EDUCATORS IN ACTION

"It is people who will pave the way toward the future of our world, and there is no greater influence in the development of an individual than that of solid, human-centered education."

– Daisaku Ikeda
Peking University, 1990

In his recent education proposal, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda calls on each of us to establish the twenty-first century as the century of education. Committed to the lifelong happiness of their students, SGI-USA members Joe Newman, Melanie Reiser, Jennifer Obidah and Monte Joffee have made humanistic education their life's pursuit and are determined to make a difference.

EDUCATION: STRIVING TO HELP CHILDREN EXPERIENCE THEIR GIFTS
BY JOE NEWMAN, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

As a child I was diagnosed as hyperactive (Attention Deficit Disorder) and was put on the drug Ritalin when I was in the second grade. This diagnosis and my early education experiences would have a profound impact on my self-image and my personal sense of mission within education. I left school feeling as though I was lacking in the character traits needed for self-discipline, concentration and success.

I began practicing Buddhism when I was nineteen and it was only after about eight years of practice that I began to understand the Buddhist concept that "attaining enlightenment as you are" applied to me. After leaving school and working in society, many of my best abilities became apparent to me. I began to realize that many of the qualities that had been described as my "disorder" were actually powerful tools in the world outside of school.

It took eight years of Buddhist practice and a wide variety of work experiences for me to begin to see that I had left school feeling truly disordered and deficient. In truth, I was a capable and gifted individual. I also realized that there must be millions of children who were having similar experiences in school. It was at this moment that I awoke to my life mission. Somehow I had to find a way to reach these children and help them experience their gifts before they left school.

For the past ten years I have worked in a variety of schools and programs, the majority of which focused on children who were labeled as "learning disordered," "behavioral problems" or both. It is no coincidence that those students who have been diagnosed as learning disordered often also exhibit behavior problems. For children labeled "learning disordered," school is not a place where their gifts are emphasized but rather their deficits. Imagine renowned ballet dancer Mikhail Barishnikov arriving to a ballet company and being put to work everyday in the accounting department.

Based on my personal and teaching experiences I have been particularly attracted to certain principles of Soka education, first of which is its emphasis on involving the entire society in

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education. Makiguchi's proposal that the Japanese school day be cut in half and children spend the other half of the day working in apprenticeship roles within the community I believe had three distinct purposes. First, it would help to develop the relationships of the student beyond academia and into a broader community. Second, the experiences within the community would bring context and meaning to the academic subjects studied in school. Third, through these varied experiences and relationships, a child would be able to find his or her unique gifts and particular talents within the world.

I feel that school should be a place where children can experience myriad activities and opportunities to be found in the real world. To this end, when I teach I include activities that I call endeavors. These are activities of the adult world in miniature such as creating and running a small business, making a movie or designing a house. During the endeavor I try to draw as many links as possible with individuals that do these same things in the world around them. It is my hope that by including endeavors that represent all the intelligence found within society, I will enable each child to discover his or her particular gifts.

The second area of Soka education that I find particularly attractive is the importance it places on the relationship between teacher and student. The most dynamic aspect of teaching for me is the ever-changing internal dialogue that I experience as I interact with my students. Perhaps it's because of the numerous experiences that I've had with children considered difficult to effectively communicate with that this has always been so important. For me there are two areas that a teacher must always consider when interacting with children: the respect you give the children, and the respect the children give you.

It is easy to go into most schools and find teachers who err on one side or the other. It is my belief that these two are actually interdependent. That is to say that to achieve the maximum of either, you must be strong in both. Some teachers in the name of humanism fail to set clear consistent boundaries for the students and are excessively permissive, while others set strong authoritarian boundaries without helping the children to develop a sense of their own autonomy. I am always striving to create strict respectful boundaries with my students and to emphasize their choices and my high expectation of them. Also I'm trying to administer the consequence without judgment but rather as the natural effect of their choice.

In order to continually develop loving respectful relationships with my students, I continually wrestle with my inner self, asking whether the interaction was based on my higher ego speaking to their higher ego or from somewhere else.

TAKING MY FIRST STEPS AS AN EDUCATOR
BY MELANIE REISER, FERNDALE, MICHIGAN

My dream is to work at a Soka elementary school in the United States, a dream that developed in 1996, after the first year and a half of my Buddhist practice. At the time I was working as a computer programmer, but was very unhappy, so I began to chant about what I really wanted to do. For a time in college, I had considered getting my teaching certificate for elementary education, but among other considerations I felt I wouldn't make enough money to support myself.

In June 1996 in his speech at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, SGI President Ikeda said: "The first condition for happiness is fulfillment. To be filled each day with a rewarding sense of exhilaration and purpose, a sense of tasks accomplished and deep fulfillment — people who feel this way are happy."

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This really struck me, because that's not how I felt. That's when I really started pursuing my desire to teach.

During the summer of 1996 things fell into place in an amazing way. The person who introduced me to Buddhism told me about an alternative school, called Waldorf, and I found they had a program to certify teachers in this method here in Michigan.

