

A Model for Humanistic Education **By Amanda Rivera, Bilingual Program Coordinator, Chicago**

This article is based on a presentation made before the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies Conference held August 2, 1996, at Chicago's DePaul University.

As an educator in the public school system for the past seventeen years, it gives me great pleasure to share a brief historical perspective on the development of a model of humanistic education developed by the Soka Gakkai and how this foundation has impacted the Soka Gakkai and society today. This model focuses on the development of the learner as a whole person, one who is not only an active participant in society, but who is also a value creator. As a global society, we are facing a multitude of issues and crises that appear to be growing faster than the solutions. In a speech given at the Teachers College of Columbia University in June 1996 entitled "Thoughts on Education for Global Citizenship," the international president of the Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, stated that he believed the "root cause of today's problems was our collective failure to make the human being and human happiness the consistent focus in all fields of endeavor."¹

Mr. Ikeda further stated, "The human being is the point to which we must return and from which we must depart anew," and what was required was a human transformation or human revolution.² The Soka Gakkai has had a strong commitment to education since its inception as an organization in the 1930s. This commitment was primarily developed and reaffirmed by the respective Soka Gakkai presidents, who each experienced the cruelty, stupidity and waste of war. Humanistic education or value-creating education, which will be used interchangeably throughout this paper, is perceived as the way "to enable human beings to be fully and truly human to fulfill a constructive mission in life with composure and confidence."³

The first president of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, was born in an impoverished fishing village in Japan in 1871. He became an educator and served as a principal for twenty years in Japan's public school system. Greatly displeased with the school system, he became a strong advocate for educational reform and a strong critic of the Japanese educational system. Makiguchi believed Japanese teachers and education were bound by traditional ideas and practice, and felt new educational ideas or theories were accepted with little thought, reflection or analysis. These sentiments can be compared to those of contemporary educators, such as Paulo Freire. Freire advocates the importance of teachers being critical thinkers and implementing the use of reflection in their quest to guide learners. He also advocates that teachers engage students in the same process for effective education.⁴

Makiguchi believed that methods such as "drill and repetition were mental gymnastics and memorization of material was often unrelated to the lives of the learner."⁵ Similarly, present-day school systems find themselves struggling to address these same issues—how to make learning meaningful and engaging with the advent of rapid technological advancements and infusion of so much information. Fortunately, newer methodologies of instruction that challenge children to think, question and to integrate knowledge and information are being devised and implemented. Approaches and/or philosophies of instruction such as the whole language approach and integrative instruction can help learners to see the interconnectedness of all the disciplines of learning as well as providing the forum to help learners transfer that

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knowledge to the realities of their daily existence. Makiguchi would probably be pleased to see such methodologies implemented in schools, for they appear to address the issues he felt compelled to criticize and change.

Makiguchi also felt that education was very fragmented, providing students with little understanding of life in society; this type of traditional education being worse than no education at all, for it failed to nurture or develop the potential of children.⁶

His frustrations with the educational system caused him to seriously ponder and evaluate the purpose of education. Influenced by contemporaries such as John Dewey, Makiguchi developed his own philosophy of education.⁷ He thought the aim of education ought to be the development of people with the capacity to create value through meaningful experiences with their environment. Their experience would also contribute to the betterment of society. Makiguchi stressed that the highest objective in life was happiness and that the goal of life should be to create value. Happiness was not something that was gained alone or inherited.

Consistent with his belief that happiness consisted of two elements, the personal and the social, Makiguchi developed a pedagogy, which evolved in the early 1930s, based on his forty years of experience in the public school system. This pedagogy focused on two aspects: happiness and value creation. An important component was the integration of the curriculum with experiences and the fostering of learning that had purpose and meaning to the learner.

The second component of his pedagogy focused on teaching the learner to be socially responsible. Makiguchi referred to the concept of “community study” as a strategy in helping to actualize this component. He suggested making community study the “central unifying and integrating focus of children’s education. Community study would facilitate learning by providing a forum to relate the things taught in schools to the actual life of a community of people, and the social economic and political structures of the community.”⁸ Like Dewey, Makiguchi placed emphasis on the community as an arena to develop global citizens, the community becoming an extension of the classroom setting.

Makiguchi perceived this as useful living knowledge. His premise was that children needed to acquire a deep understanding and awareness of the structures of their local community and that of the larger national world communities. As can be noted, he was quite visionary in promoting an awareness by his students of themselves as global citizens who are rooted in the local community. Today a number of public school systems as well as universities are developing educational programs that focus on Makiguchi’s concept of community study; more commonly used terms are *full-service schools*, *community schools* or *community-based schools*. These types of schools combine classroom instruction with community involvement or service, making learning more holistic and practical and meaningful for children and educators.

Makiguchi was convinced that to be an effective value creator, one had to have a thorough grasp of the meaning and significance of social or civic life. He proposed that the right methodologies could help actualize such human beings and such learning. In order to provide such an education, he thought it was necessary to nurture teachers who comprehended life, education and society. These types of teachers could then serve more in the role of facilitators or guides in helping students develop their potential, as opposed to the all-knowing providers of information. Here again it can be noted that present-day educator Freire holds similar beliefs to those of Makiguchi. Freire also believes that the role of the teacher should be that of a facilitator for the

learner.

Freire developed a concept called the “banking concept of education.” This concept presupposes that education can be perceived as an act of depositing (knowledge), in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Freire, like Makiguchi, viewed this as dehumanizing for it failed to respect the knowledge and potential the learner brings to the learning environment.

Makiguchi’s reforms received initial political support from the prime minister and some local scholars. It was, however, shortlived after the prime minister was assassinated. Makiguchi’s focus of interest was never the state, but always the people, or the individual human being. He was very vocal about his criticisms of the educational system as well as the imperialist government of his time. Unfortunately, his attempts to have an impact on the Japanese school system with his reforms were not successful during his lifetime.

