity that has presented itself? How might we rally together, with torches and pitchforks in hand, to fight the good fight? How ought we go about changing public education once and for all?

David lets out a laugh. He gestures vaguely to the forest around us, half shrug, half invitation. *We already know what to do.* We know how to do good things in small ways; how to conduct ourselves amongst the students we are entrusted to teach. He talks about chopping wood for the winter, and planting peas in the spring. He recounts stories of the Shakers and their carefully handcrafted furniture—how there is no need to hurry when the end of the world is near. He tells me there are limits to the kind of fighting I imagine—that if you only go out into the woods with dogs, you can't claim there are no deer.

I'm torn between elation and despair. This is not the answer I was looking for. Also, it is.

The notion of letting go of the fight for public education (or letting go of the fight as I have imagined it these past 25 years) feels like abandonment. Laying down my torch and pitchfork feels like both a personal and professional betrayal—an act of collusion in striking the possibility of a different educational future from the hands of the next generation.

I ask him how he reconciles his lifelong commitment to public education with its current state—how he removes himself from the fight. *I wonder,* he asks, *what makes you think that planting the peas isn't fighting that fight?*

David talks to the birds who land in the branches overhead, and to the stone Buddha as

we walk back along the forest path. He cuts an armload of basil and pulls a fat rutabaga from the garden for me to bring home. He tells me my question is answerable in any number of ways. *The world will give to you what you ask of it.*

Falling in Love Anew

To be honest, I don't know if I have what it takes to plant peas while the world burns.

I recognize, however, that what is required of me is to take up a different kind of fight—to enact a different form of responsibility to this generation, and the next.

Loving a dying world, according to Wendell Berry, requires that we don't indulge despair¹¹—that we refuse to succumb to loneliness and worldlessness, that we resist cynicism and indifference, that we reject both convenient fictions and radical hope.¹² This kind of letting go isn't about laying my hands in my lap, and waiting for miracles; nor is it about resigning myself to the status quo.

David suggests considering the “small ways in which we might act, think, be careful and encouraging in these ecologically sorrowful times...and how we, how *I*, might prevent huge world events from visiting themselves upon those small ways and asking them to live up to that hugeness.”¹³ We can't simply immerse ourselves in the cacophony of crisis, and reject any quiet act of grace that fails to resolve the noise.

He reminds me that our work is—and has always been—about taking care. It is about taking responsibility for that which lies within the boundaries of our own sphere of influence, and accepting that one's own boundedness, one's

¹¹ Tim DeChristopher & Wendell Berry, “To Live and Love with a Dying World,” *Orion Magazine*, March 2, 2020, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/to-live-and-love-with-a-dying-world/>.

¹²“ICSI Public Lecture: Richard J. Bernstein - The Relevance of Hannah Arendt,” *The New School*, June 19,

2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaRK-cpj6tH2k>.

¹³ David Jardine, “We Do Know What To Do,” unpublished manuscript (2020): 7, https://www.academia.edu/42858573/We_Do_Know_What_to_Do.

limitedness "is its own form of suffering that can then bear itself out in witness of small things done fully, done as well as possible."¹⁴

Perhaps fighting the good fight requires falling in love again with the *experience* of public education, while practicing loving relinquishment of the *idea* of public education. The pedagogical present, after all, is a space of infinite possibility.

This form of fighting for public education is a matter of remembering how to do the little things by the right standards—how to be present with *this* student, at *this* time, in *this* place; how to treat the topics we are entrusted to teach with care.

The nature of our work in education, Jardine suggests, need not be revolutionary to be transformative—rather, it is a practice of continually “recover[ing] the sensation of life over and against the neurasthenia of the day to day distraction, absorption, and exhaustion of living itself.”¹⁵ Perhaps, in a fractal-like unfolding of the particular into the infinite, *how* we orient ourselves, *how* we pay attention, and *how* we care for what arrives, is precisely the means by which we enlarge the space of the possible around what it means to educate, and to be educated.

The Pedagogical Stance of Possibility

Hermeneutic curriculum scholars often make reference to notions of presence, attunement, or contemplation—a pedagogy of openness, attention, presence, watchfulness, or wonder that allows for unexpected arrivals, interruptions, or disclosures.

