

# **Value Creating Education and the Capability Approach: A Comparative Analysis of Soka Education's Facility to Promote Well-Being and Social Justice**

## **Abstract**

*The relatively unfamiliar pedagogy of Soka (value creating) education is analyzed for its capacity to promote well-being and social justice, using the well-known Capability Approach (CA) as a comparator. Various aspects of Soka education correspond favourably with the CA, indicating its potential as a credible and constructive approach for facilitating improved quality of life for individuals and communities. Diverse practical applications of Soka education illustrate how its principles are actualized in advancing social justice issues. Empirical research on Soka education is suggested to investigate its assertions that the pursuit of value creation leads to happiness and well-being.*

*Key words: Soka, value creation, happiness, Makiguchi, Ikeda, Capability Approach*

## **Introduction**

Soka (*value creating*) education is a relatively new system of progressive education, largely unknown outside of Japan – where it originated – however, gradually gaining a modicum of international attention through fairly recent scholarly research, particularly in the United States. Soka education is intimately connected with the philosophy of Soka, a humanistic-based approach to well-being, developed by Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) and his protege, Josei Toda (1900 -1958) in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Toda’ s disciple – Daisaku Ikeda – a leading Buddhist philosopher, peacebuilder, and educator, has further advanced Soka education over the past 40 years.

Makiguchi's formulation of Soka education was highly influenced by, inter alia, Mahayana Buddhism<sup>1</sup>, Kant's views on happiness and value as they relate to the human condition (Goulah & Ito, 2012; Kumagai, 2000), the utilitarianism perspective espoused by John Stuart Mill (Kumagai, 2000), and John Dewey's philosophical positions on pragmatism and progressive education (Gebert, 2009; Goulah, 2010a; Goulah, 2010b; Goulah, 2012; Goulah & Ito, 2012; Hickman, n.d.; Ikeda, 2010).

Soka education has a deep historical connection with both the promotion of well-being and advocacy for social justice, and its philosophical underpinnings and practices are keenly affiliated with the welfare of both the individual and society as a whole. Soka philosophy and educational theory initially found expression in the 1930's against the backdrop of Japanese industrialization, expansionism, and increasing militarism. Makiguchi vehemently opposed the purpose of Japanese nationalist education at that time, which was ostensibly a platform for political indoctrination and support of Japan's war efforts. Kumagai (2000) recounts that Makiguchi aligned with the ideals of liberal humanism and devised his "System of Value Creating Pedagogy" as an approach that would contribute to solving the challenges inherent in Japanese education at the time.

Makiguchi believed that education is the key to ultimately securing individual and societal well-being – or happiness – and that happiness was discovered through a

<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the Lotus Sutra, considered Shakyamuni Buddha's most essential teaching, as interpreted by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Japanese sage Nichiren.

transformational process of creating value in one' s personal life and in one' s interactions with the

environment. Goulah (2010a) relates that Makiguchi held the belief that individuals become happy when they are contributing to the development of society through their participation in the joys and sorrows of daily life, and that school is the primary forum for cultivating this humane value creating way of living.

Daisaku Ikeda, chief architect of the modern-day interpretation of Makiguchi' s vision for education – as well as founder of a system of schools based on this concept – elucidates the goal of Soka education in a manner that resonates with the ideals of global social harmony and justice. Ikeda believes that the chief goal of education should not be for the promotion of nationalism, business interests, or religious purposes, and that “ The aim of Soka education is the happiness of oneself and others, as well as society as a whole, and peace for all humanity” (Ikeda, 2006, p. 341). Goulah (2012) adds that the fundamental objective of Soka education is the development of people who are committed to the ideals of peace and the sanctity of life.

Despite its localized beginnings and continued pedagogical application (largely) in Japan, Soka education' s vision now extends far beyond that country' s borders. Educational facilities based on Soka are appearing around the globe and a growing number of international educators sympathetic to Soka' s ideals are practicing the concepts of Soka education in their classrooms.

Gebert and Joffe (2007) report that scholarly research and ensuing publications focusing on

concepts of Soka education are starting to appear from educators in a number of countries. The fairly recent growth in the internationalization of Soka education is a reflection of Makiguchi' s

ideas on the important function of education in human development, in that he believed a key purpose of education was to cultivate global-minded individuals who could be empathetically engaged with the world, while at the same time maintain their roots at the local community level (Gebert & George, 2000).

