Resistance to Neoliberal Ways of Thinking through Soka and EcoJustice Teaching Traditions

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Rats and roaches live by competition under the laws of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy.

—Wendell Berry

Ensnared by the spirit of abstraction, we have lost sight of the fact that our genuine humanity exists only in the totality of our personhood. To a greater or lesser degree, we have all become *Homo economicus*, incapable of recognizing any value other than the monetary….We ignore at our peril the timeless words of José Ortega y Gasset . . . regarding the essential unity of our lives and our surroundings—“I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself.”

—Daisaku Ikeda

1 Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 135.  

As the neoliberal political agenda has grown to dominate U.S. discourse, the neoliberal values of individualism, competition, and consumption—fueled by fears of scarcity—have pervaded our public education system. Educational institutions are at the mercy of a zero-sum business ethic which reproduces ways of thinking and being that prioritize personal success over contribution, cooperation, and sharing in abundance.”

Neoliberalism manifests in schools as privatization, hierarchy, high-stakes testing, and the devaluation of relationships, emotion, and interdependence. In fact, the rhetoric of neoliberalism has become such a norm in education, the US Department of Education places individual achievement and competition squarely in the center of its purpose, stating on its website, “Our mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.”

Immersed in this culture (and despite intentions otherwise), schools and teachers reproduce both social inequalities—like racism and sexism—as well as unsustainable ways of living on the planet. In order to prevent further environmental degradation and to create a more just culture, we need a shift in how we relate to others and to the natural world. This shift needs to emphasize practices of mutual support and interdependence—practices which can move us beyond the limitations of industrialism, competition, individualism, and hierarchized values. This shift must move us, instead, toward the

values of diversity, democracy, and sustainability.\(^5\)

Scholarship emerging over the last two decades calls for a holistic, relational education that bears similarities to practices embodied by indigenous and collectivist cultures\(^6\) and includes the day-to-day, formal and informal, non-monetized practices that generate and restore health in communities.\(^7\)

Teachers are uniquely positioned to help their students recognize harmful cultural habits and ways of being while simultaneously teaching students how to appreciate and care for the health of the Earth’s communities. Unfortunately, fears spawned by the rhetoric of scarcity and the threat of losing in the “race to the top” cause many teachers to overlook the relational skills required for engaging in a healthy community.

From an ethical perspective, teachers often face a choice between structural ideologies\(^8\) and community, cultural norms and individual student needs. For example, educational institutions are situated within a culture that devalues care practices, in part because these activities are not seen as commodifiable skillsets that can increase one’s competitive edge.\(^9\) This ethical paradox places teachers in a double-bind as they experience tension between the moral obligations of care and enculturated understandings of competition and individualism. By making this ethical dilemma visible, teachers can broaden an awareness of larger social structures that may be contributing to the reproduction of harm—but that lay outside the awareness of the individual.\(^10\)

We work at the intersection of two emerging educational traditions: EcoJustice approaches to education and Soka education. Drawing on the work of Martusewicz, Edmundson and Lupinacci,\(^11\) EcoJustice Education provides teachers with information to challenge the “deep cultural assumptions underlying modern thinking” that undermine “local and global ecosystems [that] are essential to all life.”\(^12\) That is, EcoJustice educators seek to shift schools away from a culture that “dangerously overshoots the carrying capacity of the bio-systems depended upon for life.”\(^13\)

EcoJustice theorists call for a rethinking of what it means to be educated for citizenship in a way that supports diverse, democratic, sustainable communities. Teachers working from

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\(^{5}\) Rebecca A. Martusewicz, Jeff Edmundson, and John Lupinacci, *EcoJustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2015).


\(^{11}\) Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci, *EcoJustice Education*.

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 362.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 19.
this tradition teach students how to connect to their place to cultivate a rich knowledge of local history that includes participating in the local economy of resources.

Soka or value-creating education is an educational ethos that draws on the work of Japanese Buddhist educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), who argued that education should help students not merely acquire knowledge but be able to appreciate the value of that knowledge and use it to both find personal meaning and contribute to the happiness of others. The Soka education ethos has been further developed by Japanese Nichiren Buddhist leader, author, and Soka school system founder, Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928), who emphasizes a human education that fosters a global citizenship that allows learners to perceive the interconnectedness of all life, to grow from encounters with those who are different, and to cultivate an imaginative empathy for those who suffer.  