I started going to school right away and loved it. I found Waldorf to be based on humanistic values and consistent with Buddhism in many ways. One of the unique aspects of Waldorf education is that the teacher and the class stay together for eight years. Also, teachers home-visit the students the summer before grade one and part of their responsibility is to create a community, not just with the students but with the parents. Teachers introduce content through stories, which is just what President Ikeda does with *The Human Revolution* and *The New Human Revolution*. The curriculum is meant to address the experiences of the children at each age and all aspects of the children. Their physical, social, emotional, artistic and academic abilities are nurtured. As my education continued over the next four years, I became more and more excited about my career move into education.

Then I began my first year of teaching. What a reality-check this year has been! Care for students and human revolution is what it's all about! Not that I am throwing out the importance of having well-established methods and a concrete curriculum, but I never realized the patience, wisdom and high life-condition required to teach a group of first graders. I have had many eye-opening experiences —children running and jumping on desks, biting, scratching and hitting. In the heat of the moment, all I wanted was quiet and I can't say I've always responded with grace or respect for the children in the forefront of my mind. There were times I wanted to quit and ask the children to leave the school. But each day I went home and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the determination, "I will win today." My first school year has ended and I'm still reeling from the experience.

Where does that leave me now? I still have the dream to work at a Soka elementary school in the United States; this is what helped me get through each day. What will it look like, when will it be established? I don't know. I keep trying to soak in as much as I can from President Ikeda's insights into education. I was very encouraged by his proposal on education (published in the February 2001 *Living Buddhism*) and the kind of reforms he suggested. I don't know how I am going to do it, but I want to show my appreciation for President Ikeda and respond to his passion for education. For my next step, I am determined to help raise the next generation of youth. As President Ikeda says, "We must give the highest priority to cultivating in young people the strength of character and values that will enable them to take the lead in building a world of creative coexistence" (*Living Buddhism*, February 2001, p.18).

VIOLENCE AMONG YOUTH: A CRITICAL LENS IN EXAMINING THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIETY BY DR. JENNIFER E. OBIDAH, LOS ANGELES

Every morning I pray for the children all over the world who died during the night. For many young people today there is no greater challenge than violence. The 1994 *Children's Defense Fund State of America's Children Yearbook* noted that "more American children died from firearms on the killing fields of America than American soldiers died on the killing fields of Vietnam." Gun violence experienced by children — either as perpetrators or victims — is the type of violence cited most in media reports. However, children's experiences of abuse and

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neglect occur even more, or, as frequently as gun violence. Taken together, the many ways that children experience violence in their daily lives compel a reexamination of the role of education and educators in the lives of children.

My work on death and violence among the youth and the effects on public schooling began five years ago. As a middle school teacher I became aware that my students were frequently exposed to violent deaths, and consequently this aspect of their realities had an effect on the educative process in my classroom. One particularly significant lesson for me was realizing that children who live with violence as an everyday reality are important sources of knowledge about the challenges of this issue in their lives. But in urban schools today many educators are afraid of the children they teach. Instead of focusing on their students' potential to learn, teachers are focusing more on students' potential to be violent. Consequently, they focus more on protecting themselves from their students.

There is no doubt that educators are faced with myriad challenges today, none the least of which is school violence. But as SGI President Ikeda asserts, and I concur, for educators to approach children with the mindset of a "'self' lacking identification with the 'other" [i.e., the students] is insensitive to the pain, anguish and suffering of the 'other'." He continues: "Viewed in this light, it is clear that none of us can remain a spectator or view the problematic behavior of children as someone else's responsibility."

Today, as an educator preparing teachers to teach in urban schools and training doctoral students to become education researchers, I stress the importance of educators connecting with youth, and thereby effacing positions of "self" and "other" in the relationships between teachers and students, and researchers and those they research. I begin by debunking the myths that surround the topic of youth violence. First, violence among the youth is not new. Cycles of high rates of youth violence are evident when this phenomenon is analyzed historically. What is true however, is that children who commit acts of violence are children who feel alienated and have lost a sense of hope and belief in adults' ability to help. Second, reports of youth violence have nurtured a public indictment of all youth, and African American young men in particular. However, the fact is, as Dohrn (1997) notes, "if all the youth violence were eliminated, eighty-six percent of all violent crimes would still exist." Third, and as alluded to in President Ikeda's proposal, youth violence mirrors the anomie and chaos that prevails in this society. It does not occur in a vacuum.

So what can we as educators do? In his most recent education proposal, President Ikeda urges that a central goal of education, which is the aim of Soka schools, is to "develop students' abilities to ponder meaning and purpose…to foster a rich humanism and spirituality that enable students to enjoy personal growth and contribute to society" (see page 30). He asserts that for this to occur "every individual, every family, every organization and every sector of society must pool their energies and resources" (see page 30). Our responsibility as educators must center on the care of all children. We must teach children care by demonstrating care toward them even in the gravest situations. The need for more caring adults in the lives of children dealing with violence is imperative.

