

***Fostering Students' Character in Worst Times Through Human Education:
The Importance of Teacher's Role and Attitude According to Value-Creating Education***

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Abstract

This paper examines the situation in which students are growing in these years impacted by a global pandemic and climate change's effects when conspiracy theories and pessimistic views have arisen even stronger. Students are exposed to them, most of all through social media. This study is questioning, which role as teachers we should cover. What is the perimeter in which teachers can act for cultivating hope and empowerment in students' minds. Considering the priority to teach students how to recognize truth and create value from that, the author suggests how to cultivate this kind of *forma mentis* in class with the purpose of fostering empowered future global citizens. The Author, speaking to educators, underlines the significance of Value-Creating education. The study takes into consideration students from 7th grade and is developed among Curriculum Studies, specifically linked to Ikeda/Soka studies and Value-Creating education. The study contributes to post-humanistic discussion about "what makes us human?" and "what to include in curriculum in order to foster humans?" through the lens of two interdependences between a) Human and social construct and b) Human and technologies. Findings and conclusion can help designing a specific curriculum for teachers' education. This is a conceptual/theoretical study. Methodology: qualitative research based on observation of students' reactions in Author's classes. Primary sources are belonging mostly to the corpus of literature in Ikeda/Soka studies, linked to Curriculum Studies. Some predominant literature in the field of post-humanism is considered. The correlation of the three fields is conducted under the lens of interdisciplinarity.

Keywords: Value-Creating Education, Empowerment, Character Development, Curriculum Studies, Post-humanism, Global Citizenship, Interdependence

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Introduction

Observing the rising of conspiracy theories, a question emerges in relation to young generations since they mold young minds, most of all if accepted and supported by parents or role models. Taking into consideration the role of the teachers in cultivating critical minds, value creating education could cover a significant role as a tool to foster future generations. The recognition of truth, the difference between “critical thinking” and “oppositive thinking” are topics to be included in curriculum and the teacher is someone who has the duty to empower students. In this sense, what teachers owe to students?

Accessibility to internet and to mainstream information has caused a sort of cognitive omnipotence according to which people have started to think that everybody can become an expert just reading studies and research. This has led to a strong critic towards scientific literature. In the meanwhile, social media rose giving a larger circulation of ideas and opinions causing a flattening of the level of reliability and authority of sources: studies and opinions risk to seem equal. This is the cloth on which conspiracy theories became more powerful mostly with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brought to the extreme, this trend generated the paradoxical situation in which even though everyone can be an expert about everything, there is always a “further” information citizens could not know. This caused a slithering thinking according to which, common people are not in the condition to know, and to have an actual impact in their close environment and in the society. This mindset is spreading even among youth. Often, parents bring this reasoning at home, calling it inappropriately “critical thinking”.

Citing Ikeda’s 2010 Peace Proposal (2010), the study digs into the Nihilism attitude which constitutes the opposite of empowerment. Right in this age where people have, in theory, more accessibility to information, they are paradoxically experimenting a decrease in the feeling of their own power. Which is the role of educators with reference to this phenomenon? Schools are primarily the milieu of the learning process and teachers have the mission to teach students about their infinite potential and impact they can have in their close environment and in the entire society. Without rendering the discussion, a quarrel on different positions, teachers should not fail in providing their students with useful tools to discern truth, learn what “critical thinking” is and how to create meaning from truth, and so, to create value from truth. This implies issues on curriculum studies specifically about what to include in curriculum to foster youth to be able to recognize truth and to educate them to their potential. Moreover, even praxis must be investigated in this perspective.

The study is framed as well in the post-humanism discourse about 2 of the three interdependencies: a) Human and Social Constructs and b) Human and Technologies.

The final suggestion is that value creating education could be a compass to navigate among the creation of meaning and teachings from the truth (creating value). Moreover, creating hope, even in the worst times is the core of education.

