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Welcome to this Issue

Along with my associate editors, Jared Kemling of Southern Illinois University and Zane Wubbena of Texas State University, I am pleased to share with you this editorial team’s current issue of The Journal of School & Society. We continue to thank the many members of the John Dewey Society who have supported us in this project.

The John Dewey Society was founded in 1935. While the ideas and topics that interested Dewey are shared by all in our organization, as an editorial team, more than anything else, we seek to work in the spirit of the great American philosopher—and in particular, with his commitment to the use of the method of conjoint experience and communication for the enrichment of democratic living. We seek to help communities of like-minded interest—understanding that term in its most Deweyan sense, as that which leads us on to our shared aims and ends—find themselves.

The Journal of School & Society aims to speak to all those interested in the place and function of education in a democratic society—to academics, certainly, but even more so to public school teachers, to parents, and to community activists—both young and old. To that end, we actively seek to highlight voices from diverse constituencies. We seek to be a journal of intelligent practice for creative and justice-oriented practitioners.

In this issue, we join with the many educators who have criticized the trend in public education policy to use market forces as levers for “reform.” However, we do so within a tradition of Deweyan pragmatism. That is, rather than pit ideology versus ideology, we seek to highlight educational practices that subvert the view of the human being embedded in contemporary capitalism: the competitive, acquisitive, self-interested, and coolly rationalistic self.

Our Contributors

Today, nearly all institutions are under threat from ideologies that stress competition over cooperation, consuming over being, and scarcity over abundance.

All of these values—as John Dewey might be the first to note—have their place in a democratic society. Yet the fact remains: institutions that seek to secure shared public goods—pure water, healthy food, clean air, beautiful art and music, as well as strong bodies and intelligent minds—have come under sustained attack.

Public schools, therefore, might work towards a newly cooperative social ethos, one that takes as its primary aim the creation of a society where all are their sisters’ and brothers’ keepers. This issue of the Journal of School & Society explores the creation of such an ethos in several realms.

The Realm of Abundance

Poets and mystics have always rejected the notion that the great goods of life are limited. Da-
vid Jardine, in the featured article for this issue, explores this sense of fullness and how it might yet anchor us in this time of uncertainty: that is, how abundance, rather than being seen as a state or a condition, might instead become a practice. Such a practice would reconnect us to the wonder and beauty of our world and might serve as a new basis from which to rethink what we mean by curriculum.

The Realm of Cultural Wisdom

Bottom-line thinking is colorblind thinking. It flattens everything it touches and makes culture into something that must be overcome in the pursuit of “fidelity of implementation.” In our next section, we hear from educators who have grounded themselves in diverse cultural traditions as a way to challenge neoliberal orthodoxies.

Melissa Bradford and Monica Shields bring the Japanese notion of “soka” into dialogue with eco-centric forms of education in pursuit of a schooling that helps children unlearn what is harmful, all while learning to care for the Earth and the many forms of life which she sustains. Sheron Fraser-Burgess and Camea Davis use the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates to theorize what a less destructive form of the American dream might entail—one that is no longer forgetful of the black and brown bodies who have been violated by the relentless pursuit of white supremacy and wealth accumulation. Finally, Lina Zhang asks what happens when neoliberalism comes into contact with traditional Confucian values—and whether or not child-centeredness can escape the threat of self-centeredness that unfettered capitalism brings with it in contemporary China.

The Realm of Service

Schooling has become a commodity. The aims of education have become commercialized. We go to school to get a good job, a nice home, and a large paycheck. Things that are difficult to justify in purely economic terms, such as art and music, are the first things cut from the school curriculum.

Yet, educators can resist this commodification in a variety of ways. One very practical way to do this is by maintaining and promoting service learning by students—who are then asked to explore what they can do for others rather than asking what teachers and adults can do for them. Theresa Udziela explores the possibility for service in an article on her school’s innovative and popular leadership program.

Another path for resisting commodification comes through story. Who are you? How can I help? These are basic questions that every educator, in one way or another, mobilizes as they start to build relationships with their students. Cynthia Douglas, through her service to undocumented immigrants facing the most heart-breaking of situations, shows us how she approaches this process of humanization through story.

The Realm of Possibility

Whether it be parents seeking to “opportunity hoard” for their own children; teachers who maintain grading systems where students come to see learning as a zero-sum game with “winners” and “losers;” administrators who rate faculty as “highly effective” for their compliance and high test scores; or children who view the talents of another as a threat to their own self worth—instiutions that promote competitive social relations distort the human capacity for harmonious growth.

In our final section, we hear from educators who challenge capitalism head on by staying rooted in the “what may be” rather than the
“what is.” Arthur Chiaravalli argues that it is time to hold accountability accountable by embracing the uncertainty that is part-and-parcel of the humanities. David Militzer argues that the best way to resist the nefarious effects of “disaster capitalism” is to make friends with the future—through a practice of hopeful awaiting. Finally, Lucia De Luca argues that imagination is the classroom practice that must be cultivated if we are ever to see our way beyond the narrow-minded obsessions of the present.

**John Dewey and the Distorting Effects of Endless Competition**

In 1935, John Dewey wrote that:

> the actual corrosive “materialism” of our times . . . springs from the notion, sedulously cultivated by the class in power, that the creative capacities of individuals can be evoked and developed only in a struggle for material possession and material gain.

As true today as it was in 1935, Dewey’s critique of liberal economic theory reminds us of the profound impact that the creed of competition can have on the development of the young.

Classical economics is built upon the idea of scarcity—that resources, capital, labor and time are inherently limited. Hierarchy is, in some ways, a response to the challenges of a perceived scarcity—those at the top receive more, those at the bottom less. A “natural order” is in this way justified. What is worth stressing it is the very belief in scarcity that grounds the entire system.

The rejection of scarcity might be the rejection of hierarchy. And the rejection of hierarchy would be in this sense the rejection of fear.

Throughout his life, Dewey stressed that it is the form of social association in which we find ourselves that shapes who we are and who we might yet become: “Liberalism that takes its profession of the importance of individuality with sincerity must be deeply concerned about the structure of human association.”

Should we appropriate the hours spent by children taking standardized tests and re-dedicate them to serving elders and neighbors, stewarding the environment, and making goods that enrich life, making it more interesting and lovely—schools could become sites that release human potential and remake a society crippled by varying levels of fear.

It is our hope that this issue of our journal provides some food for thought as we each seek to realize these ends.

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“In the Noontime Sun in Summer”: Abundance Reconsidered

David W. Jardine

Preamble

In the process of writing this article, I decided, a bit ironically, I suppose, to take a break and get a bit of sun during the eclipse: August 21, 2017, around 11:30 AM, MDT, and me, 52 degrees north in the Rocky Mountain foothills, west and south of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

And then I just happened to notice these shadows on the deck cast through a leafy lilac bush.

My camera doesn’t quite do this justice, but the bush’s overlapping leaves made countless, overlapping pinhole-camera images betraying arcs of the moon’s shadow in what appears to be a three-dimensional image.

It is a lovely example of a sort of happenstance exuberance of things—and it fell right in line with what I was trying to write. It is exhilarating to think about how much is folded into the curves of this image, and how freely and freshly available it was.

Treating this image not as an isolated thing but as a gateway into worlds of relations takes patience and practice. “Without the readiness of the person who is receiving and assimilating the text to be ‘all ears,’ no . . . text [or thing or image] will speak.”¹ Such readiness, too, is a practice that must be practiced if we are to become practiced in it.

Teachers already know something of this when listening carefully to students. It is how to read the sky with some acuity, how to decode the whiffs of smoke in the air this whole summer.

Becoming thus practiced takes the patience and fellowship of others reading my own experiences of things back to me in ways that go beyond my own ability and experience. Curriculum in abundance, like teaching itself, is a practice.

I think, too, about how very easy this would have been to miss.

Part One: “Regimes of Scarcity”

In educational circles, “regimes of scarcity”² have promoted [the belief] that things are simple and monitor-able and manageable. Abundance and diversity become drained out of the topics [being taught] and become signs, rather, of the pathological variety of “learning styles” we each bring with us to

² Ivan Illich (with David Cayley), Ivan Illich in Conversation (Concord ON: The House of Anansi Press, 1992), 118.
the classroom. We are suggesting something different—that the topics entrusted to schools are abundant and, therefore, suggestions of multiplicity and diversity are not opulent educational options. Rather, the [diverse and multiple] ways of traversing a place that students bring to the classroom is precisely what [abundant, multiple and diverse] things require if they are to be “adequately” understood in their abundance.3

It has been over ten years since my colleagues and I glanced upon the idea of curriculum in abundance. This image of abundance struck a chord with practicing teachers, but the chord it struck was not one of Romantic hopes and sloppy dreams.

Rather, teachers, then and since, have spoken of the ubiquitous experience of scarcity, of time and materials and energy and knowledge itself always on the verge of running out, causing a mood of embattlement and the need to be, as a consequence, hunkered down, barricaded, doling out teaching and learning in a zero-sum game of competition, exchanges of piece-work for marks, and an ever-accelerating pursuit of an ever-receding promise, leading to exhaustion, frustration, and, in some schools, an unfulfilling culture of complaint.

Under regimes of threat—not enough time, high-stakes tests, competition for spots in further education, and so on—vibrant, rich and exploratory attention is hard to maintain. Without practice, it atrophies, and such atrophy makes exploratory attention increasingly unpracticed, thus increasing a sense of scarcity and threat, thus tying together the knot.

The tragedy comes when, once atrophied, one is resignedly glad of threat-induced procedures, rubrics, manageable routines and assessment tools, since pedagogical experience, in students and teachers alike, has not been able to be well cultivated in such circumstances.

Harry Braverman called this process “deskilling”4 and showed how it forms a deliberate and strategic part of the maintenance of efficiency in industrial production. It makes workers easily replaceable and compliant, because they are only asked to follow a few simple rules that anyone could follow. They no longer need any cultivated craft or skill or practical experience.

Hence the echoes we hear in David G. Smith’s chilling statement of a commonplace in which we are all variously implicated: “Tell me exactly what it is you want in this assignment.”5 Even more chilling is how this echoes a June 4th, 1906 lecture by Fredrick Winslow Taylor, the “father” of what came to be known as the efficiency movement. Taylor was, in a sense, hired to make American schools more efficient by replicating his work in industrial assembly: “In our scheme we do not ask for the initiative of our men. We do not want any initiative. All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quickly.”6

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Given Taylor’s words about the “scheme” he insinuated into the organization of schooling, blaming “kids these days” for lack of initiative—while at once living out the legacies of efficiency in how schools are structured—is, frankly, a tragic form of cultural amnesia.

Part Two: “So Permeates the Soil”

Educational rituals reflected, reinforced and actually created belief in the value of learning pursued under conditions of scarcity.

Part of the hard work of understanding curriculum in abundance is having to repeatedly unravel this long legacy of fragmentation and scarcity that comes down to us from the efficiency movement.

The efficiency movement of industrial assembly became codified into how curriculum topics were broken down into separate bits and pieces and sequenced in their standardized reassembly and how, therefore, anything that could not be thus codified—tarrying, for example, over a deck shadow and consider how arcs and circles create a seeming three-dimensionality—was marginalized or eradicated as a threat to efficiency itself.

Rich, thoughtful and rigorous explorations become cast as “frills” which we’ll get to later, if we have time. And, it seems inevitably, there is never time for such things.

With each particular curricular fragment, we experience lack, scarcity, and “not enough,” and this propels the subsequent urgency to “get through” the curriculum. And, once locked into this dominant regime, the urgency created by this regime—Taylor suggested that it helps keep workers and, hence, teachers and students on their toes—can only be satisfied by further fragmentation and standardization. It leads, inevitably, to failed, market-driven promises of sure-fire “teaching methods,” with no experience needed for success.

Just do what it says to do.

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7 Illich (with Cayley), 165.

Now there is nothing wrong with efficiency per se, but there is something amiss regarding its hidden dominance, especially insofar as it invades living fields of thought, living disciplines of knowledge, and renders them into fragments that seem to—this emphasis is important—bear no inner affinity to each other, each ready for separate, sequenced and standardized assembly.

With each particular curricular fragment, we experience lack, scarcity, and “not enough,” and this propels the subsequent urgency to “get through” the curriculum. And, once locked into this dominant regime, the urgency created by this regime—Taylor suggested that it helps keep workers and, hence, teachers and students on their toes—can only be satisfied by further fragmentation and standardization. It leads, inevitably, to failed, market-driven promises of sure-fire “teaching methods,” with no experience needed for success.

Just do what it says to do.
Addition, we are told, has nothing to do with subtraction. It is taught first because it comes before subtraction in the curriculum guide—in a developmentally determined and standardized sequence of “assembling” mathematical knowledge. This way of thinking, I suggest, is a mathematical disaster, and a pedagogical and ecological one as well.

Part of the work in which I have engaged with teachers is precisely sorting through and studying this legacy—its hold on how the work of teaching and learning is imagined and practiced. We read, for example, Raymond Callahan’s now-classic text, *America, Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, and dozens of other sources that elaborate what has happened to education. To us and our students and to the knowledge entrusted to us in schools. All under this regime.

“Taylor’s thinking so permeates the soil of modern life we no longer realize it’s there.” Hence the gasps of recognition (my own included) and that weird moment of realizing that what seemed to be just “the way things are” in the world of schools is in fact nothing of the sort. We are not dealing with “the real world” under “regimes of scarcity.” Rather, we are dealing with how the world of schools happened to have turned out—once it is fashioned after the model of efficient industrial assembly, with the control, surveillance, acquiescence and obedience it requires.

To understand curriculum in abundance, a weird sort of spell must be broken.

Where do I start? Who should I talk with and about what? How much is enough? Breaking this spell causes its own sort of momentary panic. But there is good news, here, too. I don’t have to try to gobble up and amass as much experience and knowledge as possible—as quickly as possible.

I recall telling a group of student-teachers that when you glance at a globe and see the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn lines around it, you don’t have to worry. When you are ready and able, the knowledge is right there, patiently waiting for you—of constellations, of maps and map-makers, of the tilt in the Earth’s pole, of seasons, of the tropics (Latin *tropos*, “turning”), of the Sun (Latin *Sol*) stopping (Latin *stasis*) its lowering, turning, and starting to rise at Winter solstice (Latin *Sol-stasis*).

In all of this, it is not a matter of figuring out some new trick and then no longer having to be attentive. Nor is it simply a matter of having amassed some great storehouse of knowledge ready for dispensation.

Rather, it is a matter of *becoming studious* in how we let ourselves experience the world. “We can entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest.” We can glance at deck shadows and know that there is great abundance there, ready for our attention and devotion.

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11 Kanigel, 7.

Part Three: “Our Work Perishes Quickly”

Perhaps it is only when we focus our minds on our machines that time seems short. Time is always running out for machines. They shorten our work by simplifying it and speeding it up, but our work perishes quickly. Since no shortened and simplified fragment of industrial assembly requires much attention, this leads to a cascade of hurry and panic over bits and pieces—no one of which requires any careful attention. This then leads to grasping for regimes of management to secure oneself against precisely the rush that is produced and sustained by such regimes.

This phenomenon is palpable in many schools, and in much of contemporary living beyond those walls—not just speed but acceleration. There is a great irony here.

Regimes of scarcity, fragmentation and efficiency produce precisely the sense of time running out that they seem to be designed to ameliorate. Time running out is precisely yet another way in which efficiency induces a sense of scarcity, and thereby an unquestioning obedience and compliance from those under its sway.

Part Four: Monsters in Abundance

“Time is [not] always running out.” The real work of teaching and learning does not perish quickly.

Years ago, I was speaking in the school hallway with a kindergarten teacher about monsters. She asked me to come in and talk to her students about it. We sat and tossed around ideas of what you think of when you hear the word: scary, big, hairy, green, under the bed, in that story Papa tells, trolls, bridges, bears in the woods, darkness, being chased, my little brother, run, help, grr!

I diligently wrote all this down on the paper beside me and then told the children that this word, “monster,” comes from an old Latin term, monere, which means “to warn, to show, to teach.”

After we all had a laugh looking over at their teacher, “the monster,” we talked about the fact that monsters aren’t just there to scare you in a story. They are trying to tell you something. Who sees the monster? When do they see the monster? Where does it live? What does the monster want? I asked them to have another look at books they had mentioned and think about what the monsters are up to.

I also suggested that they write down the word, monere, and take it home and tell their parents that they are learning Latin in kindergarten. We laughed and laughed at the thought. In the weeks and months that followed, I stopped in, saw myriad books, and heard countless tales of heeding, of showing, of teaching.