### **The Capability Approach as a Comparator**

In contrast to the relative unfamiliarity of Soka' s principles and practices within global educational circles, the more comparatively well-known Capability Approach (CA)<sup>2</sup> has engendered a substantial following in the international community. Researchers have commented on the flourishing state of capability studies, the exponential growth in application of the CA, and its influential currency with respect to conceptions of equality and freedom (Gasper, 2007; Ootegem & Spillemaeckers, 2010; Woods & Deprez, 2012). In particular, Gasper (2007, p. 357) notes the CA' s increasingly widening footprint through such diverse applications as,

...a major research effort, a scientific association, regular conferences at which many disciplines, nationalities and topics are seriously represented, and policymaker attention not only within the UN system but some influence in many countries and even in the World Bank.

The CA conceptualizes how we might comparatively evaluate and better understand the notion of individual (and societal) well-being. Conceived in the 1980's, its primary protagonists – Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum – based their theoretical framework on the assertion that the

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<sup>2</sup> Also commonly referred to as the Capabilities Approach and the Human Development Approach. The Capability Approach, and its abbreviation CA, will henceforth be used in this paper.

freedom to attain well-being is of primary importance and best understood in relation to people's capabilities (Robeyns, 2011).

Unlike Soka education with its roots in educational reform, the CA was not specifically formulated as an approach concerned with education or its advancement. The CA, nevertheless, provides critical insights and potential metrics for promoting and expanding educational capacity and attainment. Sen and Nussbaum are both convinced that education is a basic foundational capacity that is instrumental to well-being, affects the development and growth of other capabilities, and enables people to have lives they “have reason to value” (Unterhalter & Walker, 2007a; Wood & Deprez, 2012). Walker (2006, p. 163) reports that Sen “identifies education as one of a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being”.

Initially formulated by Sen, a socio-economist and philosopher, the CA was developed in response to the more widely used commodity-based model of income growth as an alternative approach to understanding economics and human development, as well as the measurement of income and satisfaction (Ballet, Koffi, & Pelenc, 2013; Gasper, 2007). The CA has clearly become one of the preeminent current-day frameworks for conceptualizing well-being, with wide-ranging practical application to issues of social justice and other aspects of societal welfare. Van Hoorn, Mabsout, and Sent (2010) note the widening expansion of the CA from its limited origins in political and moral spheres to a broader reach across diverse disciplines; while Anand and van Hees (2006, p. 268) consider the CA “ one of the most important developments in welfare economics and moral philosophy over the last 25 years, [and] the work of Amartya Sen has been, and still is, of paramount importance in this respect” .

Central to the CA are concepts such as capabilities, functionings, freedom and agency, and reason to value. For introductory purposes at this point, Walker (2005) offers a succinct overview of the CA framework by positioning it as a human development approach that focuses on expanding people's freedom and well-being, based on choosing a life that they have reason to value, and that they are actually able to achieve – as opposed to simply what resources they are able to access. Similarly, Soka education is concerned with expanding individual capacity or capability through an interactive process called *human revolution*, which functions to enhance one's wellbeing by seeking to create value in all aspects of one's life.

### **Method of Analysis**

It is evident that there exists some degree of confluence between Soka philosophy and the CA framework, with particular relevance to the cultivation of human development, and converging along the notion of how value is situated in one's life. The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of Soka education – in particular its capacity for promoting well-being and social justice. My approach in this analysis will be to map Soka education to the CA framework, i.e., to translate or conceptualize the theoretical and philosophical foundation of Soka education through various concepts that define the CA framework. The intended outcome of this exercise is to critically view the narrowly-familiar landscape of Soka through the lens of the more widely-known CA, thereby bringing into sharper focus the possible strengths and limitations of the former. After providing summaries of both Soka education and the CA, an analysis of Soka education will be undertaken through an exploration of parallels between the two perspectives, within the context of the advancement of individual and societal betterment. My contention is that Soka education has a largely contributive place in promoting well-being



and social justice, which is illustrated through examples of Soka education principles applied in practice across various milieus.

