

## Re-Thinking the Teacher-Student Relationship from a Soka Perspective

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*Under the current neoliberal paradigm, the discussion of “good teachers” often centers on a very limited aspect of “best practices” used to effectively transmit pre-packaged knowledge to students. Soka, or value-creating education as expounded by Japanese educators Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Josei Toda, and Daisaku Ikeda, is an Eastern philosophy that inherently challenges the neoliberal conception of the role of a teacher and the nature of teacher-student relationships. It not only re-conceptualizes “good teaching” as guiding students to apply learned knowledge to create meaning, or valuable outcomes, but also identifies a key characteristic of “good teachers” as the attitude of mutual growth between teachers and students. In this commentary, drawing on both the theoretical and empirical literature, I explicate how the Soka framework conceptualizes the teacher-student relationship: both the doing, the methods of teaching, and the being, the attitude of a teacher. This focus provides educators with a new framework to reflect on in order to re-think the teacher’s role in relation to students.*

### Introduction

Today, as the neoliberal paradigm dominates the field of education, the aim has been defined as raising students’ test scores (Null, 2015) and preparing students for the workforce (Ravitch, 2013); little attention is given to developing students as human beings. Under current circumstances, “good teachers” are those who can effectively deliver the tested content and raise students’ test scores (Saltman, 2016; Schlein & Schwarz, 2015). In other words, the sole focus is on this type of teaching, which has increasingly become “a hyper-individualized, yet strictly administered activity that compels teachers to focus on the production of quantifiable outputs” (Attick, 2017, p. 38). There is little attention given to the attitudinal aspect, or dispositions, of the teachers (Bialka, 2016). Under this paradigm, the discussion of “good teachers” often centers on the very limited aspect of *doing*, or how teachers teach, with hardly any regard for the *being* aspect of the teacher. Soka, or *value-creating* education as expounded by Japanese educators, is an Eastern philosophy that inherently challenges the neoliberal conception of the role of the teacher and the nature of the teacher-student relationship. It not only re-conceptualizes good teaching as guiding students to apply learned knowledge to create meaning, or valuable outcomes, but also identifies a key characteristic of good teachers to be an attitude of mutual growth between teachers and students. Before addressing these topics, I first turn to a brief introduction of the field of Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education.

### Introduction to Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education

Although studies on Soka and Daisaku Ikeda encompass other fields such as religion (e.g., Gebert, 2016; Seager, 2006) and politics (e.g., Fisker-Nielsen, 2012; Sharma, 2018), the field of

Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education<sup>1</sup> has seen rapid development in the past decade with the establishment of numerous university-affiliated research initiatives and institutes, the publication of books, chapters, and journal articles, and presentations, panels, and pre-conference sessions at annual meetings of (inter)national professional organizations, such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), the American Educational Studies Association (AESA), and others. Because the history and development of Soka education is well documented elsewhere (e.g., Gebert & Joffe, 2007; Goulah & Gebert, 2009), I will only briefly present its history here.

The term *soka* is a Japanese neologism for value creation and originates with the Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944). It was later interpreted and expanded after his death, principally by two other Japanese educators, Josei Toda (1900–1958) and Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928). Makiguchi was an elementary school teacher and later a principal, and his earlier works focused on the dynamic inter-relationship between physical geography and human activities (Takeuchi, 2000). When Makiguchi served as a principal in Tokyo, he met Josei Toda, who soon started working under Makiguchi as a teacher at his school. Toda later established a private tutoring school where he applied Makiguchi’s educational theory. Toda also edited Makiguchi’s notes on educational theory, published in 1930-34 as *Soka kyoikugaku taikai (The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy)*, in which the neologism *soka* first appeared (reprinted as *Makiguchi*, 1981–88, Vols. 5-6).