Six years later. Same school.

A young boy came up to me in the hallway holding the latest Harry Potter volume.

13 Wendell Berry, Standing By Words. (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1983), 76.

“You’re the monsters guy, right?”
He flipped the book open.
“I want to show you something.”

Our work perishes quickly only if it remains in separate fragments in which no future tug of past memory can be experienced. Curriculum in abundance works to see through this situation, to see how any seeming fragment is, in fact, a fragment of something and is, therefore, always already full of relations and kin, full of stored, shared and contested memory and stories, rife with appearances and re-appearances in our lives and living.

And it is reliably and consistently thus even if we don’t have time. Even if we don’t know what might be there for the finding.

Many teachers have voiced an immediate recognition of something like abundance in moments of their day-to-day work with students: when a question or conversation takes flight, when an exploration yields to careful attention and blossoms open into unforeseen territories, when a text or a geometrical figure suddenly gives up its secrets and opens up and out and beyond our immediate ken and asks us to search, to study, to be patient and rigorous and attentive.

When deck shadows suddenly stand there, beckoning me to be all ears.

Given this experience of interdependence, interrelatedness, and abundance, teaching and learning are no longer rushed matters of industrial assembly, but more akin to an ecological acts of recognizing the “places” (Greek topos) we inhabit. How they work, what they ask of us, what holds them together, and what our work might therefore be in them if we are to take good and proper care of these curriculum “topics” (Greek topos).

This is an ancient and always-brand-new experience enjoyed and enjoined far beyond the confines of school: “[the world] compels over and over, and the better one knows it, the more compelling it is.”

Many teachers have voiced an immediate recognition of something like abundance in moments of their day-to-day work with students.

Part Five: And Pythagoras’ Ghost

I think of how intensely patient were Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen’s long and winding classes on the surroundings—the “topography”—of the Pythagorean Theorem. Full of images and words and ghosts and relations, diagrams and circles and angles and perpendicularly and angle bisections.

Full, too, of tree shadows, now, in the winter sun, longer than they were last summer.

And a slightly astonished 12-year-old boy facing south on the playground, toes at the end of the long shadow, blurtting: “But Pythagoras says that something is still the same.” Half a wide-eyed declaration, half a question.

This is why Sharon and Pat and I took on a sort of rescue mission of the idea of “the ba-
We knew from decades of practice that fragments are not basic but are, rather, arcane and abstract outcomes of incredibly elaborate and invasive interventions into living fields, tearing apart any memory of their belonging together, their inherent relatedness. And then, in a great act of forgetting what we have done, these fragments are said to come before and to be more basic than the living field that enticed our attention in the first place.

What comes first, what is basic, is our human draw towards such kinships, such relatedness, wherein my own interest—Latin *inter*, “in the middle,” plus *esse*, “of things”—is not only a testament to, but part of that very relatedness. Such “interest” is something that most teachers secretly know but have little recourse to express, that “something awakens our interest—that is really what comes first.”

In this sort of awakening to the abundant interrelatedness of things, the Pythagorean Theorem (or those deck shadows, or adding, or subtracting):

No longer has the character of an object that stands over and against us. We are no longer able to approach this like an object of knowledge, grasping, measuring and controlling. Rather than meeting us in our world, it is much more a world into which we ourselves are drawn, so long as it is not placed into the object-world of producing and marketing.

Each seemingly separate thing or seeming fragment “possesses its own worldliness” and to teach it, to learn it, is to come to know this worldliness.

It is to quite literally re-place it back into all its relations that were, in reality, hidden there all along.

**Part Six: School**

Young people want to know if, under the cool and calm of efficient teaching and excellent time-on-task ratios, life itself has a chance, or whether the surface is all there is.

Abundance points to a long-forgotten cluster of etymological origins of the word “school”—from the Greek *skhole* and the Latin *schola*, meaning both “leisure” and “a holding back, a keeping clear.” The great arts of teaching and learning are to be conducted, in part, away from the day-to-day fray of immediate, impinging, hurrying concerns, anxieties, distractions, renderings, wall-building, and threats that are not indigenous to the workings of the topics being explored.

In such leisure and holding back, it is possible to notice and to confirm how good—how mathematically rich and mathematically abundant—is that 12-year-old boy’s questioning declaration over a lengthening tree shadow that has somehow also remained the same. Yes, Pythagoras is flourishing right here underfoot, right here in the arc of seasons and sun and shadows, and right by your toes at the end of that shadow. Even this mathematical Theorem is not just an isolated and memorizable fragment but also a memorable and befitting reminder of a living field of relations in isolation from which it would not properly be what it is.

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21 Gadamer, 192.

22 David G. Smith, 1999, 139.
There is no hurry here, no time running out, no scarcity, no lack. It does not need to be doled out, surveilled, and monitored. It has its own indigenous relatedness and rigorousness, its own orderliness, its own tale to tell. It is not used up by our attention. It does not become scarce but precisely the opposite. The more we learn of it, the more we know of the inexhaustibility of its relations and kin, and this sense of being inevitably “outplayed” is part of the deep pleasure of such work. Just for a moment, my own anxieties, wrapped up as they are in the distractions and rush of “producing and marketing,” can let go, out into the leisurely time of this rich place which, of itself, does the work of holding back and keeping clear.

In the school-as-schola, the living field of knowledge being investigated can flourish of its own accord. I have called this elsewhere a “pedagogy left in peace.”

Part Seven: From Little Panics to Terror

Animals under various forms of threat—the continuous presence of predators, lack of adequate food, drought, and the like—tend to play less and less. They tend, quite naturally, to revert to those kinds of activities that will aid them in gaining comparative control over their environment, activities that involve little or no risk.

People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders. They are the ideal consumers. By inducing in them little panics of boredom, powerlessness, mortality, paranoia, they can be made to buy virtually anything that is “attractively packaged.”

We have been schooled in these governing habits. We have become habituated. The promise of efficiency and its consequent cultivation of a sense of lack, of scarcity, and the need for obedience, dovetails easily with the never-fully-fulfilled promise of market logic.

Early in the 20th century, once efficiency movements in industry reached a certain threshold of increased production, the desire to consume more and more quickly became subject to equally hidden and systematic psychological manipulation, using the same easily induced sense of lack, scarcity, and panic, threat and never-quite-fulfilled promises of relief

So, then, this, from Kevin O'Leary. O'Leary, a recent candidate for leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada, was affiliated with *The Learning Company*, currently owned by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, one of North America’s largest providers of packaged educational products, “learn to read” series, and educational video games such as *Carmen Sandiego* and *Reader Rabbit*.

I’m all for children, but I want to make a buck. I am *Carmen Sandiego*. I am *Reader Rabbit*. People will do anything for their children to help them in math and reading scores. I made a fortune just servicing that market. I love the terror in a mother’s heart when she sees her child fall behind in reading. I made a fortune from that.

I encourage practicing teachers and parents to read it carefully and with an open heart, because something vaguely suspected is finally being said clearly, unequivocally, and out loud, and for that we should be oddly grateful.

**Part Eight: From Terror to Perpetual War**

“Given . . . abundance, scarcity must be a function of boundaries.”

The insistence on well-wrought boundaries and the building of walls is a function of feeling invaded, vulnerable, and under threat. It is also a function of the hoarding by those in power of what is of value and the subsequent manipulation of scarcity and threat as a means to deflect attention away from the realities of such manipulative functioning. Thus maintaining those regimes of power and profit.

“I made a fortune from that.”

We have seen a lot of this recently. How easy it is to induce and manipulate, especially if we remain immersed in the roiling distortions and distractions of attention, unable to hold back or keep clear (*schola*) enough to think through what is being perpetrated and to what end, and to whose benefit.

“I love the terror in a mother’s heart.”

“I love the poorly educated.”

This suggests why the issue of curriculum in abundance is far more relevant than it was 11 years ago.

A great inversion has occurred, where a reliable means of relieving this sense of embattlement, of breaking its spell, of holding back and keeping clear our knee-jerk panics and anxieties—the school as *schola*—is now often identified as one of the causes of embattlement.

This inversion works like this. Regimes of scarcity are regimes of threat. And, in light of the retractions and subsequent xenophobic suspicions produced and sustained by threat-consciousness, any suggestion of abundance feels like a breach, a border-violation, a counter-threat, an uprising:

Education becomes akin to a sometimes overt, but more often subtle war on the very possibility of unanticipated “uprising.” Natality itself becomes experienced as a perennial insurgent threat to security that must be planned for and secured against. Education becomes cast as akin to a counterinsurgent war on terror.

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29 O’Leary’s quote referenced above.

30 From a speech of Donald Trump, where he stated that, “I love the poorly educated.” Published February 23, 2016. Accessed on-line: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vpdf3omPoG0.

Those who suggest abundance, show affection for it, and demonstrate a desire to live one’s life in its sway, become suspect:

Trying to act on the belief (inside or outside of schools) that the matters at hand need more intellectual subtlety than purged and clarified exaggerations-under-threat allow, starts to appear as an act of betrayal or sedition. Believing that there is more complexity to the story . . . is to be branded a conspiracy theorist. Wanting to know something more than the simplistic, threat-induced clarities . . . is [considered] egregious. Knowledge and its pursuit become experienced as a threat to security.32

Part Eight: Elephants and “A Terrible Trial”

We ought to be like elephants in the noon-time sun in summer, when they are tormented by heat and thirst and catch sight of a cool lake. They throw themselves into the water with the greatest pleasure and without a moment’s hesitation. In just the same way, for the sake of ourselves and others, we should give ourselves joyfully to the practice.33

I felt compelled to leave in this scene of elephants plunging into cool water as a way to counterbalance a bit of the dourness that is being discussed here. The work of studying the world in its abundance is full of great and difficult and repeated joys—of discovery, of reliable and time-tested insight, full of stings and little reliefs, breakthroughs and wonders and, too, failures and commiserations and starting all over again. It can provide long, solid, rigorous, multiple, scholarly ancestries to ideas of dependent co-arising, interdependence, and abundance.

This is not New Age froth or emotionally fraught, “liberal” touchy-feely-ness, or do-whatever-you-want-ness. It is the old and reliable warrant of thinking carefully and well, of scholarly work, of evidence, of good and practicable examples, attentiveness, and so on. And this is sometimes simpler than it might seem. I recall having a complex conversation over recess with a student-teacher regarding the ins and outs of multiplying by fractions and how hard it is to articulate, and by the time we noticed, the students in this grade-five class had returned and were sitting quietly behind us, leaning forward a bit into a mid-conversation. The student-teacher asked me, “what should I do now?” The answer was weirdly simple.

We should not now do something else.

“Let’s tell them about the conversation we were just having and see what happens.” Entrusting ourselves.

So there we were, the chalkboard full of scrabbles and examples and things crossed out, standing up, facing fresh faces just in from the cold, stood up into the hard, joyous work of seeking wisdom about this matter, together in its safe and reliable company.

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I had the great good fortune of ending the formal part of my career co-teaching, with Jackie Seidel, at the University of Calgary, two clusters of graduate courses that explored the matters mentioned here. These involved talking together, reading together, taking and passing notes back and forth, writing, publishing, conference presentations, retreats, gathering and re-gathering. Since those courses ended, some of us have continued weekly meetings of refuge and comfort in its deepest sense—cultivating “common strength” against the forces of fret and distraction. When surrounded in the frays of schooling and trying to just get by, reminders are important, commiseration is vital. Just seeing each other’s faces was sometimes enough to invoke a whispered, “oh, yes, right.”

I end with part of an interview with Wendell Berry, conducted by Bill Moyers. It was one of the many “texts” that we carefully “read” and “re-read” in our gatherings. Advice, here, about impending ecological troubles, but equally a heartfelt message to teachers and students in schools about the portend of curriculum in abundance:

This can’t be hurried; this is the dreadful situation that young people are in. The situation you’re in is a situation that is going to call for a lot of patience, and to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial. The important thing to do is to learn all you can about where you are, to make common cause with that place, and then, resigning yourself, become patient enough to work with it over a long time. And then, what you do is increase the possibility that you’ll make a good example. And what we’re looking for in this is good examples.

I would only re-emphasize that this work needs the company of others—the long and mixed ancestries of thinking and writing. Ways from our elders, the fresh company of the youngest of children and newest of students, and the affectionate vigor of colleagues. Those who will treat my slim patience and other failings with some patience, and let me do the same with them, over this common work.

I ask for the same from the bustling moose that just barged through last night, or from that whiff of stale smoke from the British Columbia fires, or the deep waters current in Houston, all that serve as reminders, as gateways, into our abundant and dependent co-arising.

I want to push this one more step: there is no emergency here. Seeing through this manipulated semblance in good company is itself a terrible trial worth the work. In, and only in, this frail and finite mutuality lives curriculum in abundance.


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—all by myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself.”

—Daisaku Ikeda

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

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

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 cultures6 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 ideologies8 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 encultured 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
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

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.

Relational (e)pistemologies provide teachers with philosophical underpinnings to resist neoliberal encroachment in their classrooms and foster sustainable cultures of care.

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 pr[oper] 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

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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.

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

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

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Connections 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.

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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.27 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.\textsuperscript{35} 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.”\textsuperscript{36}

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**

\textsuperscript{35} For a more detailed exploration of the confluences between Soka education, relational (e)pistemologies, and Noddings’ caring theory, see Julie Nagashima, “The Meaning of Relationships for Student Agency in Soka Education: Exploring the Lived Experiences and Application of Daisaku Ikeda’s Value-Creating Philosophy through Narrative Inquiry” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2017).


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.  

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” 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.”

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**

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37 Goulah, “Dialogic Resistance in Education.”
38 Ibid, 89.

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 learning projects in their classrooms and have built their vision of teaching in reference to *EcoJustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities.* 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.

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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, Kimberly, 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, Kimberly’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 . . . They can get it cleaner, but not as clean as it started.”

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.

Relationality Leading to Student’s Deepening Value of Interdependence

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—42—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-


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Memory Work for All: 
Getting Beyond Neoliberalism’s Racialized Politics of the American Dream

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Thus the American dream is an impressive ideology. It has for centuries lured people to America and moved them around within it, and it has kept them striving in horrible conditions against impossible odds. Most Americans celebrate it unthinkingly, along with apple pie and motherhood; criticism typically is limited to imperfections in its applications.¹

The idea of the “American Dream” lives powerfully in America’s cultural imagination as an aspirational trope. Although the nature of the dream varies, its accomplishment is universally viewed as a worthwhile goal.²

Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a racial hermeneutic of the term.³ Indicting its symbolism, Coates claims that it masks the complicity of its acquisitive aims by abetting racialized violence and oppression in the United States. “The Dream” is the very ideation of white materialist achievement and all of its accoutrements.

This paper argues that neoliberalism is most implicated in such a dream—a dream in which scarcity of resources, competition, and commodification that encourages consumerism are all axiomatic. As a corollary, it underwrites the privileging of private consumption and an individualistic prosperity as primarily being “for me and mine.”

Animated by claims of meritocracy, colorblind ideology, and a white-washed history, the idea of the American dream functions much like an opiate—one that neoliberal advocates have lately administered to the masses.

“The Dream” is the metaphor within which these claims are justified and made legitimate. Animated by claims of meritocracy, colorblind ideology, and a white-washed history, the idea of the American dream functions much like an opiate—one that neoliberal advocates have lately administered to the masses. It justifies the increasing corporate influence on the institutions of democratic society and the ceding of increasing aspects of our lives to market forces.

This paper also explores, then, the differential cultural wages of neoliberal ideology. By couching itself in a discourse of colorblind individualism, and by placing an inherent value

² Hochschild and Scovronick detail the conflict between individual benefits and the public good that is taking place in public schools and that lead to a growing opportunity gap for the least advantaged students.
³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).
on laissez faire economies, neoliberal economic and educational policies have advanced a ruthless “single story” of American aspirations. Desire itself is co-opted under such a regime.

The possibilities for achieving racial commons in the American context goes beyond this singular and materialist conception. It might go instead to a shared experience of the struggle for, and the joys of, a meaningful life. Such a vision would make sense of the complex attachments to places in American geography, their histories, and the journeys that individuals and families made across states, regions, and countries to acquire a new sense of belonging on American soil.

The individual and collective cultural processes of memory work hold promise for fostering an American dream predicated on personhood and the recognition of diverse forms of group identity. Appealing to bell hooks, Theresa Edlmann, and Rebecca Martusewicz, this paper explores the possibilities for a dream rooted in connections to places, spaces, and their history. This work proposes that the forms of migration that are inherent in the American story can make possible the common, continual, and forward march of our society towards a more unifying vision of American aspirations.