Consider all of the adults who enter the lives of "at-risk" children precisely because of their designation as "at-risk": social workers, health care providers, probation officers, police officers, school psychologists and teachers. Six adults to one child in the absence of a parent or guardian, who, if present, would raise the number to seven or eight adults who ostensibly care for this child. If all of these adults viewed this child as their responsibility, how could this child remain "at-risk"? The necessity to pool our energies and resources is obvious. Our children's happiness does rest in the balance.

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MY JOURNEY ON THE ROAD TO VALUE-CREATING EDUCATION BY MONTE JOFFEE, NEW YORK

As a principal in New York City, Monte Joffee believes that "school should be a happy place and learning should be meaningful, creative and interrelated." He would like to see more schools established that promote value-creating education.

My experience on the highway of value-creating education started in 1969. The first phase of my career was centered purely on professional survival, as my entry into the profession was very rocky. My ideals about education were idealistic but theoretical and without the backing of a philosophy of life. Fortunately, I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism at the end of my first year of teaching, and through my practice as a youth, I fought through my weaknesses and learned to become determined, resilient and passionate. I bounced from job to job for four years until I gained the life force and confidence to succeed as a respected teacher in a South Bronx elementary school. Now highly committed to my students and to the concept of urban education, I was dismayed when the South Bronx community was decimated by arson and neglect in the midst of New York's financial crisis of 1975.

When I was transferred into a small elementary school in Queens, I felt as if I was transported to the 1950s. The school's curriculum, administration, even the textbooks seemed no different from the school I attended as a boy. During this second phase of my career, I primarily dealt with establishing a vision of education.

At that time there was relatively limited information about Soka education. However, the contention of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi that the primary of function of schools is to promote the lifelong happiness of students resonated deeply with me. Yet with the exception of some wonderful early childhood teachers, few colleagues shared the conviction that school should be a happy place and that learning should be meaningful, creative and interrelated.

Despite my loneliness, I relied on my Buddhist practice to forge my spirit of hope and tried to become the best possible classroom teacher. Through my silent struggle I gained the respect of students, parents, administration and colleagues.

In my thirteenth year at the school I was offered a position as a music teacher, which enabled me to interact widely with students and colleagues. My classroom was the auditorium right at the center of the school and bubbles of laughter and creativity started to permeate the rather stodgy building. A year later, I had the opportunity to mentor three wonderful first-year teachers and the school had become more lively.

Through my wife's encouragement I started doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University and discovered that the academic community was sparkling from a fresh wave of

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research that substantiated the extent to which professional collegiality and community-building affected student learning.

In 1991, the New York City Board of Education reached out to organizations and individuals in the city for original ideas for new schools. I helped organize a committee of fifteen friends to submit a proposal.

The committee was quite eclectic, with members from different ethnic groups, both teachers and parents, people spanning traditional and progressive pedagogical philosophies. Our proposal to create a K–12 school, centered on the notion of a caring community and dedicated to nurturing future leaders, was one of sixteen accepted by the Board out of nearly 300 applications.

We opened in 1993, and after many years of effort, have been consistently praised as one of the best public schools in New York City. I now realize how my previous struggles and efforts had prepared me for the role of school principal by helping me forge a greater understanding of education and broadening my life-condition.

This third phase of my career is a study of the role of a school community can have on student learning. I have been fortunate to work with a highly talented and committed group of people who share a common vision about schooling. Our educational community has thrived because our human relationships are based on self-growth, trust and engagement. The stakeholders in the school engage in sustained and difficult dialogue, respect each other's unique talents and sense of initiative, and try to return to the prime point that our mission is to serve our students. As the "village elders" continue to grow, we see how our students start to accept responsibility, mellow and become more happy, capable and strong.

Issues of violence have largely diminished, we are currently studying the phenomenon of bullying, and we are trying to institutionalize the balanced values of rights, responsibilities and respect, which we call "R-cubed."

Maintaining our community has not been easy. We have encountered storms of cynicism and criticism, both from within and outside the school, and, on a couple of occasions, we almost lost our school. Yet our collective wisdom has always managed to surface at crucial moments in our development.

I am now asking myself several new questions. I see public education under intense attack from many politicians and the media, and university researchers seem currently unable to reach a consensus on the theoretical basis for the reconstruction of education.

As a result, I see dispirited teachers who have lost both self-confidence and a source of direction. I also see two other unsettling phenomena.

Stanley Pogrow has used the term *cognitive gap* to characterize the gaps of achievement between many students of color and their majority culture peers. Also, SGI President Ikeda has described the "flight from learning" which, in the eyes of many students, has transformed learning from the very gift and purpose of life to a meddlesome chore to be avoided if at all possible.

In the fourth phase of my career, I would like to see the establishment of schools that are beacons of hope to despairing students, parents and educators. I also sense there are pathways out of the cognitive gap and the flight from learning and I want to contribute to the map that contains the escape routes. Daisaku Ikeda encourages us that "the darker the night, the closer the dawn," and I sense that the current winds of gloom and criticism in the educational environment can be replaced by a brilliant dawn of value-creating education.

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