14 Our respective traditions suggest ways teachers can resist neoliberal pressures by embracing dialogic relationships in their classrooms and with their environment. Further, these approaches cultivate in students the ability to perceive and appreciate interdependence and to act on their understanding to contribute to and heal their communities.

In this paper, we argue that relational ways of knowing and being provide teachers with a way out of the dead end of standardized curricula and high-stakes testing. Drawing upon our work with a group of teachers, we present here some of the philosophical underpinnings that support relational ways of knowing and being. Throughout, we share some of the themes that surface in our work with teachers who activate relational ways of knowing and being in their classrooms.

From Dualism and Hierarchy to Relational (e)pistemologies

What we assume about the nature of the world (ways of being or ontology) is foundational to how we can understand the world (ways of knowing or epistemology). Within the Euro-Western philosophical tradition, ontological assumptions that are dualistic and hierarchical have led to epistemological assumptions that can justify neoliberal values of individualism and competition. They do this by normalizing the domination of some groups over others.

For example, a central theme in EcoJustice scholarship is how anthropocentric discourses have taught humans to place themselves in the center and in the position of highest importance in the universe. This leads to a social hierarchy that is ordered by logics of domination, generated through dualistic thinking that creates binaries such as man/woman, adult/child, and human/non-human. These binaries establish social value based on relationships in which one side of the binary naturally assumes a hierarchical position over the other.

The assumption of hierarchical ways of being underpin ways of knowing that position abstract over concrete, mind over body, reason over emotion, and humans over nature. The relationships, ideas, and values associated with binaries that encode logics of domination become part of the culture’s idea of common sense. Further, these ways of thinking and being are transmitted through language and discourse and passed on through generations of cultural interactions.  

15 Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci, EcoJustice Education; John Lupinacci and Alison Happel-Parkins, “(Un)Learning Anthropocentrism: An EcoJustice Framework for Teaching to Resist Human-Supremacy in Schools,” in The Educational Significance of Human and Non-Human Animal Interactions: Blurring the Species Line, ed. Su-
In order to shift away from such thinking, educational philosopher Barbara Thayer-Bacon argues instead for non-transcendent views of knowing based on ways of being that emphasize connections and relationality. In her work, she describes relational (e)pistemologies that view existence as “w/holistically connected with our greater universe, materially and spiritually.”

Thayer-Bacon cites examples of relational ontologies and epistemologies such as Buddhism and Native American philosophy to illustrate how they provide an alternative to dualisms in Euro-Western philosophy that are fundamental to logics of domination.

As one example, Thayer-Bacon examines the Buddhist notion of dependent origination, which teaches that nothing exists on its own. Because all things are interconnected, Buddhists “believe in compassionate caring for life in all life forms...and they teach that the relationship between people and nature is not one of opposition but of mutual dependence.”

Ikeda articulates this Buddhist view succinctly when he writes,

A sense of being part of the great all-inclusive life prompts us to reflect on our own place and on how we ought to live. Guarding others’ lives, the ecology and the earth is the same as protecting one’s own

life. By like token, wounding them is the same thing as wounding oneself. Consequently, it is the duty of each of us to participate as members of the life community in the evolution of the universe. We can do this by guarding earth’s ecological system.

Dominant culture rationalizes ways of relating that cause harm and understands oppression and marginalization as a normal part of humanity rather than cultural understandings that can be unlearned. Relational (e)pistemologies provide teachers with philosophical underpinnings to resist neoliberal encroachment in their classrooms and foster sustainable cultures of care.

Sustainable Cultures and Classrooms as Enactments of Relational (E)pistemologies

Sustainable cultures provide examples of relational commons-based practices that are restorative in nature to meet the needs of community. Commons-based cultural practices include relationships of care and conviviality, and include the non-monetized, day-to-day relationships and practices that must occur for all members of a community to flourish.