Ultimately, these journeys and the way that they mediate forms of identity are essential to cultivating a shared sense of place. In this way, they can treat the racial animus and counter neoliberal individualist ideology.

Coates & the Neoliberal Appropriation of the American Dream

As an ideology, the American dream has powerfully motivated both creative and reformist discourses. Nominally related to basic principles for being successful, the American dream is a construction that can direct one’s life goals towards the achievement of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Paradoxically, the lived disparity between the reality and the ideal has given rise to revisionist critiques and interpretations. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Between the World and Me represents the American dream or “the Dream” as complicit in the historical oppression of black and brown bodies. For, indeed, the sustained, deleterious effects of economic and social policies on the black community are a thread that runs through the narrative—and, perhaps, undergird the very possibility of the narrative itself.

Coates’ work, as has been widely acknowledged, is written as in the intergenerational epistolary discourse—a discourse that Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time made famous. The letter addresses his 15-year-old son, Samori, on the occasion of the news that the officers responsible for the shooting of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, would not be charged with a crime. When “a journalist asked [Coates] what it meant to lose [his] body,” he awoke to the burden to “awaken her from the most gorgeous dream.”

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4 This concept of a “single story” has been popularized through the 2009 TED Talk of the Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.


9 Coates, Between the World and Me, 5.

10 Coates, Between the World and Me, 11.
Coates reveals that there is no escape from this harsh reality for blacks, who must live daily under this cloud. Coates remarks that, as a child, he recognized this differences between his way of life and the one in the popular media—all too clearly associated with bright hopes.

Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that fear was connected to the dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets. But how? Religion could not tell me. The schools could not tell me. The streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day.  

Coates contrasts the sonorous images of holiday cookouts, picket fences along, peppermint, and strawberry shortcake with the brutal acknowledgement that he did not have the luxury to find escape and comfort in these cultural artifacts.

For "the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies." It is this linking of the Dream to the exploitative economy that Coates details.

**The Neoliberalization of the American Dream as Racial Differentiation**

Neoliberalism has increasingly co-opted the American dream. Coates helps us see this.

Neoliberalism is an economic system of controlling markets and fostering competition in industries and the private and public sectors. Neoliberals seek less federal interference in daily lives and more privatization. Maintaining that everyone is on a level playing field, neoliberals promote performance-based economic accountability and meritocratic policies, practices, and discourses.

Under the presupposition that any American citizen can compete equally under such a system, neoliberalism favors a colorblind approach to public policy, while covertly dismissing social justice critiques of racial inequality in mainstream politics. This ideology is manifested in schools in the form of the corporate control of public schools and the proliferation of charter schools.

**Colorblindness is, in this way tied up with neoliberalism.**

Coates writes, “the myth perpetuated by the conservative American dream was an opportunity ripe for the talented few who could seize and exploit that opportunity.” Among that which was seized on as “opportunity” was black lives and black bodies—plundered and economically exploited to advance the dream of the few. This is a story that dates to 1619.

The nature of the profiteering has changed over time. Current neoliberal policies can obstruct, bind, and silence the human body through forms of corporate privatization of public services—such as in the case of the privatized prisons, charter schools, and contracted armed services.

Coates calls on this same history when he confronts whiteness. His evocative phrase—one that asks the reader to question who is white and why—is “the people who believe that they are white.” Colorblindness is, in this way

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12 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 11.
13 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 151.
tied up with neoliberalism. It hides the ugly truth of white supremacy, allowing European Americans to live under a cloak of invisibility while other Americans are forced to live in its margins. Whiteness has become a market factor in a system that carries privilege and power.

Neoliberalism, therefore, is complicit in, sustained by, and therefore perpetuates white supremacy. The only people able to passively ignore whiteness are European-Americans. They do so as a tenet of their unmerited white privilege. All other ethnic groups in America, especially black Americans, live with the irrefutable reality of whiteness and white privilege every day.

Coates exemplifies this point in his discussion of the ever-present condition of fear of black youth in America. He argues that the fear of violence, fear of death, or fear of disembodiment is an inescapable reality of being black in this America. “The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear.”

The reference to personal responsibility is likened to the neoliberal call for a narrowing of the social safety net so that a greater burden is placed on the individual to secure his or her future, even in the event of circumstances over which he or she had no control.

Additionally, it hints at a “blame the victim” regime that allows the state to deny responsibility towards its citizens. By comparison, white Americans are allowed to dismiss all responsibility for the violent, discriminatory practices imposed on generations of black Americans that disenfranchises and disempowers them. Ignoring race and dismissing it is a tactic of oppression for all engaged.

Neoliberalism purchases and sustains the dream of meritocracy for white Americans by way of its subversion of black reality, subjugation of the black body, and violence in black communities. Similarly, even though neoliberals may reject white supremacist intentions, dismissing race as a factor upholds white supremacy by allowing some to silently accept its privileges.

Coates exemplifies the contradictions and risks of conceding race as a factor in neoliberalism while calling out the passivity that allows white supremacy to thrive unrecognized. “No one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction. But [in my childhood] a great number of educators spoke of ‘personal responsibility’ in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility.”

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**Schools as Context for the Neoliberal Suppression of Black and Brown Dreams**

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17 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 33.
Giroux and Giroux maintain that youth of color are especially under attack in our society, through neoliberal school reform that treats these youths as dangerous and in need of containment. Black youth are now blamed for their social problems and treated as criminals—as opposed to victims of their condition. Thus, schools that serve children of color in low-income communities under a neoliberal system are privatized and militarized in ways that punish these students. Furthermore, neoliberal policies advocate legislation that supports and promotes the criminalization of children of color under the gaze of color-blind policy.

Coates chronicles the contemporary experiences of young black male children for whom school is parallel to juvenile detention centers in its physical structure, curricular design, and hidden curricula. For example, Coates maintains that the black child is not asked to be curious, but merely to fit neatly into the narrow confines of public school contexts that may see his existence as irrelevant to the specific functioning of the school system, and, more broadly, American society.

Under the veil of whiteness, Coates argues that his own “schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them.” Thus, black identity and experiences are silenced and excluded from the curricula. This exclusion perpetuates narrow conceptions of who can be known and valued in American schooling to singularly Americans of European descent. This aids in the invisibility of whiteness and, in turn, white supremacy is tacitly endorsed as the normalized way of life.

**Doing Memory Work for a New Ideal**

Coates argues that, in this contemporary historical moment of the last half-century, neoliberal policies have contributed to the emergence of a racially colorblind and yet differentiated iteration of the American dream. It is an ideological preoccupation with individual material success and achievements. It is an endorsement of policies at every level of government that accommodate this ideal of the American life journey.

... the black child is not asked to be curious, but merely to fit neatly into the narrow confines of public school contexts.

Quality of life studies of the political landscape suggest that this ideology has spread while the citizenry has, by in large, not been able to make satisfactory social mobility gains. Therefore, deep levels of dissatisfaction with material conditions afflict not only the white working class, but also all of the middle class.

Further compounding the social crisis is that African-Americans generally recognize, at the local level, the structural and systemic sources of this newly broadened inequality that has arisen and have been maintained because of these very policies. As Hochschild explains, because the complaints of the black population are situated within calls for racial justice, the white working class are inured to claims of social inequality.

Coates’ work illustrates the wide-ranging and overarching historical narrative that warrants the indictment of this account of the American journey. As such, it is a kind of

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18 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 137.
19 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 27.
memory work for Coates and for his son, Samori. This section of the paper explores the possibilities of grand remembering, or “memory work,” as a way of countering the neoliberal iteration of the American dream.

We argue that a cultural understanding of the places and spaces of self-association and the history that accompanies them hold the promise of resituating the American dream. It can be viewed as a struggle for the establishment of a new commons around the moral complexity of both American glories and its acts of hegemony—both of which inhabit its past, particularly as they have been lived out in the groups with which one identifies.

Coming out of the scholarship of anthropology, history, and, lately, of peace studies, the concept of memory work broadly refers to the “cultural shaping of memory.” It is premised on the idea that the prevailing cultural knowledge of an ethnic group indicates the fluid remembering and forgetting that collectively shapes the group’s identity.

According to Jennifer Cole, this notion of social memory refers to “the means through which a group reconstructs, assimilates, and understands its past, and its role in the formation of the group’s contemporary identity.” Cole’s work explores the role of memory in everyday life, habits, and practices, specifically in redress to the harms of colonization. In conjunction with Coates’ critique, and with consideration of the mediating factors in the American context (e.g. centuries of chattel slavery and pervasive settler exploitations and practices), such notions can point the way towards possibilities for a morally legitimate and more inclusive account.

At issue in Cole’s work is the extent to which people are able to fully realize a sense of their own subjectivity. In light of prolonged subjugation, hardship, and suffering of colonial regimes, how do such societies erect or reestablish a meaningful sense of survival and continuation?

“To remember is more than simply to recall a specific event or fact. It means defining [a] place and position in the world, asserting links with particular people and places while rejecting others.” It is a work of memory that is a collective and continual. As such, it can be characterized as an ongoing journey of meaning-making in which there are culturally intentional choices of identity formation. In this way, “it is important not to reduce memory to politics by other means but to see it as a moral practice, drawing on affect and on deep struggles for personal and collective meaning.”

We believe that Between the World and Me exemplifies this sort of memory work. On this reading, Coates offers not merely a re-narration but imposes a discursive structure upon American history that is consistent with a moral ideal and its inherent order. In his historical reconstruction, he asserts the fundamental humanity of the embodied black race, even as he unflinchingly describes the horror of white supremacy that must follow as an implication.

Coates shows that it is possible to selectively limit the formative role that four centuries of slavery and de jure and de facto Jim Crow laws can have on a people’s group identity. It shows the way towards the invention of a generative post-slavery consciousness that endures and even triumphs in the face of oppression.

25 It is worth noting that this practice of memory work is one that one could also associate with Womanist thinking as attributed originally to Alice Walker, Katie Cannon and Emile Townes. Coates models an interplay between
America is a nation where historical rootedness to a place is highly racialized and politically conflicted. As a result, a person’s social position is deeply connected to the body’s symbolic and material significance—as Coates maintains, in ways that arguably can supersede regional or local affiliation.26 If the aim is an American dream that does not pit one racial group against the other, below, we propose a preliminary account of symbolic lenses through which there can be racially situated memory work for all in the American context.

Black and White Embodiment in Remembering of American History

Coates offers racially differentiated tasks of minding one’s body in pursuit of carving out a meaningful existence. In his epistle, he explains to Samori that embodiment as a black person in America equates to compensating for the social import of one’s body in light of the American’s tradition of “destroying the body.”27

Haile describes Coates’ orientation towards the body as “underscoring its capacities to both open up and close down material possibilities of life and death.”28 There is the equation of the likelihood of life fortunes and outcomes with the form of one’s racial embodiment. The black American’s charge in light of this history is to be engaged in the ongoing work of asserting one’s humanity. It is achieved through a historically grounded understanding and celebration of the meaning of black embodied identity as part of the African Diaspora. For as Coates tells his son, “you cannot arrange your life around them and the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness.”29

By comparison, the labor of white Americans vis-à-vis the body is only indirectly addressed and yet it implicitly runs through the entire work. There is a stark chronicling of historical and contemporary racial injustices that beg the question of the salience of the moral imperatives of the nation’s charter documents. Coates makes clear the interpretive gap between asserting equality and the way in which its realization is linked to the necessary racial and phenotypic criterion of whiteness.

What, then, needs to happen for white Americans? Acknowledging whiteness as real embodied racial identity in all of the evil that it has wrought while not foreclosing the possibility for reformation. Yet Coates is clear that he is not exactly concerned with the enactment of this particular memory practice. It is a task for this “other” to define.

As Coates’ explains.

Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God. … In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed their God.

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26 Kathleen Cramer presents the urban versus rural divide as the salient political fault line that influenced the outcome of the local, state, and national elections in Wisconsin. However, this divide also maps along a racial affiliation that Cramer leaves unaddressed in her work.


27 Coates, Between the World and Me, 103.


29 Coates, Between the World and Me, 146.
When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” he was not merely being aspirational … The question is … what our country has, throughout history, taken the political term “people” to mean.  

America’s economic and political history has constructed racially opposed counterparts in blackness and whiteness and therefore interconnects a troubled heritage in which white dominant traditions and historical narratives simultaneously rest on embodied white supremacy and black subordination.

As Haile describes:

To be white, for Coates, means to be part of an encoded mind-body-world system that through symbolic and memory recollection reinforces certain beliefs within certain material orders and linguistic patterns. Coates is arguing from this moment that the “world” as such, that is, the determination of who was “white” and who was not, was merely meant to ignore a fundamental truth of its disclosedness: the world as such was a conscious, embodied construction of meaning value, space-time expression.

These mythologies of white America that Coates highlights inform the guidance that is provided for his son. Coates offers no final proclamation about the redemptive prospects for persons that he calls “the Dreamers.” However, the way forward clearly is indicated in an acknowledgement of these racialized harms.

Theresa Edlmann’s work in peace-making in post-Apartheid South Africa is, in this sense, instructive. Edlman characterized memory work there as taking place in settings where parties from different sides of political or ethnic conflict can listen to each other’s stories. This historical memory work is premised on the value that each person attributes to his or her own account of their lived experiences.

It holds that “analysing and clarifying the beliefs, attitudes and values that people hold dear, through mechanisms primarily aimed at listening to what people have to say, is central to making sense of current realities and complexities, while in the midst of conflict, and within a post conflict.” The narrative method that is used in the peace-building context is a form of reflexive engagement with the stories of others. The aim is to influence “the ‘inner dialogues’ of the members of the respective groups as well as the narratives that are woven throughout the way people engage in domestic and public networks and spaces.”

Historical memory work provides the opportunity for each participant to conceive of his or her narrative in direct dialogue with other perspectives and possibly see the “bigger picture” of a conflict. In addition, it involves multiple forms of expression, such as “mediation and victim support, workshops, public conversations, research, photographic and video work, as well as writing and research.”

Memories of Embodied Journeys in Black and White

Related to the moral and social significance of embodied racial identification, the differential political and social economies of the body underscore the transactional nature of freedom.

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31 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 499.
33 Edlmann, “A Reflection,” 231.
and autonomy. Under these systems, local, national, and international regimes and institutions constrain the freedom and control of one’s movements—or simply where one’s body is compelled to be.

For Coates, the iconic image of Michael Brown’s body lying in the street for multiple hours, uncovered, while police conducted an investigation, was a visceral reminder. Black bodies can often occupy the position of least freedom in this regard. These unequal economies produce varied odysseys to and in the United States. In contrast, the Dreamers are free to “plunder” land, sea, and people without explicit recourse of conscience.

Memory work that gets beyond the divisive politicization of the American dream to construct a more unifying identity seeks a common categorization. It transcends the experiences of voluntary and involuntary passages and their mitigating role in identity formation. In the notion of journeys in social memory, there is the assumption that one is defined by where one has come from as much as the place in which one is found.

Questions that such an exploration elicits include: What is essentially American across all the various passages? What must be remembered and what must we render to the dust heap of history in order that these values can survive? As such, forms of journeys are common experiences within which to understand the meaning of the American dream in terms of the politics of social and geographic location.

For example, Isabel Wilkerson offers a remarkable account of the Great Migration as a mediating factor in black identity. Motivated by an epidemic of lynching and the economic deprivation of share cropping, descendants of former slaves, by the millions, made the journey from the south to the American West, Midwest, and North in hopes of achieving their American dream. Their journey explains the distinct southern influence evident in these regions of the country. It also introduces further diversity and variation into the meanings of African American identity.

However, the (lack of) housing and discriminatory employment policies that these millions encountered at their destinations are also part of the narrative. The reception is part of the narrative and provides an explanation for the black urban hubs that exist today, generally abandoned by manufacturing and industry. They are part of Michael Brown’s story as well.

Similar narratives of journeys by members of the dominant racial group can also engage

... the iconic image of Michael Brown’s body lying in the street for multiple hours, uncovered, while police conducted an investigation, was a visceral reminder.

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with the politics of social and geographical location. For example, Timothy Lensmire’s recent work is an attempt to provide an account of journeying from—and then returning to—his rural hometown in order establish a common understanding with those that were left behind in light of the gap between his progressive beliefs and their more conservative ones. Lensmire’s work complicates whiteness in striving to reconcile his sense of both belonging and alienation.