Chambers, for example, describes an “education of attention”¹⁶ that is undertaken in apprenticeship and place-based learning that involves “a direct and sensuous engagement with the world”¹⁷ through sustained perceptual and intellectual engagement. Davis and Sumara speak to an “attentive and tentative rhetoric of listening, participating, and engaging” that embraces contingency and ambiguity; avoiding foreclosure on determinate ends.¹⁸ Jardine describes an “intensity of attention and engrossment”¹⁹ that requires immediacy, patience, repetition, persistence, and intimacy—that draws upon our full devotion.²⁰

Greene used the term *wide-awakeness*—drawing from phenomenologist Alfred Schutz’s definition of “a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements.”²¹ This image of wide-awakeness, for Greene, involves a deeply aesthetic attentiveness, interest, and imagination—looking through many vantage points, and considering multiple perspectives. It calls for a

¹⁴ Jardine, “We Do Know,” 8.

¹⁵ David Jardine, “A Finch in a Wild Mint Vest,” unpublished manuscript (2019): 11, https://www.academia.edu/41265324/A_Finch_in_Wild_Mint_Vest.

¹⁶ Chambers, “Where are We,” 119.

¹⁷ Chambers, “Where are We,” 120.

¹⁸ Brent Davis & Dennis Sumara, “‘If Things were Simple...’: Complexity in Education,” *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 16 (2010): 859, [https://doi-](https://doi.org/10.1080/10494849.2010.514999)

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10494849.2010.514999>.

¹⁹ David Jardine, *In Praise of Radiant Beings: A Retrospective Path Through Education, Buddhism and Ecology* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2016): 169.

²⁰ David Jardine, “Birding Lessons and the Teachings of Cicadas,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 3 (Spring 1998), 92-99.

²¹ Maxine Greene, “Curriculum and Cultural Transformation: A Humanistic View,” *Cross Currents* 2 (1975): 184.

continuous reconstruction of experience, and a continuous opening toward the possible.²²

Seidel draws attention to the different sense of time that is experienced in this kind of looking—inviting *Kairos* into institutions ruled by *Chronos*. “Making spaces for other times to pour into the cracks and fissures. The time of love. The time of contemplation.”²³ Seidel’s stance is one of silence, and listening—of “*presentness*, as intentional focus and meditation.”²⁴ “With this attitude,” she says, “we make time more spacious, more open.”²⁵

Lewis also speaks to a kind of expansive presentness.²⁶ For Lewis, the stance is one of potentiality—of simultaneously leaning forward and drawing back—a temporary abandonment or suspension of action that allows the present to become saturated with possibility.²⁷

Jardine writes:

There is a practice at the heart of hermeneutic work (a practice shared in various and varying ways with ecological awareness and threads of Buddhist philosophy and practice) that results, mostly gradually, but sometimes suddenly and without warning, in the ability to intimately and immediately experience the dependently co-arising (Sanskrit: *pratiya-samutpada*) reality of things, ideas, word, selves, gestures, actions.²⁸

This ability to intimately experience co-arising reality can be conceived of as an enlarging of the

space of the possible. Huebner, for example, writes about the web of associations that are present in a moment’s noticing,²⁹ while Aioki describes the rhizomean connections and multiple meanings to be found in any seemingly ordinary encounter.³⁰ “In the very being of every separate thing,” observes Jardine, “are nestled *worlds of relations*.”³¹ A universe of intricately woven threads where “any seemingly isolated thing on earth in fact is the nestling point of vast, living abundance of relations, generations, ancestries and bloodlines.”³² In this space of expansive relationality—expansive possibility—“each and every thing [“every word”] becomes the center of all things and, in that sense, becomes an absolute center.”³³

Although the unfolding of abundant relationships is commonly associated with experiences of “astonishment, amazement, surprise, fascination [and] awe,”³⁴ such experiences can also be decentering, destabilizing, and unsettling. They can upend what previously seemed certain, and complicate meanings that were otherwise simple, fixed, and dependable.³⁵ In times of uncertainty, this sense of discomfort and confusion can trigger an urgency to act—to resolve ambiguity, or recover a sense of predictability and control. It is in this grasping for familiar

²² Greene, “Curriculum and Consciousness.”

²³ Jackie Seidel, *Unknowing the Future: Meditations on the Time of Teaching*. (Doctoral Thesis, University of Alberta, 2007): 4.