The community ethic used to frame this way of relating comes from agrarian author and cultural critic Wendell Berry, who teaches, that “a proper community, we should remember also, is a commonwealth: a place, a resource, an economy. It answers the needs, practical as well as social and spiritual, of its members—among

16 Thayer-Bacon, Relational "(e)pistemologies", p. 182.
17 Thayer-Bacon, Relational "(e)pistemologies", p. 159.
18 Daisaku Ikeda, Buddhism Day by Day: Wisdom for Modern Life (Santa Monica, CA: Middleway Press, 2006).
20 Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci, EcoJustice Education.
them the need to need one another.”  

Berry adds an agrarian and Christian-based land focus to counter the human-centered tendency of dominant culture. The corpus of Berry’s work speaks to the complexity and multitude of intersecting relationships between human life, the community, economic life, and the land. Like Thayer-Bacon and Ikeda, Berry emphasizes the fundamental interconnectedness of humans and the natural world—and our responsibility to care for the land.

This way of relating can be taught in the classroom. In ecocritical studies, teachers explain commons-based practices and the politics surrounding their enclosure. They use stewardship initiatives to teach students how to connect with the land and to provide an opportunity for students to imagine and engage with restorative and non-hierarchical relationships with the natural world.

Likewise, Thayer-Bacon suggests that a non-dualistic understanding of knowing and being is the key to supporting relationships of mutuality within the classroom. Her research adds to a community ethic by arguing that students can develop a sense of rootedness, responsibility, and belonging through engaging in a dialogue with a place.

When students understand themselves in terms of being mutually dependent and interrelated, a natural progression results as we learn to treat nature as we treat ourselves, living in harmony with nature, developing our sense of wonder, and valuing traditional means of local knowledge.

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**Caring as a Relational (e)pistemology**

Noddings argues for caring relationships as an educational goal and advocates for caring relations in education. Her work helps teachers to affirm their philosophical positions on ethics in education. She argues for an ecological cosmopolitanism, a way of knowing based on a relational way of being that recognizes how we shape our environment as it shapes us, and speaks to the need for us to be aware of the interdependence of all life forms.

This way of knowing and being supports the creation of caring relations between the one caring and the one cared for. For Noddings, dialogue is needed to build caring, ethical relations. Noddings critiques the neoliberal discourse of accountability because it triggers our self-protective mechanisms, rather than fostering a sense of responsibility that would lead to relations of caring and trust.

Noddings’s most recent work calls our attention to the lack of meaning, peace, and con-

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Conclusions in our educational institutions. Drawing from Noddings, learning to connect stems from a basic human need to belong, and can be met from two ways. One is engaging with other people who share similar beliefs and commitments. The other is from our formal and informal work responsibilities.

Noddings argues that without meaning, we impede lasting learning. She suggests one way to add meaning in education is through content-area connections to social life. Inter-topic connections, she argues, are important for creating meaning. The significance of the practical meanings, she cautions, should not overshadow the curriculum. Rather, Noddings describes a role of education which is to provide both action and knowledge towards creating and maintaining peace.

Echoing Noddings, we believe meaning and connections are crucial for teaching and learning. Unfortunately, despite the research surrounding the need of, and value in, care ethics, the neoliberal culture of competition places more value on skillsets that are commodifiable. So even when teachers are working to teach ethical ways of thinking, being, and knowing, they are still influenced by the institutional discourses.

In other words, the institution context can override the teacher, regardless of their mission or purposeful actions. This means the relational aspects of teaching and learning are constructed within the dominant cultural understanding that places care and care-associated topics in a position of lower value than other topics. Despite this culture, the teachers in our respective education traditions find ways to actively challenge both the dominant schooling paradigm and the cultural norms that value competition and individualism by prioritizing relational ways of thinking and being alongside their curriculum.


Two Traditions that Employ Relational Ways of Knowing and Being

Every teacher has a set of beliefs, both articulated and subconscious, they use to guide their daily instructional interactions. Educational philosopher David Hansen notes “an educational philosophy provides the educator with an articulated sense of values, with a moral compass, and with an abiding engine of ideas to employ.”