Considering forms of journeys can provide a framework from which a basis of individual common identity can emerge. hooks undertakes such a task in writing about issues of “space and location” as crucial in the evolution of her subjectivity. hooks identifies this effort with the movement in early post-apartheid South Africa, where the following statement was a mantra: “our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.” In this sense, striving to make-meaning of the journeys of one’s life equates to an account of one’s social position relative to the broader culture.

For hooks, being aware of her marginality as a youth is instructive in understanding the social divide that continues to occur in American society. From a marginalized position of Jim Crow Kentucky, hooks occupied a perspective of seeing “reality” as that which was both “from the outside in and from the inside out.” Her journey from rural Kentucky to a prestigious college in California to a leading academic asked her to engage with these early experience. Her aim should be ours: to articulate personal stories of the meaning of the American dream as it has been lived in connection with meaningful others situated in important places in the past—all the while working to reconcile tragedy with triumph.

The American tendency—perhaps the human tendency—is to frame historical accounts from the point of view of the victor rather than those who were vanquished. Often lacking is reflection on relative social position as a function of the kinds of journeys made and an awareness of the forms of privilege that exist in the American social system. As hooks notes, “fragments of memory are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a ‘new take’ on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation” This process is quintessentially aspect of memory work.

**Her aim should be ours: to articulate personal stories of the meaning of the American dream as it has been lived in connection with meaningful others situated in important places in the past**

**Dreaming as Diverse Conceptions of Home**

The notion of home and its symbolism in the American context is multi-perspectival, while also having moral implications for a person’s life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Coates associated Howard University—or what he calls his “Mecca”—as his intellectual

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40 hooks, *Yearning*, 147.
41 hooks, *Yearning*, 149.
42 hooks, *Yearning*, 147.
home and the place from which his identity as a black man received its greatest affirmation. However, throughout *Between the World and Me*, he names multiple physical homes. For example, he identifies his parents’ home, his city, Baltimore, and the space that he shares with his partner and son. Coates situates each of these locations in a broader story of the black identity that he inhabits. Such a practice suggests that the act of identifying a home on the transient and highly-contested American soil demands memory work.

Similarly, hooks frames remembering home as palliative for those hailing from the margins of society (but who are also striving for acknowledgement, belonging and full agency). Such a process first involves a narrative that connects the history of places to actual spaces within which one’s self was, is, and will be constituted. For instance, the small Kentucky town in which hooks lived as child exhibited the traits of Jim Crow segregation.

However, it was home. Its symbolic value inheres in that:

> Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, and order that does not demand forgetting.

Critically reflecting on one’s home as a privileged place is an important for memory work. For those in the dominant racial group for whom a sense of marginality is not evident, the recourse to “Dreamer nostalgia” can be disrupted by developing a politics of social and geographical location. As Coates explains, the meaning of a place can hold drastically different implications for black Americans versus those who are white—for whom home can evoke the very racially colorblind Dreamer-narrative of personal success that has been so historically pernicious.

*Between the World and Me* illustrates the meaning of memory for those who have been historically oppressed. The work of remembering home and those with whom it is associated provides impetus for resistance and the opportunity “to heal” or to simply live bravely in the face of the truth, as Coates promises to do.44

### Coming to an American Dream of the Commons

In envisioning this reworked ideal of American dream, the recourse is therefore to journeys: journeys through landscapes that open possibilities for conversations—conversations that may evoke and invoke the social and ecological fate of those spaces.

For if the success of the individual is not sacrosanct, and if the various dilemmas introduced by the detaching from home are considered in the meaning of this reworked American dream, then important considerations are now up for discussion. These conversations can involve policies and interventions that can be undertaken to encourage sustainable living and working spaces where the American dream is achievable with due consideration to the meaning of home.

In Rebecca Martusewicz’s place-based understanding of flourishing, the construct of the commons encompasses the shared values around which a diverse community coalesces.45

45 Rebecca Martusewicz, “Toward an Anti-centric Ecological Culture.” Rebecca A. Martusewicz, Jeff Edmundson, and John Lupinaeci, *Ecojustice Education: Toward Di-
The commons-based approach, particularly as it applies to education, works:

as a reform [that] emphasizes two important tasks. The first is a close examination of the commodification of life systems by the globalizing forces of western economic and cultural systems, and the fundamental discursive and thus subjective or psycho-social positions that make this destructive behavior possible . . . The second equally important task . . . is to identify and reclaim those relationships, practices, and beliefs within our communities that do not promote or rely upon the system of commodification, and that thus pose important alternatives to the largely self-interested and exploitive practices generating consumer culture.  

We must resist individualistic and meritocratic values system that underwrite a consistent and widespread pattern of commodification. Community and school spaces devoted to exploring diverse journeys as a part of the politics of location hold the promise of being generative for community, group, and individual well-being.

In a 1965 meeting between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr., the subject was whether the American dream had been achieved at the expense of the black race. While it was not clear to Buckley that such a state of affairs was the case, Baldwin provided astute observation from his body of work to confirm the assertion. The conversation and Baldwin’s book, The Fire Next Time, demonstrated both the scope of the racial tensions confronting America and the solipsistic and narcissistic universe that white America inhabited at the time.

Coates’ work underscores that the forms of progress since 1965 that are most visible in addressing racial tensions still lack the depth of reflection that are generative for a national consensus about race. Unless white America can disengage from the narrative of the individualistic and meritocratic American ideal, they will not be able to secure either their own freedom or support that of their black and brown brothers and sisters.

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The Future of Child-Centered Early Childhood Education in China

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Like all education, Early Childhood Education is shaped not only by political, economic, and demographic factors, but most importantly, by culture. As a teacher educator within the Chinese Early Childhood Education sector, I have seen this firsthand.

China has undergone rapid “modernization” in nearly every sector of its society over the past generation, but question of culture remain predominant. Education has increasingly become the preferred method for dealing with the tensions of social change.

Such social change impacts not only Early Childhood Education, but everyday life, especially for children, teachers, and parents. Can Chinese educational practices be “modernized” under a global neo-liberal regime without losing touch with traditional Chinese and socialist virtues, including diligence, self-sacrifice, frugality, and communalism? And can the health and well being of children be supported through such a process?

This paper explores these questions within the Chinese context.

The Confucian Past

Increasingly in China, there is a focus on the rights of the child as well as on cultivating independence and creativity within children. This is a “modernist” discourse that can be understood as promoting either child-centeredness or global competitiveness. This “modernist” dis-course has, in turn, come into contact with “traditional” Chinese approaches to teaching—a tradition that, even in the early elementary grades, tends towards strict discipline and the controlling of children’s behaviors and thoughts.

The long history of Confucian culture certainly plays a role—with a focus on the Four Books and The Five Classics. In ancient times, children went to the elementary school at about the age of eight. They mainly studied a curriculums focusing on Etiquette, Music, Art, Math, Chinese, and so on.

The focus on Etiquette, however, was overriding. It taught right-relationship across many contexts, such as the Etiquette between King and Subject, Father and Child, Teacher and Student, and Husband and Wife. There was a popular lesson that taught that, “if the King asks a Subject to die, the Subject must die undoubtedly.” Obligation within relationship was essential.

Children and Parenting in Urban Areas

Confucian culture is the background against which contemporary reforms play out in the urban Chinese context. Parents and teachers are
urged to cultivate the potential of children as much as possible.

But what does this mean?

Nowadays, the typical family pattern in China is “four grandparents, two parents, and a child.” Traditionally, the relationship between grandparents and a grandson meant the continu-uity of the whole family. A generation raised under the one-child policy means that attention and resources are increasingly focused on the young.

In urban areas, grandparents often have retirement savings that buoy family incomes. Urban parents often therefore seek part-time tutoring for children (this, despite the govern-ment prohibition against extra tutoring sessions in afterschool hours or during summer and winter holidays). They also often enroll their child in part-time extra-curricular lessons, such as dancing, painting, speech, music, English, computers, Olympic math, and so on.

These families’ hopes are seemingly in line with governmental policies: to develop the child’s “comprehensive quality.” Yet is this really the case?

Generally speaking, the prices of an apart-ment price in China are among the highest in the world. Due to rapid economic development, transportation is more convenient in China than ever before, and more and more people are migrating to cities to seek a higher standards of living. This creates a climate of extreme competition. Parents want their child to have a head start in life.

They hope that “their daughter will be the phoenix and their son will be the dragon in the future.”

In these situations, parents often require their child to obey them: that is, to study hard inside and outside of school, during the week and on the weekends. Some parents will abuse and spank the child. Regardless, the pressure means that some children will become rebellious. Some will even choose extreme acts to relieve their resentful feelings, such as committing suicide.

This led Ji Quang Zhang, principal at the Wuchang Experimental Elementary School in Wuhan City, to exclaim that “our educational aim is to make our students sleep well.” A Confucianism backed by neo-liberal values is simply not healthy for a society, as many Chinese educators are increasingly recognizing.

Children and Parenting in Rural Areas

China still has a large rural population. Howev-er, as noted above, with the push for economic development, migration to larger cities is now common. Over twenty years ago, Deng Xiao-ping’s push for the development of the coastal cities, while successful in many ways, has also brought unbalanced development.

An increasing phenomenon in many rural areas are children who live with their grandpar-ents while their parents are off working in the larger cities. We call such children liu shou er tong. Many fear that these children are overly sensitive and fragile. Spectacular cases can catch media attention, such as the famous case of a poor undergraduate student from a rural area who brutally killed his wealthy, urban room-mates.

The Chinese National Education Commis-sion has become more and more focused on programs to support rural students and mitigate these concerns. Every year, the Central Educational Ministry allocates funds to local govern-ments to promote better facilities, eliminate college tuition, and supply living allowances. Yet these funds do not change the fact that people continue to shun rural areas once they graduate, especially teachers.

As a response, the government called for teacher volunteers to aid in rural areas since 2007. If a teacher taught for three years in a
rural area, the government would allow her to sit for a Master’s Degree without paying tuition. In addition, a plan was put into place that would allot free tuition for normal college student contingent upon taking up a rural teaching assignment once completing.

While these steps help to ameliorate some of the problems, they do not address the core issue: the pressing sense that Chinese children are growing up in an extremely competitive global society where only the urban elite can enjoy a healthy standard of living.

Progressive Visions of Teaching

Over the past twenty years, China has aggressively imported progressive ideas about Early Childhood Education. Many aspects have changed, especially related to teaching methods.

Prior to this, many teachers were born and trained in the examination-oriented system. The teacher was usually the focus and made use of a very traditional didactic approach. But as international agencies put forward the conception of a “Quality Education” in the 1990s, more and more of my colleagues focused their attention on Early Childhood Education.

Scholars worked with the Central Educational Ministry to formulate new guidelines for Early Childhood Education in the 1990s. Referencing ideas from John Dewey and Maria Montessori, an emphasis on children’s development was brought to the fore: outdoor play, role-play, and learning stations were some of the results. Teachers are encouraged to allow children to choose painting, role-playing, building blocks, and other activities, depending on the child’s own will.

An old Chinese proverb says that a healthy body is the foundation of a person’s ability to act. Ministry guidelines for the Early Childhood Education system require that every teacher put an emphasis on taking bodily care of the child, and only then to take up the building blocks of literacy.

Everyday activities like drinking water, eating a healthy lunch, going to the restroom, and napping are taken seriously. These are the basic important things that a teacher should know and teach children to practice. Hence, a teacher will fix a time to remind children to drink water, go to the restroom, eat some fruit, and so on. They hope children can develop these good living habits as they grow up.

On the whole, the goal is for early childhood educators to take time to listen to and respect children, to understand their feelings about themselves and others, and to teach them how to respect teachers, other classmates, and themselves. “From the behaviors and words of the three-year-old, you can see that development of the child in the future.”

The Future of Child-Centered Chinese Education

The government continues to struggle with its vision for how to reform the current nine-year compulsory school system. Should it extend the system upward to high school or downward to connect with the kindergartens of the Early Childhood Education system?

And if it extends the system downwards, will the play- and health-based focus of the Early Childhood Education system survive? Or will the focus on the child’s “comprehensive
"qualities” be co-opted by the logic of economic competition?

Right now, child-centered educators in China must maneuver between “traditionalist” discourses rooted in a Confucianism and “modernist” discourses rooted in neo-liberal thinking about the role of globalization and competition. The search for an integration of the best elements of each is a goal that remains for the future.

I was born in China’s Hubei Province. I received my B.A. (2004) and M.A. (2007) in English Language Education from Central China Normal University in Wuhan. After graduation, I was an Assistant Professor in the College of Education in Tong Ren University (Guizhou Province), before later joining the faculty at Hu Bei Science and Technology University in 2013 as an Assistant Professor in the College of Education. I teach courses about the Pedagogy of Preschool Education, Survey Research Methods in Education, Management of Preschool Education, and Education Policy. I also supervising undergraduate students in their fieldwork. I have published over ten articles and a book. I also host three research projects in Hu Bei Science and Technology University.
Being Our Sister and Brother’s Keeper: Creating Equitable Learning for Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

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When I was growing up in Idaho, my school was not a compass of diversity. As a matter of fact, it was the reflection of years of homogenous conformity. This is not to say that there were not culturally and linguistically diverse students among us, but a public school education meant a White, English-speaking, American education. If non-White or ELL students couldn’t conform to the cookie-cutter mold or pick up the English language quickly enough, then they were left out and left behind.

I did my student teaching and first-year teaching with the Shoshone-Bannock Confederated Tribes on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in southeastern Idaho. I was the first student teacher at the tribal school, in the fall of 1992. It was the hardest, and yet best, experience I could have ever had as a new teacher. It was in this place that I learned that American public education system did not work for everyone. Students at the tribal school showed me something more valuable than anything I ever learned in a teacher training program: that education has to be perceptive of and compassionate to the needs of the learner. I learned that teaching that is cognizant of learners’ needs, cultures, and experiences will be transformative. I would be remiss if I said it was an easy chapter in my life. It was not.

As a White person growing up in America, I never had to think about things in terms of my culture or my language—and how could I fit in. Everything was already set up for me to be successful, because the dominant culture and language of my country was geared for me. I never had to face that fact until I taught on the reservation. It was rough in the beginning, because there was a lot of anger directed toward me simply because I was White.

Most students had no problem in verbally attacking me for being White. But once we got past the anger, things changed. Once I understood that I had been blind to how every student had to fit into an education system that did not reflect who they were—even on their sovereign reservation—I came to see how their education was not reflective of their cultural identity. When I started to understand the backgrounds, traditions, experiences, and cultures of my students, the process of teaching and learning became propitious. Real learning took place when teaching became observant of the learner and what they needed from an education.

Now, twenty-five years later, I’m still teaching school. But to a different population and in a different place. Now, here, it is still
important to tap into the backgrounds, traditions, experiences, and cultures of my students.

For the past ten years, I have taught students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) in a suburb of Long Island, New York. My SLIFE students want the same things my students wanted on the reservation all those years ago: an education that acknowledges their experiences and cultures.

**SLIFE Students and Their Challenges**

Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) is an overarching term for a particular cohort of English language learners. SLIFE have been in the U.S. school system less than 12 months and have had interrupted or limited schooling in their country of origin. They have limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their native language(s) and are below grade level in most academic skills.

For the past ten years, I have been working with SLIFE students in a suburban school system on Long Island, New York. The majority of these students come from Central America, specifically, from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The SLIFE program that I run consists of teaching the student five periods a day: Math, Science, Social Studies, and two English classes. The age range is from fourteen to twenty-one years. The ability of the students depends on their own personal histories. Some students have missed a couple of years of schooling in their country and some have never been to school at all.

The hard truth: the SLIFE program has not once, in ten years, produced a student who has graduated with a high school diploma. The reality is that most drop out because they have to work or they do not see the purpose in going to school when they aren’t going to earn a diploma, anyway. Over the years, the idea has been to give them a foundation in English so that they can transition into a community program to earn a GED or get a job.

In the past few years, SLIFE students have increasingly been allowed to exit the program if they score well on the NYSESLAT (The New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test). They are then placed in foundation-level classes where they begin to earn credit toward a diploma or other program. The SLIFE program that I run is an educational triage center of sorts. It stabilizes the students and starts them on their road to recovery. Many times SLIFE students are fleeing political instability or violence, leaving behind their families and friends. They have made the hard decision to start anew. They know that it can only happen if they learn English and go forward.

**Helping SLIFE Students Learn**

There is a four-step process to creating culturally responsive lesson plans for SLIFE students.

**Step 1**

Before the process begins, the SLIFE teacher must understand who the students are. In order that the teacher have a firm conceptualization of the SLIFE students’ country of origin,
The following inventory can be administered to SLIFE students. The following inventory is in English, but can be translated into whatever language necessary through the Google Translate App.