Makiguchi and Toda converted to Nichiren Buddhism in 1928 when Makiguchi found that its philosophy was more in alignment with his educational theory of value creation (Gebert & Joffe, 2007; Goulah & Gebert, 2009). They then founded a lay Buddhist organization called Soka Kyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creating Education Society), a venue for educators who wished to reform Japanese education based on Makiguchi’s educational theory and Buddhist practice (Gebert & Joffe, 2007). In 1943, during a time of escalated nationalism and war effort based on the imposition of State Shinto as the mandated religion, both Makiguchi and Toda were imprisoned on charges of violation of the Peace Preservation Law, put into place in 1925 to suppress “dangerous ideas” that conflicted with the government’s ideology that promoted war (Goulah & Gebert, 2009). Makiguchi died in prison the following year, but Toda was released in 1945. Toda renamed the lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai (Value-Creating Society), opened membership to non-educators, and with his disciple Daisaku Ikeda, rebuilt the group from its post-WWII devastation to more than 750,000 families by the time of his death in 1958 (Goulah & Gebert, 2009). After Toda’s death, in 1975, Ikeda established Soka Gakkai International (SGI), which claims over 12 million members in 192 countries and territories (Soka Gakkai International, 2015). He founded the K-university Soka schools network across seven countries, and has engaged leading thinkers and figures in the fields of peace, culture, and education in over 7,000 dialogues; more than 80 of which have been published as books (Goulah, 2013a).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jason Goulah (personal communication, October 16, 2018), whereas *Soka education* is used generally to capture the *value-creating (sōka)* practices and perspectives developed by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and expanded by Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda, *Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education* is used to describe the scholarly field and includes consideration of these Soka/*sōka* approaches but also distinguishes Ikeda’s broader and more expansive educational contributions beyond Soka education, including in fields such as peace education, human rights education, and environmental education.

The philosophies and practices of Ikeda, Toda, and Makiguchi not only undergird the 15 K-university Soka schools found in seven countries throughout the world; they also inform non-Soka public and private schools and universities from various countries, and shape the practices and perspectives of thousands of educators who often self-identify as *Soka educators* (Goulah, in press). However, it is important to note that Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda do not define Soka education or provide specific Soka methods (Goulah, in press). In fact, the concept of value-creation as a subjective process of meaning-making and creating positive outcomes based on the particularities of one's circumstances defies a single prescriptive method that can be applied universally.

There is, however, a growing body of scholarly literature examining and applying the ideas of Ikeda, Toda, and Makiguchi over the past decade, forming a new field of Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education (Institute for Daisaku Ikeda Studies in Education, 2018). Scholarship in this emerging field both identifies and explicates key concepts, such as value creation (Goulah & Gebert, 2009), dialogue (Goulah, in press), community studies (Gebert, 2009), human education (Goulah & Ito, 2012), and global citizenship (Obelleiro, 2013). These studies also apply these key concepts to areas such as (second)language education (Gebert, 2013; Goulah, 2009, 2013b; Okamura, 2017), language policy (Hatano, 2012, 2013), peace education (Goulah & Urbain, 2013), environmental education (Goulah, 2010, 2017) and (global) citizenship education (Goulah & Ito, 2012; Obelleiro, 2012; Sharma, 2011, 2018), among others. In this commentary, drawing on both the theoretical and empirical literature, I explicate how the Soka framework conceptualizes the teacher-student relationship: both the doing, or the methods of teaching, and the being, the attitude of a teacher.

### **The Teacher-Student Relationship from a Soka Perspective**

#### **Methods to Guide Students toward Value Creation**

Makiguchi's theory of value creation is rooted in his distinction between the cognition of truth (knowledge) and the creation of value, or meaning, from that truth (see Goulah, in press; Goulah & Ito, 2012). For Makiguchi (1981-1988), knowledge is not valuable in and of itself, but rather becomes valuable when those who acquire it (i.e., students) can use it to create positive outcomes in their lives. Thus, Makiguchi opposed instructional practices that merely transmitted knowledge without real life applications (Okamura, 2017). Instead, Makiguchi asserts that the purpose of acquiring knowledge is to live a happy and contributive life by being able to apply that knowledge to create the values of *beauty*, personal *gain*, and social *good* (see Goulah & Gebert, 2009; Goulah & Ito, 2012). For Makiguchi, having the agency to create such values, that is to create something new rather than merely consuming existing values, is what engenders authentic happiness (Goulah, 2013c; see also Saito, 2010).