The two different educational traditions we work from, EcoJustice (Monica) and Soka education (Melissa), complement each other. They do so, in part, because they provide teachers with a compass that guides them through the relentless waves of neoliberal discourse. They both draw upon relational (e)pistemologies to support shared goals of peace and respect for the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Teaching for EcoJustice

I (Monica) draw from more than a decade of teaching experience as a middle and high school special education teacher in a diverse, working-class public school district in southeast Michigan. In higher education, I have taught special education courses, provided leadership for a nonprofit, and participated in undergraduate program development.

Through my work, I draw attention to the ways in which our educational system is inherently oppressive and harmful. I seek to bridge our dominant ways of schooling with more ethical and sustainable ways of thinking and being,

even while we are immersed in an increasingly competitive and globalized society. My work positions itself within the critical activist-educator frameworks and draws on the EcoJustice traditions.

EcoJustice education is an activist-educator framework that understands local and global ecosystems are essential to all life. This type of education challenges the deep cultural assumptions within modern thought—assumptions that include individualism, mechanism, progress, commodification, and anthropocentrism. One of the goals of teaching for EcoJustice is to bring attention to the ways that our culture assumes harmful practices like competition and consumerism are simply part of the human condition.

Instead, EcoJustice highlights discourses of sustainable cultures. These include holistic, community-centered, ecocentric, and non-commodified traditions based on relational ways of knowing and being. EcoJustice teachers teach students to analyse culture for deeply held beliefs surrounding inequalities and then work towards rebuilding social relationships through care. They purposely teach students how to examine social structures for hierarchical relationships of power and how to respond with care to oppression and marginalization. Through service projects, teachers can provide students with public opportunities to engage in care practices.

The critical stance of EcoJustice traditions draws the students’ and teachers’ attention to the intersection of social and ecological issues and becomes a space to interrogate the deeper meanings behind our cultural understandings. Rather than add to the tools and techniques a teacher uses in the classroom, the principles learned in EcoJustice can be thought of as a mindset. Once learned, the EcoJustice mindset is always present.

As one teacher describes it, “we vegans who are not, like, militant and preachy, we’re the vegan in the room, which doesn’t mean we even say that we are [vegan], we just are the vegan in the room, and just our presence usually communicates something.” This teacher continued: “Well, I’m the EcoJustice person in the room.” In other words, to have an EcoJustice mindset means it is part of one’s identity and thus influences all that one does.

These traditions do not necessarily add to the workload of practicing teachers. Rather, the teachers I work with utilize these traditions in their classroom alongside their standardized curriculum.

Soka Education

I (Melissa) have taught a variety of middle school, community college, and university classes over the past twenty-eight years, and have also founded democratically-run, K-12 Sudbury model schools. My current work centers on the Soka education tradition, an educational ethos that draws on Makiguchi’s value-creating (in Japanese, soka) pedagogy.

Makiguchi argued that education should go beyond the transmission of knowledge to knowledge cultivation, which incorporates student evaluation of knowledge. When teachers shift from transmission to cultivation, they acknowledge and honor their students’ roles in determining, for themselves, what holds value. Makiguchi understood the value of knowledge as running along several dimensions: as beauty (something I like), as gain (something that benefits me), and as good (something that contributes to my community).

Through knowledge cultivation, students directly observe the way mature community members create value and practice applying that knowledge to acquire their own ability to create

value. They learn to recognize what is valued by others as well as themselves and become proficient at creating value that benefits themselves and their community, simultaneously. Thus, learning incorporates community knowledge in a way that is meaningful to the student, but also becomes a source of new creative contribution to the local community.

Value creation represents an actualization of relational epistemology and ontology because it is inherently dialogic; a teacher cannot cultivate student knowledge without considering the perspective of the students who are doing the evaluating of what they learn. Additionally, students must be in dialogue with their environment in order to evaluate and contribute beauty, gain, and good. Through dialogic value creation for self and other, students become more fully human through dialogic engagement, moving their identities toward cosmological citizenship and ecological interconnectedness.