In his 2014 Peace Proposal, Ikeda (2014) suggests fostering youth (students) even in intangible things, such as love, courage, and hope. Cultivating solidarity and unity in young people’s heart as a tool to getting involved in social and political issues to manifest their dissensus and participate to the social discuss is vital. This is strongly auspicated by Daisaku

Ikeda and Adolfo Perez Esquivel (2018), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, in their joint Appeal for Resilience and Hope of 2018.

The paper is intended as a brief analysis on what we, as adults, teachers, educators, and parents, owe to young people to foster them as empowered and fully human.

How Could Curriculum Help in Answering to Our Question?

What do we mean by curriculum studies? There's a slight difference between curriculum studies and curriculum instructions. Curriculum instruction is simply related to what to teach and how to teach it. Curriculum studies is ultimately interdisciplinary. It draws on multiple fields, for example, political science, law, religion, philosophy, literature, anthropology. Moreover, it is strongly linked with the worthwhile question, elaborated by Schubert (2009). What's worth challenging, what's worth becoming, what's worth transforming, what's worth loving, what's worth being. Curriculum studies engage with the hidden curriculum, the taught curriculum, and the untaught curriculum. It primarily draws on schooling, but it focuses also on educative practices happening outside classes, in the community. Even the place outside the school could be the place of curriculum studies. Schwab (1970) explained it through the lens of the four commonplaces of curriculum: subject, student, teachers, milieu (He, Schultz, Schubert, 2015).

In this study, we will take into precise consideration the final 3 commonplaces: student, teacher, and *milieu*. The student is the same person at school and at home, he or she brings everything that they hear, or drink or eat before they enter to school. They bring with them all discussions they had with their parents, and every single word or opinion they heard from them. The teacher is also curriculum. What the teacher is living impacts curriculum. Lastly, the milieu, the traditions, the culture, what's happening in the community, which are the major topic discussed in the community. These all constitute and impact curriculum.

All these topics create a net where discussions around posthumanism and human education and the human interdependencies with nature, social constructs and technology are crucial nodes of complexity. In this study we will only navigate through 2 interdependencies: humans and their own social constructs and humans and technology.

Post-humanism Interdependencies

The Post-humanist turn moves toward the so-called Anthropocene, the age of man. This is the age where the actions of human beings are impacting the planet even at a geological level (Goulah, 2020a; 2019). Humans are actually shaping or reshaping the physical nature of the planet itself, such that it's having an impact on the biosphere and the climate, speeding up the heating of the planet. It cannot be thought without the lens of the interdependence. In fact, we can try to answer to the questions: what makes us humans and how we can become fully humans, starting from the analysis of three interdependences, they are between: a) humans and their own social constructs; b) humans and nature; c) humans and technology. In this study only two of these three will be considered.

- 1) Humans and their own social constructs. Race, feminism, capitalism, gender, justice, these are some of the social constructs we're all living in. How can we look at these intersections and how this can be intended as curriculum? Social constructs are created by humans. How can we teach students and youth in general to get free from them, to realize

a new paradigm? Which is the role of teachers with reference to this interdependence? For example, changing the narrative stepping away from the traditional colonialist version (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015) or interrogating ourselves on who are laws serving? (Snaza, 2019, 2015). Remaining on the narrative importance of reality Taliaferro Baszile (2019) underlined the overrepresentation of man as human, as if human and man are synonymous, urging for a fast change in the representation thanks to the power of the artist who can draw the reality (and the representation) through art. Resonating to the role of the literature and the artist in the post-humanistic era, Ghosh (2016) who stressed the strict link existing between the artist, the literature and the politics, intended as both the voice of establishment and the political engagement of the artist. On the same topic, even Snaza (2019) urged for a reconstruction of the curriculum helped by the re-narration and the re-writing, changing the voice to be allowed. The wish of Ibrahim (2017) to form a pedagogical army of students, is resonating with the title of this study.