Table 1: SLIFE Inventory

- DATE:
- SCHOOL:
- TEACHER:
- STUDENT NAME:
- COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:
- WHEN DID YOU LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN?
- WHO DID YOU LIVE WITH WHEN YOU WERE IN YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN?
- UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES DID YOU LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY?
- HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO GET TO THE U.S.?
- DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL AT ANY TIME WHILE WAITING TO COME TO THE U.S.?
- HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT LIVING IN THE U.S.?
- DO YOU FEEL HOMESICK RIGHT NOW? EXPLAIN HOW YOU FEEL.
- DO YOU LIKE YOUR CURRENT SCHOOL, CLASSES, AND TEACHERS? EXPLAIN.
- WHAT COULD BE BETTER IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?
- WHAT NEEDS DO YOU HAVE THAT ARE NOT BEING MET EITHER AT SCHOOL OR IN YOUR HOME?
- DO YOU HAVE A JOB? DESCRIBE IT.
- WHAT IS THE MAJOR REASON YOU ARE IN SCHOOL?
- WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?
- WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN SO YOU CAN ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS?

Step 2

Step 2 consists of the teacher processing the knowledge gathered in Step 1. It is imperative that any teacher know who the people sitting in their classroom are and it is no more urgent than when teaching SLIFE students. Their personal histories and experiences impact their ability to learn.

In order to meet a SLIFE student’s needs and bring them up to speed regarding their education and socio-emotional wellness, a teacher must understand the lived experiences of the SLIFE student. The following vignettes are examples of SLIFE students’ stories from my program from the past ten years. They give a glimpse into the turmoil, issues, and dreams of some SLIFE students.

**Brenda.** Brenda is a 20-year-old young lady from Apopa, El Salvador. She had not been in school since she was ten-years-old due to gang violence in her neighborhood. She had two brothers as well as her mother murdered by a local gang. For those ten years, she had been doing seamstress work with her grandmother. Then she left for the United States.

Her dad had saved money to send for her once she got old enough. She was supposed to leave El Salvador for America when she was 15-years-old, but she did not want to leave her grandmother. Ten years of staying home had rendered Brenda with vocabulary, reading comprehension, and math at a fourth-grade level.
level in Spanish. This was assessed by giving her the Logramos test (which is a Spanish language assessment test).

Her low scores in her native language qualified her for the SLIFE program. Brenda struggled with basic math, science, social studies, and English in the SLIFE program. She had only been in school three months when she got pregnant by a young man who was not at the high school. She finished the school year, but did not return. She worked stocking shelves at a local bodega until she had her baby.

**Elijah.** Elijah was born in La Union, El Salvador. His mother immigrated to the United States when he was three years old and his older brother was five years old. They lived with their grandma, yet did not attend secondary school due to the threat of gang violence.

The mother worked as a seamstress in suburban New York City and saved enough money to bring one of them to the United States by paying a coyote. Both boys were being threatened by a gang in the community. The older brother said that Elijah should go first, and then when the mom had enough money, she could send for him.

Elijah took three weeks to arrive at the border between Mexico and Texas. After he was processed through a detention center in Texas, his mother brought him to New York. The first week he was in New York, the mom and Elijah got word that the older brother had been decapitated by the local gang.

Needless to say, Elijah and his mother were devastated—so much so that his mother had a nervous breakdown and he stayed by her side for six months. He again was in a position of not attending school due to violence and turmoil beyond his control. Eventually he would register for school and qualified for the SLIFE program with roughly a third-grade literacy and math level in Spanish.

Yet even after he was in the SLIFE program, he mostly wanted to stay by himself in the corner, with his head down, for the first semester of school. The school social worker did not speak Spanish, so it was impossible to express what was going on in his life. The SLIFE teacher, me, was the “counselor,” in a manner of speaking, by allowing him to write in a journal every day, in his own language, about his feelings and issues. Eventually Elijah scored out of the SLIFE program by scoring “Emerging” on the NYSESLAT. The journaling allowed him to have a place where he could feel safe and “say” whatever was on his mind.

**Griselda.** Griselda arrived from Honduras to my SLIFE program at the age of 18. She scored on the fourth-grade level in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and math. She had been brought to the Mexican-United States border by a coyote.

She had been raped several times on her journey from Cortez, Honduras. She was lucky in that she did not get pregnant, but unlucky in that she would wear the scars of her sojourn, deep in her soul, for the rest of her life. She was listed as an unaccompanied minor and was only enrolled in school because the immigration court required her to do something productive with her life—and going to school was a component of that structure.

She was absolutely not interested in participating in class, doing homework, and working on projects. She cried a lot in the class
and attended many sessions with counselors. She was only in school from October to June and then dropped out because she had to work to support herself and pay for her immigration court fees. She was a case that is often seen with the SLIFE students: she only needed a note from the school stating she was in school in order to give it to the immigration court.

### Referencing ideas from John Dewey and Maria Montessori, an emphasis on children’s development was brought to the fore ...

**Frantz.** Frantz was fourteen when he entered the SLIFE program. He had been living in the hills outside of Cap Hatien, Haiti. He had never been to school. He didn’t know how to write his name or hold a pencil. He was truly in shock, as he was expected to sit in a classroom all day. He knew how to survive in the streets of Haiti, but was at a complete loss as to how to speak, read, write, or listen to English.

Frantz dropped out of SLIFE when he was eighteen years old. He did go on to get his GED, eventually. He was a success story, of sorts. He did get his GED, but not during his time at the high school. He attained it through a Jobs Corp program in upstate New York.

**The Students.** There are a hundred different stories of SLIFE students from over the years, but the common thread that weaves them all together is their struggle to be educated and safe during their lives. The aforementioned stories are just a few of the many that could be told. They give insight into the difficulties that they face and how those difficulties impede their ability to gain access to success in their new home.

### Step 3

The following template is meant to be used for SLIFE students in order for them to have input into what is important to them regarding an education.

**Table 2: Educational Needs Assessment**

1. What do you feel are your strengths?
2. What are your weaknesses?
3. What do you want to learn in school?
4. How can being in school help you with your daily life?
5. What things do you want to understand about the Unite States?
6. What does it mean to live in America?
7. What is American culture? Is there anything in common with your culture?

Step 3 is meant to gather information from SLIFE students in order to begin the process of creating curriculum. The point is for teachers to take stock of the SLIFE students’ ideas about learning in order to make connections of relevance and progress tangible for them.

### Step 4

The following lesson plan (see Table 3) is an example of what a SLIFE student wanted to learn in school and why an education was of import to him. The student wrote this lesson himself. That is, this is a plan for future learning, developed by the student himself. It is not the only type of learning that happens in my program, but it is an important slice.

It is difficult to imagine moving to a new country and learning a new culture and a new language under the conditions many SLIFE students have endured. The following lesson
plan is an example of what an education might mean to some of them.

Table 3: Noe Chamaco’s Lesson Plan

Name: Noe Chamaco (19 years old, originally from Cortez, Honduras)  
Grade: 9  
Title: Symbol of America: The Flag  
Summary:  
1. Subject: Social Studies  
2. Topic or Unit of Study: American Symbols  
3. Grade: 9-12 SLIFE  
4. Objective: To learn about what the flag represents.  
5. Time Allotment: 1 block period (roughly 90 minutes)  
6. Learning Context: The American flag is important for people because it represents my new home. I pledge allegiance to this flag because it gives me liberty and justice.  
Procedure:  
1) Watch the video on the American flag at: https://app.discoveryeducation.com/learn/videos/f868fe21-2772-43e2-852e-17e30e96ff1c?hasLocalHost=false.  
2) Direct Instruction: Students learn about what the colors represent. Color the American flag.  
3) Guided Practice: Students present their artwork of the American flag and tell in English what it means to them.  
4) Check for Understanding: Ask students what are the colors of their country of origin flag and what it symbolizes. What are the connections between that flag and the American flag?  
5) Independent Practice: Give students copies of the Pledge of Allegiance. Students have to recite the Pledge of Allegiance together.  

The process was one of assisting Noe in identifying what was important to him when he lived in Honduras. He said that the Honduran flag always meant a lot to him. We researched together the history of the Honduran flag. It was a meaningful experience for Noe because not only did he find out information about the Honduran flag, but he also increased his computer-literacy skills, keyboarding, English skills, and creative thinking skills.  

Noe found the following information about the Honduran flag:  

The overall background is sky blue and white:  

The Honduras Flag is . . . three equal horizontal bands of blue (top), white, and blue. [There are] five blue, five-pointed stars arranged in an X pattern centered in the white band;  

The stars represent the members of the former Federal Republic of Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Honduras, and Nicaragua; and
According to ancient and heraldic traditions, much symbolism is associated with colors. The colors on the Honduras flag represent the following: white represents peace and honesty. Blue represents the sea and the sky [and is associated with values like] vigilance, truth and loyalty, perseverance and justice.

Noe was thrilled to learn about the American flag through creating activities for a lesson plan. It never occurred to him that a teacher would be interested in what he thought was important to his learning.

Implications

John Dewey, in his work *Experience and Education*, emphasized the importance of continuity of experience: the role that previous experience and prior knowledge play in student learning. SLIFE students’ prior knowledge may appear to be limited. In fact, SLIFE students are not barren of experiences or an understanding of the world around them.

Dewey wanted education to be transformational for students through it being continuous, relevant, and interactive. SLIFE students need unique levels of socio-emotional support and academic reinvigoration in order to stimulate interest and subsequent learning. SLIFE students distinctly benefit from the transmission and exchange of ideas.

The act of simply going to school was problematic for SLIFE students in their country of origin due to socio-political issues, gang violence, or family obligations. Dewey understood the linkage between a learning environment rich in personal experience and the ability to process practical and academic learning. Education for SLIFE students must include broad experiences that encompass learning a new culture and yet doesn’t entail forgetting the old.

It never occurred to him that a teacher would be interested in what he thought was important to his learning.

It is not realistic to have students create lesson plans every week, but it is feasible to connect lessons to tangible, useful elements that will help SLIFE students be engrossed and take ownership in their education. A democratic society such as the United States must encourage its members to not only gain academic knowledge, but membership in society.

SLIFE students, like many immigrant students coming from Central America in recent years, are undocumented. This exodus of students has required the public school system in the United States to be even more prepared to deal with issues related to socio-emotional trauma and gang violence—issues that often follows these students to their new communities.

SLIFE students are some of the most vulnerable in school, because many are unaccompanied minors, having fled for their lives from gangs. Yet many of these same dangers are lurking in their new communities.

I have also witnessed specific issues with females who are vulnerable. Many times the support of a caring family member is absent, which leads them to seek comfort, support, and security in relationships that prove to be unhealthy on a variety of levels. Interestingly, the young males are equally predisposed to such lifestyles that often end with involvement in violence, drugs, and, sometimes, death. Over
the past ten years, I have witnessed how the U.S. school system has failed this subgroup of English language learners repeatedly.

In my SLIFE program, the age range is from fourteen to twenty-one. Students who are seventeen or under have a chance at graduating from high school with a diploma. Unfortunately, SLIFE students who enter at the age of eighteen or older rarely have a chance of earning a diploma. There just isn’t enough time.

The most that my SLIFE program has been able to do for these older students is to begin their development in English so that they can initiate their learning sometime later, on their own. Sometimes the older SLIFE students simply want to learn enough English to get a job. Or they are required by the immigration court to be in school in order to get their paperwork processed to get residency.

SLIFE students are, for the most part, losers in the current neoliberal education system. This is because they are treated as just another low-value “human commodity”: their test scores simply are not viable. The cultivation of socially responsible individuals who care for community and self starts with a new mindset that rejects the neoliberal mantras of consumerism and competition.

Why not create culturally responsive curriculum that is dedicated to teaching these new members of society what it means to live in the United States? Let’s create curriculum that tends to the needs of these learner, situated in their local community, for success.

As noted above, not once in my ten years of running the SLIFE program has a student graduated with a diploma. What was I able to do, then, for all of those SLIFE students in the past ten years? Do my “numbers” tell the whole story?

Of course, I taught them the basics of a standard education and most were able to read, write, listen, and speak English, on varying levels, after spending time in my program.

Yet what did the education system tell them?
It told them that they were not good enough to pass the test.
It told them that they didn’t know enough English to pass the class.
It told them that the system was not meant to help students who immigrated to the U.S. as older teens.

The American school system tells SLIFE students that you can enroll in school because it is your right, but it will not truly address your needs nor will it advance your presence here. The American school system will take “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” but only because it has to.

But then what?
When will we see that the value of a person does not reside in a test score or their credentials? Rather, it is our collective social commitment to creating genuine learning that meets the needs of special populations like SLIFE students that should be the true “measure” of the day.

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How Are Educators Teaching What Really Matters for Developing Lifelong Learning In Our Students?

Theresa Udziela
Forest Ridge School District

Today’s educators are increasingly being called upon to cover more content and material in their classrooms. Teachers and students find that each day is full—with not a minute to spare.

The number of standards has increased in the core subject areas. Technology initiatives have been introduced to better assist students in their competitive pursuit of College and Career Readiness skills. Then add mandated Social Emotional Learning standards to assist the students in developing their “soft skills.” Now match this with limited availability in many school districts across the nation of encore classes in the Humanities.

Is this what our students really need?

Are we focusing on the mile-wide-and-inch deep cliché that gives our students exposure to content that they remember short term for the tests—and then promptly forget? Or are we truly instilling in them the skills and processes necessary to have a balanced and meaningful educational experience that provides the promised foundation of lifelong learning?

The Case of Forest Ridge School District

As a veteran educator of over 20 years, I have worked in a variety of capacities supporting student achievement and career development in Forest Ridge School District (FRSD). The district is located outside of Chicago in the small, blue-collar, bedroom community of Oak Forest, Illinois.

I have taught various curricula over the years within the district. My experiences have ranged from teaching fourth grade to teaching middle school. My work in education is not my only frame of reference, however. I am also the mother of two children who have—and who are—experiencing the very situations that I will be addressing in this paper.

My current position as Applied Technology and 21st Century Careers instructor affords me the opportunity to work with students as they explore a variety of topics and interests in relation to their future careers and the world of work. These topics range over a wide domain of practical skills, including web design, audio and video production, forensic science, computer graphics, and computer animation, to name a few.

Being a part of the Encore Department for as many years as I have, it is not uncommon for me to have students and their parents approach me about how they can take my classes. Unfortunately, due to our school scheduling structure, students who are in advanced or remedial classes, or who take band, choir, or a world language, cannot fit another elective into their schedule.

This is not just the case at the middle school. At our high school, students that have chosen to be in band must forgo lunch if taking another elective. Additionally, the amount of Advanced Placement (AP) courses that students are looking to utilize for college entry can be overwhelming, especially when condensed into their last years of high school. These practices have been in place for a long time. They continue to have to choose—one passion for
another, or what they think they will need for what they think they might yet want to explore.

And I know this as a mother, too. In the case of my son, he had a penchant for foreign languages. In his earliest years of education, he participated in an afterschool Spanish program. But after three years, the program no longer was offered. Eventually, he was able to register for Spanish classes at a local community college. Schedule went something like this: straight from the afterschool activities, a 45-minute car ride, in class for 3 hours, and then middle school homework completed early the next morning.

Repeat for the entire semester.

Now, many years later, he seeks entry into medical school. And this process further exemplifies the competitive nature of schooling, which pits applicant against applicant. His desire to serve others might quickly be lost among the applications, credentials, and procedures needed for gaining admittance.

Are students being herded through their education without a say in what they learn, when they learn it, or, most importantly, why they seek to learn it? What are we after here?

What Drives Us?

The purpose behind getting a good education seems to have shifted over the years. One of the key categories identified in the Common Core Standards is the College and Career Readiness Skills. It surmises that most, if not all, students should be prepared to go to college.

If a young person wants to get a good job, make money, and be successful by societal standards, then college is the best option. But which college? Not just any old college will do, for many families the prestige of the college comes with bragging rights. There are those that want to attend high profile and prestigious colleges such as the Ivies.

But why?

Is it the quality of the program or is it the notoriety that comes with it? Our students know what they have been taught. They know what will look best on their resume. This has been engrained in them at earlier and earlier ages. How many clubs do they participate in? What are their grades like? Are they a member of a scholastic honor society?

We award these students with certificates of achievement and recognize their class rank. To what end?

School systems are grooming them for the competitive journey and the “resume race” that they will undergo in high school, in higher education, and on their way into the world of work. However, are these resume builders what will inspire our students to explore their interests?