Daisaku Ikeda has furthered the Soka education tradition by drawing on Makiguchi’s theories, founding Soka schools, and articulating a notion of human education. As seen above, the Soka ethos is also informed by the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, which emphasizes the mutual interdependence of all phenomena, providing the relational epistemology and ontology that undergird Ikeda’s work. Ikeda also expresses an ethos of symbiosis—frequently translated as “creative coexistence”—to indicate an active rather than passive relationality that counters the disconnectedness and extreme individualism of Western thinking.

Ikeda critiques from a Buddhist perspective the excessive emphasis on materialism contained within free market ideology, which unconditionally affirms the rule of human desires. This emphasis fails “to foster our higher natures and the ethos needed to build a society based on mutual cooperation and harmonious coexistence.” Ikeda notes that, without the ethical foundation for controlling our earthly desires and what Buddhism refers to as the three poisons (of greed, anger, and foolishness), “the competitive structures of the market economy invade every aspect of our lives, creating a society of harsh, dog-eat-dog, economic domination and subjugation.”

In addition to Buddhist philosophy, three key principles—dialogue, global citizenship, and human education—inform the ethos of Soka education. The persistent use of dialogue helps us create value, but also helps us accomplish an inner transformation toward become fully human. As such, dialogue is a not simply a

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29 Goulah, “Dialogic Resistance in Education.”
33 Ibid, 16.
34 Goulah and Ito, “Daisaku Ikeda’s Curriculum of Soka Education.”
curriculum goal for student education, but more importantly, it is a curriculum for human education.

For Ikeda, dialogic relationships between teachers and students exemplify the kind of caring relations described by Noddings. Ikeda repeatedly mentions trust and warm respect for students, saying that the teacher should both serve and empower the student. “It’s important to trust and respect the individuality of even the youngest primary-school pupils. This kind of one-on-one, life-to-life interaction develops a sense of self-confidence and self-knowledge in children.”

Ikeda’s call to care for and respect student individuality through one-to-one interactions encourages caring and non-hierarchical engagements that can counteract the typical monologic ways of interacting that emphasize competition, consumerism, and individualism. Educators across the globe that belong to the Buddhist peace organization that Ikeda leads, the Soka Gakkai International, apply these principles to their own educational contexts as an enactment of the Soka ethos. In this way, self-determination, happiness, mutuality, and well-being can be the stimulus for revitalizing curriculum and school materials to make them relevant to students’ daily lives and applicable to local community needs.

Complementary, Relational Worldviews

As the above demonstrates, EcoJustice and Soka traditions share some important similarities. Although each tradition uses different language to emphasize interconnectedness between humans and natural world, both provide support in unlearning our unsustainable and uncaring human practices.

Both Buddhism and commons-based practices insist that we cannot be happy unless all people are happy.

The EcoJustice approach to education used in Monica’s work teaches students and teachers how to critically analyze culture for embedded messages while providing opportunities to engage in care-practices in a public setting. The Soka tradition in Melissa’s work emphasizes inner transformation through dialogue and value creation to engage in deep and lasting social change. Both traditions assert that when students and teachers recognize the need for relational ways of knowing and being, they empower themselves to create value within an educational context rooted in the local community. This shift in perspective can reinvigorate public schooling by allowing cooperation, abundance, and sustainable actions.

Uncovering Dialogic Resistance Through the Lens of Value Creation

Dialogic relationships are not based on economic competition and individualism. Both Buddhism and commons-based practices insist
that we cannot be happy unless all people are happy, and that our use of the environment must be restorative, sustainable, and not at the expense of other lives. Thus, dialogic resistance to neoliberalism in education manifests by fostering dialogic relationships in the classroom, allowing students to experience an inner transformation in the direction of global citizenship and universal caring.\(^37\)

Soka and Ikeda Studies scholar, Jason Goulah, has argued that value creation is a resistance ideology because it locates our lives in a cosmological context rather than a market vision, which “cultivates an ethic of interconnected empathy”\(^38\) with others and nature in response to neoliberal ideology. Through dialogue in the classroom, students understand local and global issues vis-a-vis their own subjectivities and develop a global cultural consciousness. Since, according to Goulah, this inner development “happens at the interface of dialogue . . . the ultimate resistance . . . is a persistent practice of such dialogue. It is this worldview of dialogic resistance that must undergird . . . education if we . . . aim to challenge and resist the neoliberal competitiveness causing the nexus of destruction.”\(^39\)

Thus, it could be said that in both EcoJustice and Soka education traditions, teachers use relational ways of knowing and being to cultivate interconnectedness as a form of resistance to neoliberal values. In the following sections, we share some of our work with teacher colleagues as examples of dialogic resistance through value creation.