### **Overview of Soka Education**

An examination of Soka education necessitates reiterating its virtual unfamiliarity in academic and educational circles outside of Japan. Therefore, any critical analysis of Soka comes with the proviso that a great deal of what has been written about this approach by its principal proponents is currently inaccessible for broad-based study. The chief reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, neither Makiguchi, Toda nor Ikeda are regarded as scholars in any traditional sense. They were not university educated or formally trained as academics, and therefore their (essentially Makiguchi' s and Toda' s) publications were largely relegated to relative obscurity in Japanese educational spheres (Goulah & Gebert, 2009).

In Ikeda' s case, as noted by Goulah and Ito (2012), he does not conduct empirical research or publish in peer-related journals – although he is a prolific author, founder of the Soka Education system of schools (including two accredited universities), and has engaged in numerous dialogues (many published) with leading intellectuals and dignitaries around the world for over four decades. Secondly, the issue of native language has presented a barrier to a wider dissemination of the Makiguchi-Toda-Ikeda literary corpus on the subject of Soka philosophy and education. Neither of these individuals was bilingually fluent and only a small proportion of their collective writings (largely Ikeda' s) have been translated into other accessible languages

(Goulah & Gebert, 2009; Goulah & Ito, 2012)<sup>3</sup>. This limitation appears to be gradually changing, however, as over the past decade there has developed an increased recognition of Soka education and subsequent scholarly research by a number of bilingual (Japanese/English languages) researchers. Goulah and Ito (2012) note that, while numerous university-affiliated institutes in South Asia have been established to research both Ikeda and Soka education, and while still limited in the number of English-language publications, academic research on Soka education and Ikeda's perspective is beginning to materialize. It is with this appreciation of the currently existing limitations of English-language access to materials on the subject matter that an exploration of Soka education will be undertaken.

The most essential aspects of Makiguchi's conceptualization of Soka education are those of *value creation* and *happiness*, in addition to his troika of values consisting of *beauty*, *gain*, and *good*. These central features of Makiguchi's theories on education, located largely in humanistic ideals, basically constitute his Theory of Value (*kachiron*), and they are inextricably linked in their application to Makiguchi's System of Value-Creating Pedagogy (*Soka kyoikugaku taiei*) (Kumagai, 2000). The following section explores these basic concepts.

### **Value Creation**

The distinctively unique term *Soka* was born of discussions between Makiguchi and Toda that centered on the concept of value creation, with Toda's suggestion of the Japanese neologism,

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<sup>3</sup> For many years, two key publications served as the principal English translations of Makiguchi's work; Bethel, D. M. (1973). *Makiguchi the Value Creator: Revolutionary Japanese Educator and Founder of Soka Gakkai*. Tokyo: Weatherhill, and Bethel, D. M., Ed. (1989). *Education for Creative Living: Ideas and Proposals of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi*. Iowa State University Press / Ames.

*soka*, from *kachi sozo* (Ikeda, 2009, underscores added for emphasis). Makiguchi's Theory of Value was largely influenced by two schools of modern European thought: 19<sup>th</sup> century British educational utilitarianism and its views on happiness as the ultimate aim of human behaviour, and neo-Kantianism (Kumagai, 2000). From the Kant school of thought, Makiguchi principally examined perspectives on happiness and the philosophy of value, seeking "to clarify the concept of happiness in terms of value" (Gebert & Joffe, 2007, p. 72). From Kant's view that happiness is a state intuitively sought after by human beings, Makiguchi proclaimed that helping children attain happiness in life was the goal of education (Kumagai, 2000).

In considering the neo-Kantian notion of human values classification—insofar as Western Platonic-influenced thought has traditionally defined value in terms of the three elements of truth, good [ness], and beauty—Makiguchi disputed the idea that truth should be postulated as a universally positioned value. His conviction that truth was essentially an object of cognition led him to resist the notion of truth as a human value (Gebert and Joffe, 2007; Ikeda, 2004). Makiguchi regarded truth as an "expression of things as they are", whereas, value was understood as an "expression of the relation between self and object", and that, unlike truth, "value emerges as the measure of the appropriateness of the object for the evaluator" (Bethel, 1989, p. 55). Furthermore, Makiguchi believed that, as truth latently exists in nature, it cannot be created, only revealed. By contrast, we can create value, and "creation applies only to value and

not to truth, for truth stops at the point of discovery” (Bethel, 1989, p. 56). Gebert and Joffe

(2007) interpret Makiguchi's position on value and truth such that, as value occurs as a result of the interaction between individuals and their environment, therefore only value can be created. Truth, which is not created in this fashion, cannot then be considered a basic component of value.