Increasingly, the application process of higher education further perpetuates competition and self-promotion, not only in terms of what applicants must do and show, but also in terms of how institutions themselves demonstrate their values—competing for ever greater number of applicants, many of whom will be denied entry to improve “selectivity” ratings.

What’s the pay off?

I wonder about those students who are not destined for college or who have not mastered a particular skill in the same time frame as their peers. The resulting competitive atmosphere is having a divisive and negative effect on the youth of today, both academically and mentally. It is not hard to see that, as a society, there has been an increase in self-promotion. “Success” seems to increasingly demand it.

We return, then, to an age-old question: How do we prepare the young for their futures, in ways that promote social harmony and peace?

Bringing it Back to What Really Matters
The Fetzer Institute is a foundation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, devoted to “helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.” In 1994, researchers, educators, and child advocates met there to discuss some of their concerns. Of particular interest was the question of how youth programs might be better aligned to school curricula.1

From this, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded. The group looked to identify the social and emotional needs of students and better understand how these needs impacted student learning. In 1997, CASEL worked with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) to publish the book, Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators.2

Illinois was among the first states to develop Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards for grades K-12 in the United States and, as such, emerged as a leader in the SEL movement. The passage of the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Act of 2003 further supported the charge for Illinois schools to consider social and emotional learning as an important part of the school mission.

Through the framework of the Illinois SEL standards, it was hoped educators would be supported in establishing safe and caring learning environments by assisting students in working with one another in a respectful manner. A key component of such work was the service learning curriculum.

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1 Please see http://www.casel.org/history/.

Service Can Begin at an Early Age

I have often overheard it said that children are too young to do service for others. I disagree. There are ways in which we can instill the desire to serve others in young children. The key is for students to make a connection in what or for whom they are doing the service.

For example, in many schools around our area, we collect pop tabs from aluminum cans for the Ronald McDonald House Charities. It is often a classroom event. Schools, in turn, sponsor competitions for the class that can collect the most pop tabs. This is something that students of any age can assist with and encourage their families, friends, and neighbors to help with as well.

Such competitions are perhaps better than nothing. Yet for the service to be educative, it is important that children fully understand what the final result is. Not just how many boxes or pounds they could collect, but what those pop tabs collected mean for the families and the children that will benefit from them. As I see it, a major negative of many service projects is that there is a reward at the end of the collection that may be disconnected to the process.

The purpose of the collection is to collect tabs that can be recycled for cash to provide housing and meals for families of sick children. Instead of exploring the social impact of illness and the stories of families struggling with it, collecting and turning in pop tabs is rewarded by a pizza or ice cream party. Children as young as first grade are smart enough to understand what it means to be sick. They understand wanting to have a parent with them. The social meaning of service is lost when a reward is attached—and its educative potential thereby greatly diminished.

As students get older, the requirements for service to school, community, and religious affiliations often increases. Whether it is for reli-
vious education, scouts, or school groups, educators are often asked if they can provide opportunities for students to complete service hours. Of course, there is a never-ending list of things around the school building that students could assist with and most educators are willing to oblige.

Service and consideration for others, therefore, does not always need to be outside of the school setting. Students can benefit by working with individuals within the school or classroom. In the Danielson Framework for Teaching that is used around the state of Illinois for teacher evaluation, Domain Two focuses on the classroom environment. Across the various components, teachers strive to create an environment of respect, where students feel that there is a sense of care.

While some would question the fact that having students helping one another in the classroom does not qualify as “service,” I disagree. The fact that a student will take the time, of their own initiative, to assist another student who is struggling demonstrates an understanding of service. Students in my school can be seen assisting others in the halls in a variety of ways, assisting a locker partner in opening their locker, helping a student on crutches, or by being a new student helper. These actions, often accompanied by intrinsic satisfaction, contribute to a stronger sense of self and purpose while contributing to the greater good.

One of the misconceptions of service is that it must be measurable by a length of time—that it must be able to go onto a resume. In this way, the concept of service is diluted by the fact that individuals are counting the minutes of service completed, and perhaps not truly focusing on the purpose of the service and the benefit to others around them.

Service to School

As an educator, providing opportunities for students to experience service and be a contributing member of their community has always been an important focus for me. There are the opportunities to experience the satisfaction of helping or sharing their talents with others in class. But students can also take advantage of a number of other curricular projects.

One such project came about after the construction of an addition to an existing district school building. An inner courtyard was formed with the building expansion in the district middle school. No plans existed for completion of the courtyard. Inner courtyard reconstruction and maintenance is therefore one project that students have taken part in. A landscape architect from the community volunteered to work with the middle school students to design an outdoor classroom space, utilizing existing plants and landscape structures. Students benefited from this project through working not only with the landscape architect, but also with a landscape material supplier.

In an effort to pay for the project, the students utilized recycling of aluminum cans to assist in paying for the cost of the materials and supplies. Plant donations from families and the eighth grade class gift, a flowering pear tree,

3 Please see http://www.danielsongroup.org/framework/.
rounded out the landscape foliage—plants that continues to thrive today.

The reconstruction project lasted for eight months. Approximately 65 students and parents worked throughout the week and on weekends to dig out tree roots, move landscape block, transplant plants, and haul dirt to fill in and level the area. This project, while complete in theory, continues to provide opportunities for students to upkeep and maintain. With the addition of a multi-level pond, and eight large cement benches, the outdoor space has been transformed into an outdoor classroom where students are proud to share what they have done with their peers.

Through continued student, parent, and staff dedication and hard work, this space has become an extension of the learning environment—rather than an enclosed storage space devoid of access for student use. The opportunity for students to work alongside their peers, parents, and staff members, while sharing a common interest, worked to further their passion and improve their abilities to collaborate, communicate, and problem solve, all while making a lasting contribution to their school community.

Service to Community

Another way students are often introduced to service at an early age is through school food drives, often around the holidays, for families in need. These drives, again, often focus around a competition, are organized by adults, and there is often a reward for the most food cans collected. Yet as educators in schools, we need to strive to make the service meaningful and encourage students to make a connection with the purpose and reality of what and why they are donating.

Common discussions that take place prior to these types of food drives should point out that it is not about taking the items that are at the back of the cabinet or what the family is not eating. Research is needed about who uses a food pantry—what types of food do they eat, what health and dietary restrictions do they face, and what holidays do they celebrate? By assisting students in understanding what their contributions might mean to a family in need, it will allow them to see how they can positively impact others. In doing so, they learn about the relationships that sustain the human community, and hopefully gain a sense of satisfaction, confidence, and the means for personal growth.

As students in our district become older, they have the opportunity to extend their level
of service to the community through serving as part of a food team at a local homeless shelter. The food team, originally organized by the teachers’ union local, has expanded to including students, parents, family members, and staff from all of the district’s schools. Students, parents, family members, and staff sign-up not only to work preparing the breakfast, but also in providing the food each month.

The monthly opportunity allows students to make a connection with the purpose of their service. It not only helps others, but it also makes a lasting impact on them. When they walk down the aisle created by mattresses and personal belongings at 5:30 in the morning, they are given a lasting visual image of what it means to be homeless. Then the real work begins. Breakfast needs to be served to the guests. They often number 75 a night, October through April.

Students are set to work preparing, cooking, and serving the guests breakfast. They also provide them a sack lunch before they head out for the day. The ability to make a personal connection with the families and receive their gratitude cannot be experienced by a canned food drive donation.

The impact of this service opportunity on the students in the middle school has extended to their families. Each year, we expand our impact through ever more individuals wanting to participate or through students who return even after they have left the middle school. Service can be transformational not just for those who are served.

**Taking Service to the Next Level**

In talking to other educators, we are always looking for ways to expand ideas for what we do in the classroom. Service is no exception.

In talking to a colleague about what his area of instruction is, I was introduced to a new program of service that is in place at John Hersey High School in Arlington Heights, Illinois. The program, Service Over Self (S.O.S.) has been in place since 1969, founded by Wil “Koz” Kozlowski. According to Mark Gunther, the program’s current leader, “Koz felt that high school students were our ‘nation’s greatest untapped resource.’” Gunther also describes the S.O.S. program as one of the “oldest and most prized organizations of our school.”

To say that service is a dominant interest at Hersey High School is an understatement. According to Gunther, the club attracts over 300 members each year and has been expanded into a leadership class as part of the curriculum. This course serves 30-40 students over the
course of two semesters to provide students the opportunity to experience hands-on leadership through planning and carrying out service events. In the words of Mark Gunther:

Over the past 18 years, I have built upon Koz’s club concept through the inclusion of the leadership class. The leadership class is organized by semester and is differentiated by the projects offered during that semester. Students can enroll in one semester or both semesters. Typically, 60-plus students demonstrate interest in the leadership class, but only 30 students are enrolled. A lottery is held to determine the students that enter the class. I believe that managing 40-plus projects and events per year and one leadership class is the most effective way to coordinate our mission. We have discussed having two leadership classes per semester but negatives outweigh the positives in terms of effectively coordinating and synergizing our efforts.

When I first took over the SOS program, I personally planned and organized all of our projects and efforts. In many ways, this was more efficient than enlisting the efforts and skills of my students because I knew very clearly the status of each moving part of the projects. The biggest and most rewarding challenge was giving up control of the projects to the students. I have to allow students to work at their pace (to a degree), make their own decisions, and apply their problem-solving skills. These are high school students with a lot on their plates beyond this course. Also, this may be the first time they are actually leading a project. So, it can get messy, inefficient, and at times, unprofessional. We can have 15 projects going on at once! I have learned to live with the cumbersome delegation of work to students because the net result is far greater and more impactful on the student. Empowering the students to make real decisions is the key to the whole course. They leave with the confidence of real experience that they can plan and execute a project from start to finish. I often hear from students in exit interviews that they knew they were in a leadership class, but they had no idea they were actually going to lead so much. Comments like this give me faith that the way the class is organized is just right. I heard a great quote once, “school is place where young people go to watch old people work.” On behalf of us “old people,” I take revenge on the youth!

While Hersey boasted a robust service club under Kozlowski, Gunther’s research found that student volunteerism dropped when they got to college. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the increased rigors of the college experience as well as to students not being able to create service projects on their own. They simply lacked the experience of leadership. The creation of a leadership class was a response to challenge that trend. Now, students can join the SOS Club as participants in service and/or enroll in the SOS class to gain hands-on leadership experiences! All are welcome!
Conclusion

Empowering students to grow through serve to others is key in assisting students to become contributing members of society. This can be a challenge in the competitive world of schooling. In an environment of high-stakes testing and where competition to excel in order to create the best resumes, get into the best colleges, and obtain the best jobs that make the most money, the task can be daunting.

The Illinois SEL standards are a framework that provides direction in developing the social and emotional well-being of our students. I believe, as educators, we have the ability to impact our students, day in and day out, in the opportunities we provide.

To do this, we should not put a measure on the time, nor the amount of service. Instead, we should emphasize the purpose and benefits to self and society by completing service. Indeed, we want students to learn to see their own well-being as tied up with the well-being of others.

There is a need to further educate our parents and families of the district regarding the SEL standards and what they support and aim to teach. Credentialism, narrow competition, and mindless self-promotion are forces to be resisted. But by partnering with parents, community organizations, and school staff, we can provide a strong foundation—rooted in character and altruistic behaviors—that will ultimately support lifelong learning.

Theresa Udziela currently serves as the instructor of the Applied Technology and 21st Century Careers courses in Forest Ridge School District 142. She has presented at the National Careers Pathways Annual Conference, the Illinois Computing Educators Conference, South Suburban College, and has received recognition for technology excellence in the classroom. She credits her service-to-others mindset to her own parents, serving as role models in her youth. She continues to share that passion with the help of her husband and two children. Theresa is pursuing her doctorate in Education with a focus in Curriculum and Instruction at Aurora University, Illinois.
It’s Time We Hold
Accountability Accountable

Arthur Chiaravalli
Haslett High School, Michigan

The maxim, “if you can’t measure it, you
can’t manage it” (often misattributed to Peter
Drucker¹), sums up our society’s continued
belief in the necessity and power of
accountability. A lack of accountability is seen
as a sure path to lawlessness, indolence, and
corruption. We don’t trust people who are
unwilling, unprepared, or otherwise unable to
render an account.

As a high school language arts teacher
who is increasingly “going gradeless” in his
teaching practice, I find that I am often left
with few “measures” of student learning and
growth. In its place, we have a lot of
feedback—mostly verbal—and not the kind
that fits easily (or at all, really) within the neat
grids of a traditional gradebook. Although I
still give the occasional quiz (always with the
option to retake), this approach has largely
destabilized the traditional economy of
completing assignments in exchange for
points.

Since I am required to submit a grade at
the end of each term, I involve students in
this process, using a Descriptive Grading
Criteria to bring a modicum of consistency
and fairness to these deliberations. Students
use a linked letter, screencast, or face-to-face
conference with me to highlight evidence in
their online portfolio supporting the letter
grade they think they’ve earned.

But if I can’t measure it, how do I manage
it? How can I hold my students accountable?
And how can I, in turn, render an account to
those above me?

To some degree, as I’ve suggested above,
I’ve found workable answers to these
questions. But, here, I’d like to pose another
question: What exactly does it mean “to be
accountable”?

Following the etymological breadcrumbs,
we know the word originates in the act of
adding, enumerating, and summing up. The
prefix a- means we must convey this sum to
another, presumably someone who has a stake
in the result. And -able means that we are
capable of performing both these
tasks.

Before its emergence in Old French, the
word seems to have leapt from the Latin verb
computare, meaning “to count, sum up, reckon
together.” That word derives its meaning
from the prefix com- meaning “with,” and the
verb putare, “to reckon.” Before taking on this
more modern meaning, putare meant “to
prune,” and before that, “to strike, cut,
stamp,” finding a common ancestor with

¹ Zak, Paul. "Measurement Myopia." The Drucker
http://www.druckerinstitute.com/2013/07/measurement-myopia/.
more aggressive, violent words like dispute and amputate.

It’s not hard to imagine why ancient accounting might have involved this kind of violence. Transactions likely involved cutting off the correct amount of commodity or currency; authentication of an agreed-upon amount may have involved stamping with a seal or signet. And the fact that we did this cutting and stamping together may betray our deep-set fear of getting duped.

Returning to the present, accountability continues to represent an interesting combination of contention and consensus. Even today, the ambivalence and unease it occasions seems to flow from its ancient origin: the act of impressing symbolic agreement, certainty, and exactitude on something fundamentally malleable, arbitrary, and uncertain. Although its usage has strayed far beyond these origins, accountability still makes the most sense when it involves a transaction, what Gert Biesta describes as “an exchange between a provider and a consumer.”

The fluidity and nuance of education makes us especially uneasy because it isn’t easily summed up, certified, or commodified. And when so much money is involved, it’s easy to see why one might wonder if we’re getting swindled. Thus, schools, administrators, teachers, and students must find ways to produce measurable results.

Even in making the case for going gradeless, I often find myself arguing from the standpoint of how that change will show up in measurable ways. Researchers like Jo Boaler, Dylan Wiliam, Paul Black, and Ruth Butler have shown how, by forgoing grades (and, in the process, not measuring or certifying learning), we can produce even greater gains.

Greater gains on what?

On the eventual summative assessment, usually the state, national, or international exam.

In other words, even without the daily currency of grades, I can still pay up come test time. All I’ve done is write you an IOU for an even more impressive amount. At that point have I really escaped the transactional nature of this paradigm?

I’m not saying it’s wrong for us to want the most “bang for our buck” from schools. What I am saying is that accountability—with its impulse to strike, to cut, to stamp—has often resulted in us getting far less than we bargained for.

By its very nature, accountability limits our focus to that which can be counted, ignoring the existence of anything unmeasurable or subjective. This fact is perhaps most evident in the humanities, where learning to grapple with complex, interconnected, irreducible realities is of central importance. As Bill Ferriter asserts, “The truth is that the things that are the most meaningful are also the hardest to measure.”

Instead, we choose the lesser part, crowding our curriculum with things that are most measurable, things which are, not coincidently, least meaningful. Accountability pressures us to eviscerate the disciplines we love, turning them into stale collections of discrete, demonstrable steps and concepts unmoored from their central essence.


Perhaps the most obvious victim of this approach is writing, a discipline which, as Linda Mabry observes, is “fundamentally self-expressive and individualistic.” In order to enact the alchemy of making writing measurable, we must narrow our field of vision to contain “only a sliver of…values about writing: voice, wording, sentence fluency, conventions, content, organization, and presentation.”