Makiguchi and Toda developed a method of *guiding* learning. The former first applied the method to reading and writing through the application of model structures and later called it *value-creating pedagogy* (Goulah, 2013b, 2013c); the latter used the method as the basis of his instructional practices in fostering deductive reasoning across subjects. Makiguchi (2013) explains how systematic practice of dictation and modifying passages, such as writing the same ideas using different wording and using the same style to express different meaning, can lead

students to be able to create their own compositions. Similarly, Toda's method of guiding *deductive reasoning* focuses on helping students discern similarities and differences, for example, in math word problems that are organized in an increasingly complex order from a basic form to variations of that form (Toda, 1981-1990, Vol. 9). Makiguchi's approach to composition instruction and Toda's approach to math instruction share many similarities. First, both provide a teacher-created model to be used as an example and as a point of reference. Second, both gradually release the responsibility to the students, thereby encouraging students to think on their own. Third, both move from the more familiar to the unfamiliar, from simpler to more complex ideas, which can cultivate students' ability to think and provide an opportunity to apply what they have learned. Thus, for both Makiguchi and Toda, the role of a teacher is to guide all students to develop their abilities to reason and apply what they have learned to new contexts and situations so that they can create valuable outcomes that are meaningful to their lives. Both Okamura (2017) and Hayashi (2014) provide examples of applying Makiguchi's value-creating pedagogy to their own contexts: elementary school Japanese classes and high school mathematics classes respectively. In both cases, students are not mere consumers of given knowledge but are agents along with the teacher in generating knowledge and co-creating meaningful outcomes by using the knowledge.

### **Attitude of Mutual Growth**

Another key element in the teacher-student relationship is the teacher's attitude toward his/her students. Makiguchi (2015) asserts that a teacher's attitude should be like that of a *chrysanthemum grower* who carefully observes the nature and needs of the chrysanthemums and nurtures them until beautiful flowers bloom. Just like cultivating chrysanthemums, educating children requires teachers to understand the potential growth of each student and carefully tend to them until they blossom fully (Goulah, 2015). In order to do so, the teacher must continuously reflect on his or her own attitude and practice.

In discussing such a teacher-student relationship in his own life, Ikeda often recalls his relationship with Josei Toda, his teacher and mentor, as both the cornerstone of his educational philosophy and the basis of his founding the Soka schools (Goulah & Ito, 2012). For Ikeda, the mentor-disciple relationship is based on *fundamental moral equality* and the *unity of mentor and disciple*, in which both the mentor and disciple "have the potential for growth and development" (Garrison, Hickman, & Ikeda, 2014, p. 36). Based on this conceptualization of the relationship between a mentor and disciple or teacher and student, Ikeda (2013a, 2013b) emphasizes the importance of a teacher-student relationship in which teachers and students grow together. According to a bilingual analysis by Goulah (in press), Ikeda here argues that education (*kyoiku* 教育) should be conceptualized and enacted more as the homophone *kyoiku* (共育), or *mutual growth*, of both teachers and students, because such an ethos captures the teacher's volitional attitude that he or she can and should grow thanks to his or her students. It reminds teachers that their students are integral to their own growth, and vice versa. The latter notion of *kyoiku* (mutual growth or fostering) emphasizes fostering over teaching and denotes a "two-way vector of influence between teacher and student" (Goulah, in press). In other words, it signifies the attitude that the teacher can grow as a teacher and as a human being thanks to his or her students. Furthermore, in such a mentor-disciple relationship, the mentor's goal is for the disciple to surpass him or her. Ikeda uses the ancient Chinese saying, "from the indigo, an even deeper blue"

to explain this. In ancient times, people used indigo leaves to dye fabric blue. The repeated steeping of the fabric creates a color deeper than the dye itself. Such a mentor-disciple, teacher-student relationship signifies a fundamental shift in how we see the role of and relationship between teachers and students.