Theory to Practice: Teachers Enacting Relationality

\(^37\) Goulah, “Dialogic Resistance in Education.”
\(^38\) Ibid, 89.
\(^39\) Ibid, 99.

In my ongoing dissertation work, I (Monica) work with EcoJustice educators. The EcoJustice educators are practicing K-12 teachers, located in Michigan. These colleagues implement place-based\(^40\) learning projects in their classrooms and have built their vision of teaching in reference to EcoJustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities.\(^41\) All enjoy great respect within the EcoJustice community. I will highlight the work of two them in this paper: Giada and Kimberly.

In my (Melissa’s) ongoing research, I work with Soka educators from across the United States. All have come to know Soka education through participation in Soka Gakkai International education conferences, events, or university classes. All are practicing K-12 educators who believe education should foster a student’s ability to live a contributive life through value-creating education. I, too, will highlight the work of two them in this paper: Grant and Joe.

Giada is an EcoJustice educator who has taught in a variety of educational settings as a special education teacher. Her students are a diverse group of five- and six-year-olds. Kimberly, on the other hand, is an EcoJustice educator who works as a special education teacher in the Detroit area. Grant is a teacher in an independent K-5 progressive school who attended a Soka school prior to becoming a teacher. In contrast, Joe is a math teacher at an alternative public high school in a high poverty, high crime community. He also attended a Soka school and regularly attempts to apply the ideals of value creating education in his classroom.

\(^40\) David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith, eds., Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity, (New York: Routledge, 2010).
\(^41\) Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci, EcoJustice Education.
Actualizing Dialogical Relationships with Each Other in the Classroom

Teachers in both EcoJustice and Soka traditions find ways to incorporate dialogue with their students through classroom strategies and curriculum. Grant expressly works to foster value creation dialogically because he thinks of existence as relational. For him, the essence of value-creating education is “being able to create value through collaboration,” and creating a dialogic relationship with students builds trust. Embracing the well-known KWL technique, Grant incorporates the moral aspects of learning by opening to what his students value, rather than starting with what he values.

Likewise, Giada teaches her kindergarten students how to have conversations during share time by giving them two questions they can use to ask something of the person who is sharing. By focusing on questions rather than statements, she provides opportunities for students to think about others’ values. Like Grant, Kimberly generates questions with her students as they learn more about why their local area has such high rates of pollution. She brings in community partners to speak with the students on the topic, connecting her curriculum to student-driven questions.

While Grant, Giada, and Kimberly focus on student curiosity to foster dialogue with young students, Joe spends significant amounts of time getting to know the realities of his high school students’ lives. “Good teachers enjoy learning not just with their students but also about their students.” He believes “you can’t really teach somebody you don’t know” because you need to know what motivates the student and what experiences they have had in order to make knowledge meaningful to them. For example, the social justice math projects he employs are based on his informal conversations with his students. In that way he is able to utilize their prior knowledge and experience to making their learning meaningful.

Fostering Dialogic Relationships with the Natural World

These teachers allow student interests to guide their classroom conversations. But unlearning is as important as learning in these traditions. Therefore, they also need to establish spaces where culturally marginalized ideas, such as care, are acceptable and practiced. Within these spaces, our teachers also foster dialogical relationships with plants, animals, and the larger whole.

For Joe, the purpose of facilitating connections with his students was to help his students develop “a deeper understanding of our place on this Earth, the myriad of interrelationships and connections for the sake of really living harmoniously with the Earth, living in rhythm with the larger whole.” He found ways to highlight the complexities of interconnectedness by applying math lessons to everyday realities in his students’ environment.