Often, this attempt to render writing accountable is paired with a prescriptive form or template. As Paul Thomas puts it,

...the root of what my students do not know and often badly misunderstand is the template used to teach students in most K-12 settings. Further, I now believe that teachers using those templates are also misled about their students’ concepts of sentence formation, paragraphs, and essays because the template and prescriptions mask the lack of understanding...Rules and prescriptions, I am convinced, impede the development of conceptual understanding of how and why to form sentences and paragraphs in order to achieve an essay.\

Author and writing professor John Warner points out how this kind of accountability, standardization, and routinization short-circuits students’ pursuit of forms “defined by

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What we are measuring when we are accountable, then, is something other than the core values of writing. Ironically, the very act of accounting for student progress in writing almost guarantees that we will receive only a poor counterfeit, one emptied of its essence.

Some might say that accountability only makes a modest claim on teaching, that nothing prevents teachers from going beyond its measurable minimum toward higher values of critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. Many seem to think that scoring high on lower-order assessments still serves as a proxy for higher-order skills.

More often than not, however, the test becomes the target. And as Goodhart's law (phrased here by Mary Strathern) asserts, “when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.” What we end up aiming at, in other words, is something other than the thing we wanted to improve or demonstrate. When push comes to shove in public schools—and push almost always comes to shove—it’s the test, the measure, the moment of reckoning we attend to.

For most of my career, I’ve seen how a culture of accountability has caused the focus of administrators, teachers, and students to solidify around the narrow prescriptions and algorithmic thinking found on most tests. When that happens, the measure no longer represents anything higher order. Instead, we demonstrate our ability to fill the template, follow the algorithm, jump through the hoop. And unfortunately, as many students find out too late, success on the test does not guarantee that one has developed the skills or dispositions needed in any real field. In fact, students who succeed in this arena may be even more oblivious to the absence of these.

Even approaches like Jo Boaler’s, which show how eschewing grades and tests in the formative period can lead to greater gains on standardized exams, still run a constant risk of narrowing their focus to serve prescriptive, sterile ends. How many teachers and students can bravely embrace what John Updike called “that strange law whereby, like Orpheus leading Eurydice, we achieve our desire by turning our back on it”?8

How many of us, when the stakes are high enough, will instead lose nerve and falter before guiding students back to the sunlit regions of discovery and growth?

And how can we lead them, when we ourselves are condemned to this same Sisyphean fate, squirreling away points in order to avoid the poor evaluation score? Often any creativity, critical thinking, or problem solving I’ve brought to my own teaching has been at my own peril. Taking risks, trying new strategies, questioning long-accepted norms almost always involves an unacceptable implementation dip. It’s safer to get with the program: post your learning objectives; manage your transitions; model, practice, and routinize your procedures.

**WWDD: What Would Danielson Do?**

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The abused becomes the abuser. Dehumanizing demands for accountability will continue until someone stands up and stops it. In my experience, that stand largely falls to teachers, those with the courage to carve out human spaces within a pervasive milieu of mistrust and measurement. A first step for many of us is reining in our own compulsion to manage through measurement, using grades as behavioral carrots and sticks.

As Peter Drucker (actually) said,

Your first role . . . is the personal one. It is the relationship with people, the development of mutual confidence, the identification of people, the creation of a community. This is something only you can do... It cannot be measured or easily defined. But it is not only a key function. It is one only you can perform.⁹

Without the currency of numbers, we glimpse anew the immeasurable value of the students in our care and the potential of our time together.

We don’t need to capture or quantify these unmeasurables to appreciate or cultivate them. We don’t need to add, enumerate, or sum anything up for learning and growth to occur. In fact, we may find that the old impulse to strike, to cut, to stamp is antithetical to the work of teaching and learning.

What will it take for us to start thinking of accountability, not as a numerical concern, but as a responsiveness to the students in our care?

care, a reciprocity that cannot be mediated by measurement?

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Neoliberalism and the Attack on Learning: Where Do We Find Hope?

David Militzer

There is a growing sense that the number, complexity, depth, and breadth of crises we are experiencing should cause us to pause and consider some very deep questions. As a society, we seem unable to formulate a coherent idea of what is going on—or why. As Naomi Klein recently remarked, “it’s impossible to pry one crisis apart from the others.” In an ongoing state of confusion, we lack a way to imagine a reasonable way forward.

Catastrophic events become more numerous and frequent, yet the mainstream press coverage does little or nothing to help us understand the patterns that would, in turn, help us understand the magnitude of our troubles. Meanwhile, public trust in our major institutions—media, business, government—is at its lowest level in modern history. Globally, these figures have fallen below 50% in two-thirds of the world’s developed countries.

Yet amid this existential crisis, other trends are pointing in a very different, more hopeful direction. Our historical moment is characterized by unprecedented technological connectivity, giving us access to huge amounts of information and knowledge. Fundamental questions about who we are and who we could become as humans, until recently not a part of public conversations, are emerging with a palatable urgency.

An astonishing 90% of scientists who have ever lived are alive today. We create more knowledge in one year than we have created in the last 300 years, since the beginning of the scientific revolution. Our capacity to see into distant galaxies has never been so great, and due to the expanding universe, the extent of our vision will never be matched again. The new science of cosmology is discovering universal patterns of connectivity unsuspected by earlier science, giving us the opportunity to reconsider and even transform our understanding of our place in the universe and natural world.

Yet there seem to be powerful forces resisting any effort to engage in serious reflection about the costs or legitimacy of the assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that undergird our way of life.

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Yet there seem to be powerful forces resisting any effort to engage in serious reflection about the costs or legitimacy of the assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that undergird our way of life. Why is it so difficult to discuss trends—trends we seem unable, reluctant, or simply afraid to face?

Days of Crisis and Opportunity

Media echo-chambers reinforce our thinking. Our fascination with the latest social media devices has contributed to more screen time, and less person-to-person time. Research from Sherry Terkle has suggested that use of smart phones has led to an atrophying of our abilities to empathize and self-reflect. Self-reflection generally does not happen when we are “plugged-in.” Yet perhaps the increase of feelings of loneliness and isolation, despite our technological connectedness, will lead us to find the time, space, and courage needed for self-reflection and self-knowledge. For it is from this wellspring that we might yet find a greater capacity for deeper human connections.

Joe Brewer offers another prospective point of entry. He posits that our fundamental problem is not that we lack the knowledge necessary to address even our most perplexing problems. For it is not knowledge that we lack, but rather an awareness of the magnitude of what we already know. Another way of understanding this is that our habitual ways of thinking, our “mental frames,” are too narrow and segmented for our cognitive processes to be successful.

As he notes, we face “a special category of challenge that seem to have no solution because of their deeply entangled and multifaceted nature. But [they] are only problems that have yet to be adequately framed in a manner that makes their systemic nature clear.”

In summary: We are failing to translate what is already known into viable practices for managing emergent complexity. And we are increasingly in danger due to the erosion of our capacities to share and listen in conversation, to acknowledge how we feel and think, and to face what is necessary if we are to build a better future.

The process of reframing involves being able to look differently at history, and our many current predicaments. Looking and learning from what was once invisible but is now being revealed, and exploring the deep historical, cultural, and social patterns, is such a “frame.” Learning to see the invisible is applying John Dewey’s formulation that learning is more important than knowing—as the not-yet-learned is tomorrow’s new understandings. We entertain that the invisible is unknowable at our own peril.

The concept of evolution is beyond the consciousness of all animals on earth—save us. Although we may act differently, we are not only Homo sapiens, we are Homo sapiens sapiens. We are (perhaps) the one species who knows what it knows. And it is understood by many, if not most, that the universe is constantly evolving—and so is our knowledge and sense of what is possible for us as humans.

We can choose what we do with this understanding. We can choose denial, dismissing its implications, absolving ourselves of the opportunity and responsibility. Or we can embrace it, bringing new understanding, wisdom, and meaning into our existence.

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What is it that we have been missing, that if we examined it more closely, would give much needed insight into our predicaments?

Neoliberalism, an Invisible Force

Neoliberalism, a term poorly understood and confusing to many in our society, is increasingly gathering attention. Neoliberal policies were publicly debated, some for the first time, in last year’s presidential primaries.

The adoption of Neoliberal policies have resulted in growing economic inequalities of shocking proportions, have accelerated climate and environmental crisis, and have wreaked economic and political havoc well beyond our borders. With the onset of the Great Recession, and the view that international and national leaders responded ineffectively to its effects, criticism of neoliberal policies started to gain more ground.

Monetary policies of austerity are blamed for being punitive, ineffectual, and for making things worse for many populations across the globe. Signs of this include the consolidation of wealth in the hands of the wealthiest, the growing political polarization in the United States and Europe, and the related inability of political parties to reach any consensus for crafting meaningful solutions to growing problems.

Still, most political leaders continue to defend policies such as current international free trade agreements as simply the inevitable outcropping of globalization. The cult of efficiency—privatization of government services, shifting power to corporations, deregulation of environmental and economic protections, and the growing inequity between the richest and the rest of us—is being baked into the economic and geo-political landscape. It is eerie the degree to which these policies form part of the new norm, without any public debate, and regardless of their degree of popularity.

Yet it was precisely these neoliberal programs that led to the Great Recession. And a host of troubling symptoms still persist. With increased levels of economic insecurity, anxiety and depression, substance addictions, suicides, police violence (particularly acted out versus African American communities), and increasingly frequent outbreaks of gun violence—neoliberalism’s defenders seem to be counting on the public’s continuing difficulty understanding what it is and how it affects our world.

Neoliberalism is one version of capitalist ideology. Neoliberal policies invest absolute faith in free markets and the “natural” hierarchy of winners and losers. It posits that competition is the core characteristic of human relations. Hence, in a neoliberal meritocracy, inequality is considered normal and unavoidable, and efforts to create greater equality are morally corrosive. Inability to thrive is a personal character flaw, the fault of the individual or family.

Universal competition relies on universal quantification and comparison. That which can be measured has value over that which cannot. All are subject to a stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, perpetuating a system of winners and losers. Even the “winners” are constantly looking over their shoulders—scanning the horizon for the next threat. Such fear creates an environment in which the method of intelligence has very little space to operate, indeed.

The Shock Doctrine: Neoliberalism and the Rise of Crisis Capitalism

In a world drowning in information overload, it is easy for most of us to miss when the architects of neoliberalism use crisis as an opportunity to impose unpopular policies on people who are distracted, often struggling to survive.
Naomi Klein, in *The Shock Doctrine*, catalogues the history of taking advantage of national and international crises to inject neoliberal values into nation (re)building. She cites numerous examples: beginning with the 1973 assassination of democratically-elected Chilean President, Salvador Allende, through the Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina, with numerous others in between.

The strategy of “Shock and Awe,” announced days before the bombing of Baghdad and the beginning of the Iraq War, was first explicated in 1996, in Appendix A of the book *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Its description leaves little room for interpretation.

Shock and Awe are actions that create fears, dangers, and destruction that are incomprehensible to the people at large, specific elements of the threat society, or the leadership. Nature in the form of tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, uncontrollable fires, famine, and disease can engender Shock and Awe.

The application of “disaster capitalism” was freely admitted to by Friedman, although the phrase had not yet been coined.

After Hurricane Katrina’s destruction had decimated the school system of New Orleans, Friedman wrote a *Wall Street Journal* Op Ed entitled, “The Promise of Vouchers.” Admitting that Katrina was a tragedy for the children of New Orleans, he saw in it “an opportunity to radically reform the educational system.” Of course, by this time, neoliberal thinking was deeply ensconced in national education policy. Before Katrina, there were 123 public schools in New Orleans, and seven charters. Afterward, there were four publics and 31 charters.

Voices such as Naomi Klein’s are often considered outside the margin of what reasonable people take seriously. They are not a part of most water cooler conversations. Increasingly, they must become the norm—rather than the exception.

Neoliberalism and Education: A Closer Look

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8Ending a tradition of 140 years of democratic government in Chile with the establishment of the Pinochet regime.


10Ibid., 6.

11Ibid., 5.
Rumblings began to be heard in the early 1970’s about the need for education to “get back to basics,” ironically, in part a response to the effectiveness of the progressive era and its success in educating a youthful citizenry that was now questioning the authority and conduct of established public institutions and power structures.

The roots of neoliberalism’s reflection hold over educational reform policies began to emerge sharply in the public sphere with the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983. The report identified education’s most significant problem as the failure to adequately prepare students to contribute to the country’s economic competitiveness. The report received a fair amount of attention and its influence lasted long after its date of publication.

Indeed, it would take almost twenty years for its influence to find expression in federal policies, particularly in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB), the development of voluntary Common Core State Standards, and, later, in Race to the Top funding. Nevertheless, the dye had been cast: the trend was towards a standards-, high-stakes-assessment-, accountability-based and increasingly market-driven system.

Despite some support among advocates for educational equity, these changes have resulted in little or no gain in narrowing the “achievement gap.” They have, instead, exacerbated financial pressures on traditional public schools by redirecting funding to charters. They have required impossible academic performance goals, leading to the closing of schools and the replacing of teachers and administrators for failing to make “adequate progress.” This has led to weakening community ownership and involvement in its schools by reducing local voice in school governance.

The reform movement that began in earnest in the 1980’s put education’s emphasis not on the teacher and the learner, but on what was being taught, and for accountability purposes, how to measure academic achievement. A standards and assessment system is consistent with the neoliberal focus on the bottom line. Measurement establishes value, so what is difficult or impossible to measure is, at best, of less importance. This approach has resulted in diminished attention and understanding about who students really are, and what they need from their education.

There is a not-so-hidden cost, then, to neoliberalism’s contention that humans are reducible to homo economicus. The implications of this for identity development are considerable. Identity becomes equated simply with “market value.”

Collectively we seem to have little grasp, hence little or no interest in, examining the effects of neoliberalism and disaster capitalism on state and federal education policy. As Henry Giroux has noted, these educational policies have resulted in a system of “mis-education,” characterized by “manufactured illiteracies”—civic, social, moral, and political.

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One result of this is a habitual simplification, or misframing, of political discourse as being either left or right. However, since the early 1990’s the neoliberal agenda has been supported by initiatives and actions backed by all mainstream parties in the United States and, until recently, in the United Kingdom. This, of course, diverts public attention away from considering the effects of the neoliberal agenda—and opens the populace up to angry reactions against all political discourse, which is seen as corrupt, elitist, or best left to technocrats and experts. Evidence of the destruction effects of this anger is all around us.

Hope and Compassion

It is said that when people lack hope, they have nothing. The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that, in many parts of the world, we are in a crisis of trust, and that without trust and belief in the power and efficacy of democratic relations, we lose hope. Systems meant to protect the public good fail.

This correlates to a growing sense of injustice among many—a lack of hope and the belief that hard work is not rewarded, our children won’t have a good life, our country is not moving in the right direction, our leaders don’t care about us, and they won’t do what is right. Instead, we see a lack of confidence and the desire for forceful change through forceful leaders. Yet, even in times of trouble, it is also said that hope springs eternal. Hope is the foundation for the future. Being hopeful makes us realize that in the face of catastrophe, natural or human-made, lies the greatest opportunity to build a different world.

Recognizing that, fundamentally, most people want to be good, and that seeing themselves as good is therefore one root of hope. Recent disasters have reinforced the truth that compassion, not plunder, is the natural response to tragedy and calamity. Our leading voices of hope remind us repeatedly that the most difficult challenges can forge great hope, and a better world.

Hope, then, is the sense that there will be a future, and that this future will be in some way welcoming, a good place to be.

Having a disposition toward possibility highlights the human prerogative toward improvement instead of repeating past actions. Dewey viewed such a disposition to-

ward improving the world as worthwhile in and of itself. Seen as a productive disposition, such hopefulness orients us toward the possibility that change could occur as the result of intelligent action, thus engendering a tool for reconstructing oneself and the world around us.\textsuperscript{21}

Others add that hope is essential for avoiding falling victim to despair as well as holding ourselves open to the possibility of good, for ourselves, and for our sisters and brothers.\textsuperscript{22}

Hope has been called “the virtue of creative resolve—the fundamental commitment to finding creative solutions to what appear to be impossible problems.”\textsuperscript{23}

Even today, respect for humanity is considered by many to be a fundamental moral imperative. Yet we are more likely to trust ourselves to do what is right than to trust each other. Where do we build compassion when we all experience the world uniquely, subjectively, when we have so many different perspectives to start with and choose from?