- 2) Humans and technology. The topic is clearly linked to this interdependence. Not only all information reaches us through media (internet and social media), but also, they are manipulated without little or no possibility to discover any change realized on them. It is truly inspiring to investigate what makes us human with reference to what is it created by humans which mimics our human actions. What is the limit of the progress of technology? What is our role as educators in teach youth how to interact with fruits of technology? AI has a prominent role in the stage of educational discussion in these days. Chat GPT and others are helping and inviting students to be used. However, AI could also help the monitoring of the school system sustaining educational human rights (Berendt & Littlejohn & Blakemore, 2020). Discourses on Ai are getting larger and more important and a scholarly is developing (Dixon-Romàn & Nichols & Nyame-Mensah, 2020; Williamson & Eynon, 2020).

What Is the Role of Education in the Post-humanistic Era?

Ikeda in 2020 said: “As I consider education in the 21st century, I would like to assert that what is most urgently needed is a paradigm shift from looking at education for society's sakes to building a society that serves the essential needs of education.” (Ikeda, [2000] (2022)). I'm teaching in Italy in middle school (from 7th to 9th grade according to US system) and I work with pre-adolescent and adolescent. In the third year of middle school in Italy, students must choose their high school. Parents are often stressing and underlying that it's important to remain aware of the future of our students, but when they talk about future, they are focusing on their professional future, on the role they will have in the society. When, as adult, we are thinking to their future only on a professional perspective, we are risking forgetting to foster them becoming fully human.

Ikeda (1993) said: “education based on hoping dialogue is far more than the mere transfer of information and knowledge. It enables us to rise above the confines of our parochial perspectives and passions.”. Teachers and educators must avoid falling in the trap, to think that their work consists only in transferring information. The failure or the success of their work, of the process of education, is not only related to how much students are able to replay in somehow or repeat information they provided them with. Teachers cannot forget this open dialogue which is the only and the most efficient tool they must let their students build up their personality, which is probably the most important role of schools and education in general.

As seen above, post-humanism analyzes the real world and what are we living and facing. Moreover, post-humanism is digging to propose which causes generated the society we're living in. That is right in this field of research that a lot of critical studies are emerging that are so precious. (Braidotti, 2017; Dillard & Okapalaoka, 2011; Ferrando, 2013; Goulah, 2019; Haraway, 2016; Ibrahim, 2017; Kim, 2015; King & Wynter, 2005; Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Snaza, 2019; Snaza, 2015; Taliaferro Baszile, 2019; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015).

Ikeda in his perspective made a further step. Starting from this actual analysis and asking what I can do, as a common person, a common citizen, today, to make a change in somehow, in order to create hope. Teachers and educators, have to always be focused on this and I think that in general, all adults, have too. That's not an option. Teachers should be focused on this and always remember it, even when they are teaching something very practical or very philosophical. They are fostering and cultivating future citizens to manifest, express and live with compassion, wisdom, and courage. In somehow living this time is our fortune since we cannot turn our face towards another direction. Teachers should always keep in mind: today, here in my environment, with this person, with these people, how can I become fully human? And how can I foster my students in becoming fully human, building up their own personality?

Critical Thinking or Oppositive Thinking? (Nihilism vs. Empowerment)