Giada articulates the ways she taught peace in her classroom by connecting to nature. She explains the importance of “how to live peacefully” in a broad sense, talking with her students about “how to treat not just other people, but other things.” She stresses “how all living things deserve a voice.” She focuses students’ attention on other living things in the environment, stating, “those bugs that you’re stepping on don’t want to get stepped on. We can know that without them being able to speak English to us.”
Grant describes a first-grade project he designed on climate change. He explores with his students where their food comes from, which ultimately leads to the creation of a composting system with a worm bin to handle the cafeteria compostable waste. As his students engage in caring for the worms, they were initially scared of them. Over time, they became comfortable and enthusiastic about checking on them every day. After observing worm growth and behavior, his students have lots of questions that sparked inquiry-based research, seeking to understand “how worms are important in soil to create flow for the roots.” Grant is able to meet the curriculum expectations of his school by using projects that “cover a breadth of different subjects through one really important study with social justice implications,” while at the same time fostering a sense of interconnectedness for his students.

With the support of a colleague, Kimberley, like Grant, also uses science curriculum to connect learning to conditions in the local community. Given that their community is one of the most highly polluted localities in the area, from tire dumps to environmental damage to air pollution from local industry, Kimberley’s colleague shared demonstrations that helped students understand concretely how pollution may not be visible, but that it never goes away. By trying to clean water that had been “contaminated” with chocolate syrup, “they discovered that they could never get that water . . . clean again.” Through these demonstrations, Kimberly’s students deepen their awareness of the conditions of their environment and the social causes of those conditions. In this way, Kimberly, like the other teachers, fosters ways of knowing and being that are relational to the natural environment.

When Giada took groups of kindergarten and first-graders into a forest, she emphasized “all living things have value.” Rather than chasing and grabbing animals, she teaches her students to sit quietly and wait for animals to come out. When observing plants, she reminds them, “we don’t pull the leaves off of the trees—that’s how they get their food. We don’t stomp through someone else’s community garden plot. Those plants are living creatures and a whole other group of people planned out how they want this food to grow and they want to eat it.” This type of direct observation and interaction with other living beings exposes and encourages students to develop caring relationships that move them to share with others their acquired knowledge of social and ecological ills.

Giada’s students embraced an enjoyable aesthetic experience, which led to social contribution. By connecting to the outdoors, students benefit from a dialogical relation to nature and learn the priceless skill of how to care for it. To illustrate the value her students give to their learning, Giada shares that her summer camp program has a high retention rate. Students want to continue learning with Giada. Some demanded that the camps’ age limits be extended so they can attend another year. A program
that started as K-5 quickly grew to accommodate students through eighth grade. As the demand for this connective experience continued through the students’ adolescence, Giada’s camp soon had to make space for high school students. The camp eventually grew to include high-school-aged volunteers who became volunteers and counselors in-training.

Grant incorporates geography, science, and math in his climate change project. He starts with something students easily connect with—eating. Since they love eating and are always asking for snacks, he asks them, “what is global warming and how does our food relate?” Then he has them look at five food items at home and find out where they are from. In class the next day, they map the locations and calculate distances, finding the average distance his students’ food traveled. They cook a meal together and add up the total mileage, thereby incorporating science with measuring. Then they discuss strategies they could incorporate at home and at school for changing how they are living, which ultimately leads to the worm composting project their school undertook. The students are able to deepen their appreciation of their interdependence through this project.

Joe describes his efforts to have students “make connections from what they know in their local community to things more distant in space and time, seeing those conceptual connections relevant to their own life.” Joe expresses the way this understanding can become value creation by using the connections to understand “the way that we can give back and contribute to the larger whole and live harmoniously.” He wants his classroom “to use our creative potential not just to consume.”

In order to make those connections, Joe incorporates what he learned through his conversations with his students by designing lessons based on his students’ lived realities of violence and crime in their community. Many of his students’ lives have been touched by violence and have intense stories about traumatic events they have experienced. Based on this, Joe uses “the concept of functions, linear equations, linear relationships, as a means of studying the violence going on” in the local area, looking at “the causes and how many people were really dying at so many different points, and just trying to connect the maps and the graphs and history.” He explains that the project “was really meaningful to be to really bring up and discuss a social issue that many of [his students] had experienced.” His students are able to appreciate the value of mathematics as a way to deepen their understanding of their environment.