Compassion has been described as “the understanding of another’s experience as real and legitimate.” Yet a society that seems unable or unwilling to hold anyone accountable for police violence is a sign, among many others, of entrenched structural racism. The steady state of fear and vulnerability that White Americans can only imagine demonstrates our collective lack of moral imagination. Yet we have the opportunity to choose differently. The ongoing problem of gender inequity and the growing revelations of widespread sexual harassment and abuse of women by men are additional opportunities, if we can face them, for evolving ourselves and our culture.

Moving into spaces where we can recognize, appreciate, and empathize is where we may rediscover hope. “Our shared humanity is the source of a universal interpersonal hope for a world of compassion.”\textsuperscript{24}

**Examples of What Education Can Do**

What, as educators, can we do to instill the possibility of being hopeful in a world that seems to be unraveling—in a world with more serious problems than ever, and a set of collective habits that make it difficult for us to even collectively define them, much less attempt solutions? Where do we find unity in a world where neoliberalism leads to an identity of “me, incorporated”? How can we overcome our “disaster mindsets”?

Where is our “moral compass”?

Dale Blyth reported in a recent workshop in Oakland, California, that the biggest challenge kids face in their social and emotional lives is in developing a positive identity. With the development of strength-based approaches in the expanding field of Social and Emotional Learning, it now seems within the reach of schools and classrooms to implement educational strategies that promote empathy, student agency, positive communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork.

Social and emotional learning strategies can teach the habits of hope and many schools are,


thankfully, finding ways to use them. These can provide a vision of compassion and excellence towards which the entire school community can aspire.

There are numerous resources to assist in this process. Models to improve school climate and culture are available and some have been proven effective when well implemented. Global education programs, restorative justice practices, positive conflict resolution techniques, anti-bullying programs, cultural literacy, mindfulness and meditative practices, service learning, maker spaces, peer-assistance programs, wilderness education, the arts—these are only some of the tools that are making a difference in many schools across the United States, even as I write.

Of course, with so many potential choices, community receptivity and norms are critical design considerations. Yet even in communities that may seem to be resistant to such programs, strategic and creative approaches can often succeed. For example, “leadership development” is generally a non-controversial way of entering the world of social and emotional learning.

As educators, it is important to understand the economic, cultural, historical, social, psychological, and political forces that are driving our world. Some positive forces that are marginal right now might yet be nurtured to bring about the next great transformation of society. Other forces, currently dominant, are part of a dysfunctional pattern that warrants caution and strategies of mitigation. Both have their roots in our history. Increasingly, neoliberalism and its effects are being seen as a failed ideology.²⁵

We, and our children, deserve better.

A Distant Mirror: The Axial


Connection

In 1953, Karl Jaspers wrote The Origin and Goal of History. Jaspers described a period from around 800 B.C. to approximately 300 B.C. during which a transformation in consciousness occurred in disparate parts of the world. People in diverse cultures were frustrated by warfare, conditions of slavery, despotism, violence, and the troubled course of history. Jaspers called this the “Axial Age,” as he saw it as a historical turning point, fueled by a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a yearning for a better world.

Over 2,000 years ago, the Axial Age witnessed spontaneous leaps in understandings about how we should strive to live. A new sense of individual consciousness arose, as well as the birth of empathy and the appreciation of how our actions affect others. It included the dawning of self-reflection, individuality, and striving towards living virtuously.

The formulation of the Golden Rule came about almost spontaneously in far different corners of the globe. With it came a new moral sensibility to peoples from China, Greece, North Africa, India, and the Mediterranean. This contributed to the forging of new relationships, leading to a virtual explosion of travel, trade, and the mixing of cultures.²⁶

Today, while we struggle with loneliness and isolation, we are also experiencing the profound sifting of living in a globally connected world. This growing recognition of our interconnectedness is emerging in every field, from environmentalism to quantum physicists, from cosmology to evolutionary biology, and, of course, in and through the interweaving of the world through communications.

There is a growing appreciation that we belong deeply to this world and to each other.

And this connectivity may, indeed, be more real than our feelings of separation. Religion and spirituality are being transformed again. We are reviving the profound pre-axial age of earthiness and connection to our bodies. But instead of experiencing them at the tribal level, this shift is now occurring globally. We are discovering our interconnections. At the same time, we are not losing sight of the transcendent journey of the individual, now joined with the group.27

We are living at the beginning of a period of quantum leaps in understanding and insight. Concurrently, it is important to remember the dysfunction in the world that we are witnessing is not new. It has always been operating, and we have had many glimpses of it throughout history. What is new is that it is now being revealed, and we have the senses to see and hear clearly, more than ever before.

The two are deeply connected. Seeing with depth and clarity, listening to each other, and speaking with our hearts and minds, just might lead us to a place where we can better imagine who and how we can be, separately and together.

When not busy with raising three teenagers, writing, meditating, cultivating non-virtual and virtual relationships, working hard to earn hope when for many despair is on the rise, David promotes 21st century learning for the California Department of Education. His views are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of his employer.

Imagination in the Rationale Classroom: Considering Alternatives to Capitalism

Lucia De Luca
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The function of schools goes beyond supervising individuals as they develop biologically and instinctually. It involves assisting and modifying how individuals develop to meet societal standards. This makes schools social institutions.¹

Twenty-first-century schools reflect the current state of the economy. Canadian schools have a curriculum and structure based on capitalism and consumerism.² Like many schools, worldwide, they usually emphasize individual success—the common thread in capitalism. Individuals are not valued for their own sake, but only to the degree that their successes bode well for the capitalist state.

Canadian schools follow a neoliberal logic—a logic which Stephen Vassallo sees as perpetuating the creation of capital. That is, the school’s main function is to “promote the accumulation of human capital.”³ Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills that one needs to develop to be valuable to society—and such value is almost always understood in economic terms.⁴ In spite of this dominant paradigm, there are possible teaching techniques that can be used to counteract the neoliberal function of education.

Within mainstream schooling, using one’s imagination is often perceived as a bonus—a “nice touch” rather than a vital requirement.

Neoliberal, consumerist education is problematic because it limits thinking within capitalist ideals and, therefore, allows for extremely minimal social and political change. Neoliberalism calls for an education system that is inherently static: students are taught to conform to capitalist ideologies without considering alternative ideals. In this way, imaginative activities can be used as tools for students to consider alternatives to their capitalist and neoliberal realities. Within mainstream schooling, using one’s imagination is often perceived as a bonus—a “nice touch” rather than a vital requirement. Activities and lessons that tap into students’ imaginations are often underestimated because their ability to be politically potent is overlooked. Imaginative activities have the potential to assist teachers in redefining their students’ value to society.

In this essay, I argue that imagination is an educational tool that can be used to counteract the dominant Western economic and political ideology: capitalism. As a Bachelor of Education student, and like other upcoming teachers, I feel a bit trapped in the many rules that come with practicing teaching. Learning about imagi-

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¹ John Dewey, Democracy and Education (Champaign, Ill: Project Gutenberg, 1990), 10.
⁴ Dianne Gereluk, Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education, 63.
native activities as defined by Maxine Greene was freeing because I learned they could be used in our classrooms to push against dominant ideologies and create change.

Especially as an upcoming secondary English teacher, it is important to me that tapping into one’s imagination, whether it be through reading fiction or writing creatively, not be continuously undermined. Indeed, utilizing one’s imagination can be a means to considering real-world issues through various lenses.

**What is Imagination?**

Maxine Greene defines imagination as the ability to think of alternatives to known reality that are rational and grounded.\(^5\) Greene has suggested that educators encourage their students to use their imaginations to work through real-world problems while still exercising logic.

Imagination, in this sense, is not (just) imagining alternate endings to a favorite fairy tale. Instead, the uses of imagination that Greene describes would involve students picturing how they might implement a recycling program in their school or help vulnerable members of their community—and ultimately shape a better future for their community and planet. Greene is suggesting a revolutionary use of imagination that is grounded in rationally reconsidering the real world.

To counteract capitalist values such as individualism through the school system, students need to be able to do more than criticize within neoliberal boundaries. They need to be able to identify issues that are related and non-related to capitalist values, recognize what changes should be made, and imagine possible plans of action for those changes to take place.\(^6\)

While neoliberal discourses situate imagination as a method of resourcefulness in a capitalist society,\(^7\) imagination can also be used as a way for individuals to visualize scenarios that are not dependent on consumerism or market values. Having students be aware of their own thinking and how it is influenced by previous knowledge, in addition to teaching them to use their imaginations to reconsider the world, can be seen as a level of metacognition. Students begin by thinking about the ways that political and social structures (and the elites produced by them) have influenced their thinking, and recognize how their own values and perspectives are altered and shaped by a capitalist environment.

After making progress with this form of metacognition, students are better equipped to reimagine their reality. Classroom activities, on their own, cannot be considered educative experience.\(^8\) Experience involves acting upon what one is thinking about.\(^9\) Thinking and experience are too infrequently associated.\(^10\) When students think metacognitively and take part in imaginative activities, thinking is (re)grounded in experience.

**The Limitations of Conforming to Institutional Mandates**

One critique of neoliberal thinking and learning is that they do not represent “real” thinking and learning because students are learning to conform to institutional mandates.\(^11\) Students are

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\(^9\) Ibid., 108.


encouraged to be knowledgeable, yet without having the opportunity to imagine beyond that knowledge—which is to be treated as static and unquestionable. The thinking and learning skills typically taught in schools essentially teach students to internalize the desire to follow orders and become a source of human capital: “The good thinker and learner has become the correlate of the good worker and student.”

Although students of neoliberal schools are strongly connected to institutional mandates and consumer identities, students could be taught to imagine life “outside the box” or, in this case, life “outside institutional mandates.” If students do not question why capitalism exists, they risk never imagining a better societal structure. They risk not being given an opportunity to consider a more community-based, environmentally-focused, or equitable version of society.

For example, if students are challenged to imagine what society might be like if it drastically increased its consumption of locally-produced goods and decreased its consumption of foreign goods, after in-depth imaginative thinking, they are likely to start considering how a community-oriented society might differ from an individualistic society. According to Greene, when people imagine the current state of society differently, they understand how change can be possible. They then begin to consider ways for change to be implemented.

If students are not taught to use their imagination to conceive alternative possibilities, educators ensure the status quo. Teachers should seek to create learning environments where students can realistically reimagine their reality—understanding that realism can be far from limiting.

Individualism as a Neoliberal Ideal

While it is important to think outside of institutional mandates, it is also important to think outside of individualism. In twenty-first-century Western schools, teachers often emphasize learner-centered pedagogies where students engage in personalized learning and goal setting. However, if learner-centered teaching leads to self-centered students, then schools are fulfilling a corporate agenda. As Dianne Gereluk has noted, “increasingly, economic progress is one of the central aims of education, and education that doesn’t contribute to economic value and economic growth is considered less important and worthwhile.”

Increasingly, schooling trains students to think that prioritizing their own interests is a responsible method of ensuring personal benefit. This is especially disheartening because self-prioritization, being a neoliberal ideal, disempowers the vast majority of people while continuing to empower capitalist elites. As long as students are being trained to become obedient workers and consumers, they are benefitting

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12 Ibid., 156.
14 Ibid., 22.
15 Stephen Vassallo, Psychology in Education, 152.
16 Ibid., 156.
17 Dianne Gereluk, Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education, 71.
people in high-ranking positions of power more than they are benefitting themselves. While schools claim to be motivated to empower individuals, because they do not generally respect student autonomy or empowerment, they tend to actually do the opposite: individuals are passively made into servants to the economy and the privileged.19 As we have seen, imagination is a starting point for change. Again, students must be taught to see patterns in their thinking. They must come to ask who is influencing these patterns and how these effect their education and worldview. If students do not recognize that their values, such as individual achievement as a measure of hard work, benefit elite members of society significantly more than they benefit themselves, then future change will not be possible.

It is not only important for students to re-imagine institutional mandates. It is also crucial for students to develop an awareness of the people who create, support, and benefit from institutional mandates. To see patterns in one’s own thinking, to trace those patterns to social conditions, and to re-imagine other conditions—these are conditions for social change.

Moving Towards Solidarity and Social Change

Neoliberal schooling and capitalism both propagate individualism. Imaginative activities can counteract that notion. Stephen Vassallo notes how schools within capitalist societies seek to shape students who are competitive and aim to be more academically successful than their peers.20 Even when students collaborate and work in groups, their focus tends to be on how they will each benefit from working in a group, and what skills they can personally contribute to the group.21 That is, even in group work, the focus remains all-too-often on the self.

When students use their imaginations to practice perspective-taking, they move away from individualism and towards solidarity. They become part of a classroom community that is actively trying to obtain a better understanding of the differences between individuals.22 Imaginative thinking activities could be the difference between a student displaying empathy over apathy.23

By having students consider the perspectives of others, teachers are valuing a thinking technique that is not often prioritized by capitalists, but that could be a source for positive societal change. For example, students might reconsider the knowledge they have obtained in relation to Indigenous rights and learn to recognize their urgency if they imagine the point of view of local first nations peoples. This becomes a catalyst for social change.

In order for schools to be healthy social environments rather than restrictive social institutions, it is necessary for students to be given opportunities to consider others and how their needs are prioritized within their community. Through imaginative activities, teachers can create a stronger sense of community—one which can offset both individualism and marginalization.

Critical Thinking is Not Enough

To encourage more opportunity to think beyond institutional mandates and individualism, teachers need to provide thinking activities that

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20 Ibid., 145.
21 Ibid., 151.
23 Ibid., 60-72.
go one step further than critical thinking. The tragedy of neoliberal schooling is that students are encouraged to imagine, yet only within certain boundaries.  

As has been mentioned, imagination for rational, political purposes does entail a boundary; imaginative thinking must be grounded in reality. Neoliberal schooling persuades students to think within a specific political boundary, the capitalist one, rather than allowing students to consider how they might transform it in line with existing conditions. In Western capitalist societies, people have personal freedom—but only if they conform to institutional mandates.

This tension translates itself into the process of critical thinking as generally encouraged in neoliberal schooling. Neoliberal schools encourage their students to be critical if and only if their thinking still reflects capitalist values. Imaginative activities, as defined by Maxine Greene, are limited to reality, yet unlimited within reality. Critical thinking can be considered more limiting, because students are taught to be critical of a reality observed through the lens of capitalist values. The act of imagining goes one step further than the clichéd call for critical thinking. After analyzing possible changes to be made in society, students imagine ways for change to be implemented.

Teachers and schools can push back against capitalism by empowering their students with the ability to do more than criticize within boundaries. While schools, being social institutions, will always be influenced by society, it is the responsibility of teachers to introduce productive imaginative thinking that allows for students to consider, criticize, and re-imagine the powers and structures that influence them.

**Imagination as an Authentic Learning Activity**

Imaginative training needs to be recognized as an authentic learning activity. It is, perhaps, more beneficial than limited exercises in critical thinking. Unfortunately, imagination is not generally recognized as a legitimate educational tool because it is not associated with authentic learning activities.

Opportunistically, imagination does have a place in the rational classroom. Imagination, as outlined by Greene, is a method of considering the reality of the world as formed by “conformity and unexamined common sense,” so that students can think about alternate values and ways of life. Once students have determined how their thinking is influenced by capitalism, they can begin to reshape how they consider the world, as well as imagine how they might change the world.

Paradoxical at first sight, exercising students’ imagination can actually be a way for teachers to engage students in the real world.

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In a world highly motivated by consumerism, it is crucial for teachers to encourage metacognition so that students become critical of what they understand to be reality, how they question reality, and how they interpret the various realities that others perceive.  

Neoliberal thinking and learning have a predictable set of goals and sequence of events to achieve those goals. Such predictability is particularly appealing to consumers, who only buy if they know and like the product or service they are going to receive. Since imaginative thinking pushes students beyond their comfort zone, the use of imagination in the rational classroom is not only a method for reconsidering consumerism, but also a way for teachers to establish non-consumer driven habits within their students.

While teachers should encourage students to aim towards fulfillment and success, they cannot ignore the fact that consumerist values motivate students to achieve a definition of fulfillment that is not necessarily their own—as definitions of achievement have been constructed for students through neoliberal schooling and capitalist living.

In opposition to the individualism perpetuated by capitalism, communities are formed when people work together to improve and shape democracy. Regularly incorporating imagination into authentic educational activities is a way for teachers to engage their students with the world, to imagine changes that will create improvement, and to help students take a step away from conformity and towards democracy.

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31 Dianne Gereluk, Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education, 79.
32 Maxine Greene, “Social Vision and the Dance of Life,” in Releasing the Imagination, 64.
33 Ibid., 66.