In 1928, Makiguchi learned of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, which he found to be consistent with his beliefs and conclusions about life. It also provided a deep philosophical basis for him to pursue his movement for social reform through education. Makiguchi went on to establish the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai or Value Creating Education Society in 1939 (*so*, meaning creation and *ka*, meaning value). In 1943, during World War II, Makiguchi and his disciple and fellow teacher, Josei Toda, were imprisoned as pacifists. Makiguchi died in prison of malnutrition and witnessed the dissolution of his organization by the Japanese authorities. Two years later, Toda, upon his release from prison, resurrected the organization with a strong religious foundation.

Makiguchi’s death marked a new departure. Toda transformed his anger with the Japanese authorities into a determination for creating a new movement based on peace. He formed a new organization based on the solidarity of ordinary citizens. Using a grass-roots method, one-to-one dialogue and small-scale discussion meetings, he was instrumental in developing the foundation of the Soka Gakkai organization today, giving priority to education using Makiguchi’s theory of value creation as a basis.

Today the Soka Gakkai International, the largest Buddhist lay organization in the world, is led by Josei Toda’s disciple, Daisaku Ikeda. Mr. Ikeda has been instrumental in advancing the value creation philosophy of Makiguchi through his commitment in the areas of education, peace and culture. The SGI has a membership of 12 million (from 3,000 at the end of WWII) in 128 countries. It is officially recognized as a non-governmental organization of the United Nations promoting peace through cultural festivities, initiating multiple artistic and educational exchanges, international public sharing of innovative studies and dialogues related to world crises, and host to world leaders to discuss issues of education, peace and culture.

Mr. Ikeda is a recipient of the United Nations Peace Medal and founder of the kindergarten-through-university Soka Schools system. He was motivated to develop the Soka Schools system by a desire to provide students with the experience of a humanistic form of education, as advocated by Makiguchi. Mr. Ikeda recently remarked that education was his final and most crucial undertaking, education being a human privilege that allows us to become fully and truly human so that we can fulfill our constructive mission in life with compassion. In his travels to promote peace, Mr. Ikeda often refers to the theme of education as a vital area in creating peace. In an address he delivered at Ankara University in Turkey in 1992, Mr. Ikeda states that education is the most direct and certain path to universal or world peace. He states that “education lets us transcend different backgrounds

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and discover commonalities and that it enables us to think on a higher plane, that is, as human beings....”⁹

As was postulated earlier in this presentation, our collective failure to value human beings and human happiness must be addressed for the prosperity of humankind. Humanistic education, where the individual is the focus, is a way to begin this process. Although Makiguchi was not successful in impacting the Japanese educational school system of his time with his school reform initiatives, it is evident that his beliefs and reforms have found a place not only in the Soka school system but throughout the world through the arduous and consistent efforts of Daisaku Ikeda. Makiguchi’s spirit to reform education has become the basis for a movement based on individual happiness and value creation. □

1. Daisaku Ikeda, “Thoughts on Education for Global Citizenship,” August 1996 *Seikyo Times*, p. 8.
2. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
3. Daisaku Ikeda, *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, Inc., 1996), p. 18.
4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publications, 1989), p. 58.
5. Joy G. Drsfoos, “Full Service Schools,” *Educational Leadership*, April 1996.
6. Hope C. Bliss, *Creating Value in Education: Past, Present and Future*. SGI-USA Culture Department Booklet Series, No. 4., 1994, p. 20.
7. Dayle M. Bethel, *Makiguchi the Value Creator: Revolutionary Japanese Educator and Founder of Soka Gakkai* (New York: Weatherhill, Inc., 1994), p. 56.
8. Alfred Birnbaum (translator) and Dayle M. Bethel (editor), *Education for Creative Living: Ideas and Proposals of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989), p. 61.
9. Daisaku Ikeda, *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, Inc., 1996), p. 18.

THE guiding principles in my work have been the philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin, for they have helped me to see that faith and daily life are one and the same. Daily life is the arena to implement and develop my faith and humanity. My involvement with citywide school reform initiatives has helped me to see how politics, economics and power struggles can overshadow the goal of educating children. Serving on the Chicago Annenberg Collaborative, which is responsible for helping to fund creative and innovative school reform initiatives, I have been gratified to meet with schools and organizations who are collaborating to impact student learning.

Recognizing the important roles parents can play in education, I helped to develop a parent involvement program in collaboration with schools and community-based organizations. Its focus has been to help develop parents as leaders in the school and community. It supports the value of working with parents, community organizations, agencies and leaders to develop the community and to connect community resources that impact the quality of life for children and their families.

In the past three years, I challenged my academic and career endeavors by enrolling in a doctoral program and by completing three degrees—M.A., M.S. and Ed.S.—in educational leadership. Working fulltime and being enrolled in simultaneous programs at different institutions along with my civic and SGI activities proved to be one of the most challenging

times of my life.

In 1995, I was a fellow of the National Hispana Leadership Institute, and earlier this year I was a regional finalist for the White House Internship Program. Both programs recognized my contributions to my profession and the Chicago community. My graduate work and each of these programs reemphasized the importance of quality, creative, humanistic and leadership. Each class, seminar and institute reaffirmed the principles expounded within the SGI through President Ikeda about the importance of knowing ourselves, challenging the pain to transform ourselves and taking the action necessary to create value.

When we can remember to place the child, the student, the person “at the center of our endeavors,” as President Ikeda has encouraged us, we will find the way to make a difference in the lives of those we are called to serve and will become more human in the process. □

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