Through their experiments and research, Kimberly’s students are able to make the connection that the pollution they see in their daily environment eventually ends up in the surrounding waterways. By linking human activity to the environment, students are able to develop a greater appreciation for interdependent relationships between themselves and the surrounding nature. Community partners who visit their class also help her students increase their awareness by speaking about local environmental issues, like tire dumps. This leads to action.

Taking Action to Create Value and Heal Communities

All our teachers facilitate student value creation in their communities. Kimberly’s students
chose to design a tire cleanup in their community after their classroom discussions about why some communities have tires littered all over the place and some do not. As a result, the students experienced pride in their places and saw how their fellow students and staff in the school valued the service. Although Kimberly was not a Soka teacher, her students were clearly able to create beauty, gain, and good as a result of their learning.

In a similar fashion, Giada described numerous creative and contributive projects on the farm where her summer camp was conducted. For example, she described a farm-to-table program where their farm “planted, tended, grew, picked . . . harvested and then cooked” food in a local high school kitchen. They flash froze the food so that it could be served in school lunches the following autumn. When there was an abundance of produce, the families took some home to enjoy together. Students were able to appreciate the fruits of their labor, benefit personally, but also contribute socially.

At Grant’s school, his students worked together with the cafeteria to design a gardening project that would meet the cafeteria’s needs. They then created the aforementioned composting program to fulfill the needs of their school cafeteria while lowering their impact on the environment. We are “trying to lower our impact, creating a composting system on the site, and really empowering these kids with actual practical skills of having a worm . . . and they love it.”

As a result of their social justice math project, Joe’s students created posters and charts to address the problem of violence, “for the sake of contributing to society in some way or at least discussing or analyzing the way that this problem is not contributing or is creating harm in the community.” Again, through dialogic engagement with their students, Joe and Grant, like Kimberly and Giada, moved their students in the direction of value creation, thereby resisting the neoliberal pressures of competition, individualism, and consumerism.

**Beauty, Gain, and Good**

Our teacher colleagues show us how relating with a purpose can look. Although the Soka teachers specifically referenced value creation because they were familiar with the theory, all four teachers articulate ways that they foster the creation of beauty, gain, and good with their students.

Students are given an opportunity to develop a whole self—a mind, a body and a soul.

These teachers have chosen to resist the neoliberal education paradigm of competition through promoting skills that will have a lasting effect on the lives of those with whom they work. Students are given an opportunity to develop a whole self—a mind, a body and a soul. By creating dialogic relationships with the natural world, healing communities, and making decisions based on respect for the interdependence of humans with other life communities, students are both creating value in their lives and resisting harmful cultural values.

Together, through our scholarship, we examine teachers in Soka and EcoJustice educational traditions who value relationality as an educational priority. We believe that our findings support the conclusion that value creation comes naturally when we foster caring relations through less hierarchical ways of thinking and being, based on interconnectedness and emotional intelligences. It is our hope that teachers...
will find it useful to see how four of their colleagues in the field have found a way to embody a set of values that resist the neoliberal teaching paradigm through restorative and sustainable practices.

In our increasingly competitive education system, care and care practices—not to mention fun and play—are first to be removed from the day’s lesson. In far too many instances, these important pro-social ways of relating have been replaced with standardized test prep, rote memorization, and practicing other activities that are believed to increase a student’s competitive edge.

Teachers need to decide, multiple times in a day, if they are going to respond to their students from a position of care, nurturing, and with developmental appropriateness, or if they are going to meet the needs of the educational industry. On the one hand, teachers wish to help their students be successful, which means higher test scores, more competition, and an emphasis on job-related skills. On the other hand, they wish to care for their students and teach them how to be good humans who value nature and each other. Oftentimes, this paradoxical inner conflict causes teachers to exit the profession.

This paper calls attention to the vital role teachers play as guardians of learning. It describes educational approaches that seek to create classroom spaces where care ethics are inherent. By creating a space that allows for creative coexistence between humans and the natural world, these educators avoid teaching students that there must be a winner and a loser. Increasingly, we hope teachers will seek out such alternative philosophical traditions as the- se, and in the process, nurture trends that will sustain the planet and those who call it home.

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