### **Beauty/Gain/Good**

In rejecting the truth-good-beauty paradigm of human values, Makiguchi established a new system of value based on benefit<sup>4</sup>-good-beauty, and conceptualized these values into a system of integrated understanding (Bethel, 1989). *Beauty*, to Makiguchi, is a measure of sensory response that brings fulfillment to the aesthetic awareness of the individual, but only tangentially involves the overall life of the individual; *gain* is viewed as a measure of subjective impact that directly advances the individual's life in a holistic manner; and, by contrast, *good* represents a measure of social relevance that contributes to the well-being of the larger public or society (Bethel, 1989; Gebert & Joffe, 2007; Goulah, 2010a; Ikeda, 2010).

Goulah (2010a) relates that Makiguchi illustrated the three values as if sections of a triangle, with social good along the base, individual gain in the middle, and beauty at the top. Unstable happiness results when our attention is largely focused on creating beauty (as in an inverted triangle). Stable, happy lives are developed and maintained when humans seek to create social good, in conjunction with beauty and gain (as in a right-side-up triangle). An alternative diagrammatic conception of Makiguchi's theory of value is offered by Gebert and Joffe (2010), as they envisage the troika of values along the lines of concentric circles, expanding outwardly, from the life of the individual to the life of the community. Herein lay the substance of

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<sup>4</sup> Also translated as *gain* and *utility* (Ikeda, 2010, p. 15). Gain is the more contemporary usage and will henceforth be used in this paper.

Makiguchi's theory of value, in that it emphasizes the participatory inter-connectedness of individuals through community engagement. Makiguchi posits that a value creating life is one in which individuals lead socially committed and contributive lives that target both their own well-being and the betterment of society (Goulah & Urbain, 2013).

Ikeda (2009, p. 113) provides a highly instructive synopsis of Makiguchi's theory of value creation as it applies to well-being and social betterment;

...he [Makiguchi] taught that human beings are distinguished by the capacity to create value in the form of beauty, gain, and good. That is, through one's interactions with one's

environment, people can bring ever more beauty, comfort, and justice into the world. The creation of value is, Makiguchi asserted, the outcome of one's active engagement with others. Any situation or circumstance presents both challenges and possibilities. The actualization of positive possibilities—including those that may be far from apparent—is the essence of value creation.

Elsewhere, Ikeda (2010, p. 112) captures the essence of Makiguchi's theory by observing that value creation means to have the ability to enhance one's own life and contribute to the well-being of others, under any condition or circumstance.

## **Happiness**

As Makiguchi believed that happiness was the purpose of life (and education<sup>5</sup>), his

<sup>5</sup> A position also espoused by Nel Noddings (2003, p.1), “ Happiness should be the aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness” .



consideration of the relationship between value creation and happiness requires exploration to achieve a more complete understanding of Soka philosophy and education. Human happiness to Makiguchi was not born of the shallow ego-centred, approach to life we tend to envision when conceptualizing this term. His views on happiness – somewhat parallel

Aristotle’ s ideas on *Eudaimonia* – often translated as human flourishing, which, as noted by Grant (2012, p. 913), is associated with “ well being, living well and doing well—the good life” . John Stuart Mill’ s utilitarian views on happiness may have also influenced Makiguchi

to some degree, in that

Mill positioned happiness as the fundamental purpose of human life, however, not for the sake of the solitary individual, but for the happiness of the greatest number of individuals (Smith, 2005: 2013, para.10).

Makiguchi’ s conceptualization of happiness centered on the idea that it was not a fixed destination in the sense of an end goal, but, rather, it was continually cultivated through a praxis of becoming, or self-actualization; achieved through the creation of value in one’ s life and in the

lives of others. He believed that genuine happiness is attained only through “ harmonious co-existence” —the mutual sharing with others of success and failure, joy and sorrow—and that

value is created through this communal exchange, regardless of one' s personal or social circumstances (Bethel, 1989; Goulah, 2010a; Goulah & Gebert, 2009). Makiguchi understood authentic happiness as necessitating the sharing of sorrows and joys as a participatory member of one' s community, and that an inclusive, contributive, and harmonious life within society is

indispensable for any actualization of genuine happiness (Gebert & Joffe, 2007). Makiguchi's basic principle for attaining individual and societal well-being, therefore, can be summarized as: the purpose of life is happiness, and pursuing the creation of value by continually interfacing with one's surroundings is the most meaningful way to achieve life's purpose.