### **Teachers' Voices from the Field**

Recently, there is also a growing body of empirical studies that explores the perspectives of self-identified Soka educators both in and outside official Soka schools. Studies conducted by Ikegami and Agbenyega (2014) and Ikegami and Rivalland (2016) at Soka kindergartens, for example, reveal that the participants, both principals and teachers, repeatedly articulated the following aspects as important qualities of Soka kindergarten: fostering students' happiness, displaying compassion and a belief in students' unlimited potential, cultivating both respect for others and self-respect in children, enacting dialogic student-child relationships, and helping students to never give up on their challenges. Similarly, in a study by Takazawa (2016), three K-3 teachers who self-identify as Soka educators identified care, trust, and dialogue as key elements in implementing Ikeda's human education, which Takazawa explains as being based on Buddhist humanism. Narrative inquiry of four K-12 teachers who graduated from Soka schools in Japan revealed that all four participants articulated their relationships with teachers, peers, and Ikeda as the Soka schools' founder as most influential in undergoing their "human revolution," or inner transformation, developing their character, and believing in themselves (Nagashima, 2012, 2016). Thus, their teaching practice also centers on replicating such caring and trusting teacher-student relationships through dialogue with their current students. The teachers in all of these studies exclusively highlight the attitudinal aspect of mutual growth with little discussion on the methods to guide students toward value creation.

Research conducted at Soka University of America (SUA) in Aliso Viejo, CA, on the other hand, seems to show a somewhat different result. While faculty at SUA acknowledged the importance of the teacher's attitude of mutual growth, they equally emphasized the academic content learned in class, in terms of its relevance to students and the faculty's role in guiding students to create valuable outcomes based upon it (Inukai, 2017). All participants in the study articulated their role as facilitators and the students' role as (co-)creators of knowledge and meaning. One participant explained his role in the following way:

Learning is a relational activity. Its fundamental value and its meaning are developed in a relationship, which is not one where there is one side that is the source of all knowledge that is bequeathing it to or, in a Makiguchian phrase, force-feeding it to learners or people that are empty vessels to be filled up. (Inukai, 2017)

In order to assume the role of a facilitator, all participants identified the importance of having a discussion-based class, though the degree to which they delegated the responsibility to students varied. One participant defined his goal not as merely teaching important information to students, but as helping students to acquire skills and dispositions to discuss possible solutions for difficult questions to which there is no single answer, with people of differing perspectives.

Furthermore, all participants emphasized that their students are (co-)creators of knowledge and meaning. In defining value creation, one participant stated, “[Students] are studying issues and problems they find meaningful in the world, which are problems that might be quite different from what I personally find most interesting” (Inukai, 2017). This statement demonstrates his belief in valuing what is meaningful to students, even if it differs from his own perspectives. Another participant defined value creation as “creating knowledge that is valuable,” which, for him, is producing knowledge through research (Inukai, 2017). Their perspectives resonate with Makiguchi’s assertion that the aim of education is not to transfer knowledge but to enable students to create valuable outcomes in their lives by applying knowledge (1981-1988, Vol, 5-6; see also Okamura, 2017). Here, we see the representation of both the *doing* and *being* aspects that are equally important in shaping the Soka teacher-student relationship.

### **What does Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education Offer?**

Research in the field of Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education has developed considerably over the past decade, providing educators with a new framework for re-thinking the aim of education and what it means to be a “good teacher.” As an increasing number of scholars and educators recognize the problem of the neoliberal conceptualization of the teacher-student relationship in which teachers are deskilled deliverers of knowledge and students are passive recipients of decontextualized knowledge, Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education are certainly not the only field to challenge this paradigm in education. However, Ikeda/Sodka Studies offer an alternative framework based on Eastern ontology and epistemology, which is still underexplored in the Anglophone academy. In this commentary, I focused on the ways in which Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda, teachers in official Soka schools, and other self-identified Soka educators articulate the teacher-student relationship from a Soka perspective. Importantly, a Soka perspective addresses both the *doing* and *being* of a teacher. From a Soka perspective, teachers should employ methods to engage students as (co)creators of meaning and help them create value by applying knowledge. At the same time, teachers should have the attitude that they can grow as educators and human beings thanks to their students. Because such a method is contrary to today’s pre-packaged “best practices,” and such an attitude is counter to the dominant discourse in education today, we, as educators, should continuously reflect upon our practices and attitudes; Ikeda/Soka Studies in Education offers a framework to do so.

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