In these past years the formula "critical thinking" has been overused. This increase in the use has caused a sort of misunderstanding on the term. In fact, it is usual to hear people using it describing a different process. This is the reason why this brief section is dedicated to the theoretical difference existing between "critical thinking" and a simple "oppositive thinking". Think in a critical way differs from saying no or that we do not agree. "Critical thinking" is a cognitive process aimed by the purpose to examine and carefully analyze a principle, a theory, a situation without allowing feelings or opinions to affect you. In somehow, is the clear opposite of the simple process to be in opposition on principle. To ignite a "critical thinking" process needs the courage to leave our own opinions if in the process we undercover contradictions or different explanation, or, if we find out that our thought is not logical or affected by one or more "fallacie". This process should involve (and pursue) complexity. "Oppositive thinking" instead, could be compared to the attitude of a child or a teenager who is fighting against his/her parents' establishment. It is the disruptive attitude to destroy a different opinion only because we do not agree. In this lieu I would like to draw a parallel between a) critical thinking and empowerment against b) oppositive thinking and nihilism. In my humble experience with students from 6th to 9th grade, I've been observing, most of all from March 2020 on, the raising of rumors about conspiracy theories, rumors created, of course, by parents and adults living close to youth. This rumors, often trimmed with the exaltation of "critical thinking", usually lead to a disempowerment feeling in students. I've observed that the more youth are exposed to this kind of discussion, the greater they are cultivating a sort of lower self-esteem, such as they would be powerless. This sense of impotence walks arm in arm with what Daisaku Ikeda called "Nihilism" (Ikeda, 2010). According to Ikeda, pessimism, or nihilism permeates the whole contemporary society and represents a pathology of civilization. This trend risks to make the millennial humans' spiritual heritage meaningless and without value. Nihilism, Ikeda (2010) warned, could manifests sometimes as arrogant confidence, some other as cool indifference. It is important to say that Ikeda faced this topic with reference to the risk for science and technology to run out of control (so with reference to the post-humanism interdependency between humans and technology). He drew our attention to the people's egotism (the desire for perfection in

themselves and their progeny). This attitude is easily linkable to the tendency cited above of thinking that since we can have access to a big amount of information, we are able to become expert on any field and that with the help of “critical thinking” (in its wrong sense, “opposite thinking”) we can put on discussion every assumption.

On the opposite direction there is “empowerment”. In his 2014 Peace Proposal, Ikeda (2014) focused on the concept of “human revolution” explaining that it is focused on the empowerment that opens one’s life on the limitless possibilities. Human revolution is realized when, thanks to an inner transformation of the individual, the courage and the hope arise and make him/her to face and break through the most tragic situations. This process, characterized by value creation ultimately transforms the entire society. According to Ikeda, the accumulation of a big number of changes both on an individual and on a community level, creates the occasion for humanity to overcome all global challenges. Through the human revolution, the individual experiences happiness and feels the concrete possibility to surmount any challenge. So that, both on an individual and a societal level (micro and macro are reunited) a positive transformation is realized. This perspective is not divergent from the purpose and the core of SDGs, goals that can be concretely accomplished through the actual efforts of common people and numbers of measures enacted by Countries and Organizations, that are all linked by the aim to get people empowered (in realizing them, but also after their realization).

Value Creating (Recognition of Truth, Create Meaning From Truth) and Human Education (Ningen Kyoiku)

What is the above-mentioned process of value creation? Makiguchi, clarifying happiness in terms of value, asserted that truth is found in the correspondence between a reality and the words and concepts applied by humans to that reality. According to him, truth is embodied in the student's interaction with experience. He stated that “Truth” should not be conceived as a constituent element of value, instead, is a matter of “qualitative equivalence”. Value, for the Japanese pedagogue, is the “relational power of the object measured by the quantitative response of the subject” (Makiguchi, 1972). So that, it arises from the interaction between humans and their surroundings, and it is only in this sense that value can be created; truth cannot then be a component core of value. Coming back to the topic of this study, even though managing not verified information, such as conspiracy theories or personal opinions spread as scientific assumptions, is insidious, it is crucial for educators to foster students to let them create value through the interaction they have with that info. What can I learn from that output? Is it empowering me, or it is limiting my impact? Getting used to these questions is vital while building one’s own personality and character. According to Makiguchi, educators should be a catalyst of meaning in students’ life, a guide towards empathy, consciousness, value (Goulah, 2021a; Goulah, 2015; Goulah, 2013; Gebert, 2009).