### **The Purpose of Education**

Makiguchi believed that happiness was the primary goal of both life and education, and therefore, one's life, one's happiness, and one's educational pursuits are all seen as inextricably connected in a lifelong journey toward continual self-development – or, what Ikeda (2004), following Toda, refers to as *human revolution*<sup>6</sup>. Education, therefore, has a supreme function in human and social development, and Makiguchi underscored this belief when he wrote, “ Human life is a process of creating value, and education should guide us toward that end. Thus, educational practices should serve to promote value creation” (Bethel, 1989, p. 54). Insofar as Makiguchi believed that happiness was both the starting and end point of human existence, and happiness was achieved through value creation, he posited that education's fundamental role should be to facilitate and guide students toward the creation of value. Soka education can, therefore, be characterized as an educational process that guides individuals towards a happy and

<sup>6</sup> A term coined by Josei Toda to describe a process of inner transformation leading to expanding one's capabilities to take action for the benefit of others. Daisaku Ikeda has remarked, " (Toda) consistently urged people to realize a fundamental, positive transformation in the depths of our own and others' lives. The focus of Soka, or value-creating, education must always be the achievement of...human revolution" (as cited in Goulah 2010b, p. 264).

fulfilled life in pursuit of creating value to both enhance one's personal life and one's communal

life, which are interdependent on, and inseparable from, each other (Bethel, 1989).

This concludes the overview of Soka education. The next section will undertake a summary of the Capability Approach.

### **Overview of the Capability Approach**

Nussbaum (1997-98) relates that prior to the development of the CA, the predominant methodology employed to undertake a comparative quantification of well-being and quality of life was by economic measurement, such as Gross National Product. Over the past few decades the CA has surfaced as an alternate approach to employing economic wealth as a primary measure of human development, and has provided a credible alternative to assessing and measuring well-being exclusively in economic, income-generated or resource-based terms (Tikly & Barrett, 2011; Walker, 2005). Moreover, Robeyns (2011) notes that the CA has in recent decades emerged as a new theoretical framework – not just related to well-being, but also applicable to development and justice. The CA has been prominent in the operationalizing of comparative measures of well-being, in particular the Human Development Index (HDI), published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). As a consultant to the UN, Sen aided in the creation of this index.

The CA has been widely cited in legions of scholarly research and other publications that have explored the contributions of this framework to such diverse fields as economics, human rights, education, philosophy, international development, environmental and social justice, and social work (Vigorito, 2011; Walby, 2012). Nussbaum (2003) suggests that the CA can be a potent instrument for engaging in discourse and action concerning social justice, and Unterhalter,

Vaughan and Walker (2007) position the approach as a richly resourced framework for conceptualizing issues in social justice and education. Norwich (2014) sees the CA's value in terms of its fresh ethical approach to re-examining issues in disabilities and education, and Polat (2011) suggests that issues of disability, equity, and social justice are key areas addressed by the CA.

For all of its capacity and promise, however, it is understood that the CA is not seen as a theoretical construct that explains or attaches causality to social phenomena, but rather a moral backdrop with which to conceptualize and comparatively assess notions of well-being and social justice. As noted by Unterhalter et al. (2007), “ The capability approach does not *explain* the causes of educational equality, but it provides a tool with which to *conceptualise* and *evaluate* them” (italics in original). Robeyns (2011) observes, however, that while certain CA concepts such as, functionings and capabilities, cannot be used to explain social phenomena such as poverty, inequality, quality of life, and social change, they are useful in providing practical descriptions of these issues as well as contributing to the development of metrics of well-being and social justice.

The next section briefly examines core concepts of the CA: capabilities and functionings, freedom and agency, and reason to value.

### **Capabilities and Functionings**

Saito (2003) observes that Sen views the CA as an approach to well-being that concentrates on freedom to achieve and ability to function. Its core concepts are known as *capabilities* and *functionings*; the former being opportunities to achieve valuable combinations of

functionings, whereas the latter are achievements (what a person is able to do or be) (Saito, 2003;

Sen, 2005). Nussbaum (2011) explains that the CA examines what people are actually able to do and be, in addition to what real opportunities are available to them, and considers the CA an attractive framework for addressing human<sup>7</sup> welfare because it addresses issues that people are frequently concerned about in their daily lives. Ballet et al. (2013, p. 29) suggest that the CA is a framework for assessing well-being in terms of “ the freedoms and opportunities to be and to do that people have reasons to value” , and that “ these freedoms to be and to do constitute the foundations of quality of life” .