²⁴ Seidel, “Unknowing,” 22.

²⁵ Seidel, “Unknowing,” 145.

²⁶ Tyson Lewis, “The Fundamental Ontology of Study,” *Educational Theory* 64, no. 2, (2014), 163-178.

²⁷ Tyson Lewis, “Education for Potentiality Against Instrumentality,” *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 7 (2020), 1-14, DOI: 10.1177/1478210320922742.

²⁸ Jardine, “Radiant Beings,” 154.

²⁹ Dwayne Huebner, “Is the Elementary Curriculum Adequate?” in *The Lure of the Transcendent: Collected Essays by*

Dwayne, E. Huebner, eds. Vicki Hillis and William Pinar (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 10-14.

³⁰ Ted T. Aoki, “Teaching as Indwelling Between Two Curriculum Worlds,” in *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, eds. William Pinar and Rita Irwin (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1986/2004), 159-166.

³¹ Jardine, “Radiant Beings,” 160.

³² David Jardine, Pat Clifford, & Sharon Friesen, *Curriculum in Abundance* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2006).

³³ Jardine, “Radiant Beings,” 160.

³⁴ Huebner, “Lure of the Transcendent,” 3.

³⁵ Greene, “Curriculum and Consciousness.”

bannisters that we risk foreclosure on the arrival of the new.³⁶

Moving into this space, once created, requires intentionally subverting seemingly static realities. “Imagination,” Greene offers, “allows people to think of things as if they could be otherwise; it is the capacity that allows a looking through the windows of the actual towards alternative realities.”³⁷ Greene’s view of this imaginative space is not simply an openness to whatever might arrive, but an active transgression of familiar boundaries. It “alters the vision of the way things are; it opens spaces in experience where projects can be devised, the kinds of projects that may bring things closer to what ought to be.”³⁸

Enlarging the space of the possible in public education, therefore, might begin with adopting a pedagogical stance of contemplation such that what has previously been taken for granted can be seen as nothing more than a familiar fiction.³⁹ Abundance, it seems, arrives in a stance of stillness and openness; affection and devotion; wonder and imagination.

Just This Time

In a bit of writing in the spring of 2020, Jardine asked himself where he had been. He answered:

Distracted. Fraught. Exhausted. Heads-up only to bend low again. Often simply wasting away.

At the very beginning of the 2584-page, five-volume commentary on Tsong-Kha-Pa’s *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (originally completed in Tibet in 1406), Geshe Lhundub Sopa starts thus: “So, here we are.

Right now, you have a life that is precious and valuable.”

So here I am, placed right back in the ripple of this year’s snow melt that I’ve perennially loved for as long as I can remember.

This silly, precious thing betrays me as much as does my old *grevousbede*. My own life reveals itself in passing away, streaming in the sun and down the drive. *Just this* is the time I have to love this.⁴⁰

So, here I am.

Just this is the time I have to love this work.

Our moment in history is absolutely unique. Delicately fleeting.

In this time of great upheaval, while bureaucrats and elected officials reach for cheaply-manufactured stakes with which to prop up the house of cards that is our structure for public education, I have *just this time* to practice loving attention within the limits of my pedagogical relationships. I have just this time to shake off the sensation of being distracted—fraught and exhausted—and to learn what is asked of me in this time, and in this place. To re-attune myself to the particular, and the present—without demanding that each action live up to the magnitude of global events. I have *just this time* to adopt the pedagogical stance of possibility.

As I consider how to relinquish the fight for the *idea* of public education, perhaps what is required is practiced attentiveness to the *experience* of public education. In letting go of the fight for the future, I find myself recommitting to showing up in the present. In small ways, within my sphere of influence, I practice devotion to the very center of things.

In doing so, I find myself falling in love all over again.

³⁶ Arendt, “Human Condition.”

³⁷ Maxine Greene, “Teaching as Possibility: A Light in Dark Times,” *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism & Practice* 1, no. 1 (1997): 2, <http://www.gayleturner.net/Maxine%20Greene.pdf>.

³⁸ Greene, “Teaching as Possibility,” 4.

³⁹ Smith, “Wisdom,” 73.

⁴⁰ Jardine, “Things Reveal Themselves,” 129.