Inheriting the work of Makiguchi and Toda, Ikeda, who has never been a teacher, founded several schools and institutions named “Soka” which is the Japanese word for value creating. Until few years ago, even the pedagogy related to Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda were commonly named Soka and easily translated with “value-creating” (education). The Japanese formula used by Ikeda is “*Ningen Kyoiku*” that has been translated in *humanistic education*, however in these years a review of the translation has been realized and now it is aptly rendered with *human education*. Even though in this study the evolution of terms and translations is not covered (for a deep analysis about this topic, see Goulah, 2021b; 2020b; Goulah & Ito, 2012) it is important to notice that in Ikeda’s perspective human education is like two faces

of the same medal, on one side it is the attitude always encourage the individual in front of us on his/her full potential and to never give up. On the other side, it is vital that we, as individual, become fully conscious about the whole scope of our own humanity (and humanness) (Goulah, 2021c). Thus, human education is a process in action for becoming “fully human” and education is conceived as a mutual growth of both teacher and student. Drawing a thread from Makiguchi to Ikeda, human education is a human revolution that moves from an egocentric “lesser” self to the “greater” self while all our thoughts and actions interact across space and time (Ikeda, [1974] 2010).

Teaching Youth About Love, Courage, and Solidarity

Human education, as briefly explained above, it is not limited to schools. It overcomes the walls of school and has a concrete impact on the future of students as common global citizens. In order to foster future protagonists, it is crucial for educators to include in curriculum (what to owe) subjects, matters, and discourses that can cultivate students’ strong personalities oriented towards others, and in general, society. This is the reason why human education could not be intended without the lens of intersectionality and interdependence. The core of the education is to empower future generations (Ikeda, 2009) to fight against the sense of abstraction through a constant dialogue (Goulah, 2010). Ikeda in his 2009 Peace proposal suggested a new paradigm: the humanitarian competition, a concept conceived by Makiguchi. This competition serves for achieving same goals pursued by military or political force through a moral influence: to be respected rather than feared.

Another key aspect in Ikeda’s perspective is the need to focus on solidarity as a main topic for the education of future generations. Solidarity resonates with the principal of the mutual shared joy and is so related to the attitude explained above of the human revolution, which always comprehends others, and the mutual growth, vital aspect of human education. In his 2018 Peace Proposal, Ikeda suggested to pursue an intersectional solidarity (Ikeda, 2018). Following this thread, he proposed to consider the 5th SDG, gender equality and empowerment of women, not only as one of the seventeen SDGs, but to consider it as the propeller towards the achievement of the totality of goals (Ikeda, 2018).

Conclusions

People are experimenting an increasing feeling of hopelessness. In such situation, educators, and adults in general, cannot avoid taking action in cultivating and fostering young people’s hearts and minds towards an infinite empowerment (Goulah, 2021d; Inukai & Okamura, 2021; Inukai, 2020, Kuo & Wood & Williams, 2021). In the post-humanistic age, where actions led by humans are impacting the whole globe, we need a compass. This could be human education, characterized by the creation of value, a constant inner transformation (human revolution) and an open dialogue with others pursuing a strong solidarity (Ikeda, [2000] 2021; [1996] 2021). To become fully human, we need to feel that we are not divided from others, from situations and conditions and that we are fully capable to have a strong impact on our environment and on the whole society. This strong empowerment must be transmitted to students. SDGs are amazing input and concrete goals to be achieved and towards which we need to feel empowered. Through quality education for all (4th) and gender equality (5th) we can give a strong acceleration in the achievement of all other fifteen. If people cannot feel they can have an impact, they cannot take any responsibility and this, most of all in youth, has a tragic effect in the building of their personality.

In their *Joint Appeal for Resilience and Hope*, Ikeda and Esquivel (2018) called on young people to be authors of their own lives and the future history. The two peace builders encouraged young people to be “beacons of hope demonstrating that another world is possible” (Ikeda & Esquivel, 2018). Citing the urge of the prohibition of nuclear weapons, they affirmed their “unchanging and unbounded faith in the potential of youth”, that need to unite in solidarity to resolve any challenge. With the same hope in our hearts and conscious of the fundamental interdependence that unites all of us, we as adults need to concretely use our responsibility towards future generations and to humbly continuing ask “what do I owe to future citizen of this world?”. This simple question symbolizes the attitude of a human, always caring for his/her environment and his/her future.

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