In clarifying the interface between capabilities and functionings, Unterhalter and Walker (2007a) add that a capability involves potential, while a functioning relates to outcome.

Capabilities are not simply one’ s cache of competencies, skills, and talents, but also the freedoms

or opportunities afforded to an individual through a combination of one’ s own personal

abilities and those made available in one’ s environment. Functionings, by contrast, are the

actual attainment of one or more capabilities, or products of capabilities, that are fully realized

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beings and doings. An individual’ s composite functionings can be viewed as that person’ s

capabilities, which represent one’ s actual freedom to live a life one has reason to value



(Nussbaum, 2011; Ootegem & Spillemaeckers, 2010; Robeyns, 2011).

In summarizing Sen's (and the majority of CA proponents') position on prioritizing

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<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum (2011, p. 18) also states that the CA “ provides a fine basis for a theory of justice and entitlement for both nonhuman animals and humans” .

capability as it relates to well-being, Gasper (2007) notes that there exists some variability of opinion regarding its valuation relative to functionings. However, he does acknowledge, for instance, that Sen “typically gives priority to capability” and Alkire “defines social states primarily in the space of human capabilities” (p. 342). Nussbaum is certainly not silent on this issue when she suggests, “We shoot for capabilities, and those alone [i.e., not for functionings]. Citizens must be left free to determine their own course after that” (as cited in Unterhalter & Walker, 2007b, p. 246).

While it is clear that CA proponents do differentiate capabilities from functionings—at least in theory—Walby (2012) questions their distinctiveness. She believes that neither capabilities nor the opportunities they represent can be measured separately from functionings or outcomes, as in practice it is not possible to make a distinction between the two. Al-Janabi, Keeley, Mitchell and Coast (2013) lend some credence to this opinion by noting that, so far, attempts to quantify capabilities have largely fixed their attention on efforts to measure functionings (what people actually achieve) as proxies for what people can potentially achieve. Notwithstanding these appraisals, the apparent distinction between capabilities and functionings is important to understand, relative to the significant weight that the CA specifically places on capability and its connection with freedom and human agency.

### **Freedom and Agency**

The matter of freedom is an integral, if not necessary, component of the CA, as affirmed by Unterhalter and Walker (2007a) as well as Robeyns (2011, p. 17), when she states that, “ Sen often equates capabilities with freedoms” , and more definitively, “ capabilities are freedoms conceived as real opportunities” . In this sense, capabilities can be understood as the actual

presence of viable options or opportunities that are considered of value to the individual for achieving certain functionings. Walker (2005) notes that freedom and capabilities are inseparable, in that freedom is both a prerequisite and an outcome of the opportunities to develop capabilities as well as necessary in the decision-making process for considering what one has reason to value.

Nussbaum (2011, p. 25) stresses that central to the notions of capability is the “ opportunity to select” and “ freedom to choose”, and uses Sen’s example of a person who is starving and a person who is fasting. Both have the same type of functioning with regard to nutritional intake but not the same capability, as the element of choice must be considered in both scenarios. Nussbaum endorses the prioritization of capabilities over functionings, ostensibly because she believes that this provides space in the process for exercising one’s freedom of choice. This can be illustrated by the moral distinction she makes between a policy that promotes health and one that promotes health capabilities, with the latter option respectful of individual lifestyle choices. Ordering capability over functioning, therefore, connotes an active, participatory, and self-empowering approach to well-being and social justice. In this respect, Sen calls attention to the notion of ‘ agency freedom’ , with ‘ agent’ taken to signify “ someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements are to be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (as cited in Walker 2006, p. 165).

For Sen, freedom, or choice, is a critical element in the dynamic that sees individual well-being contingent on capability and the various opportunities to achieve functionings (see, for

example, the illustration above regarding nutritional intake). Sen (2005) uses the term freedom in the context of capability to denote the degree of voluntary choice in selecting particular functionings, which can be decidedly different from what the person actually opts to choose. He emphasizes that the freedom to have something can be differentiated from actually having it. Here again, we see how CA distinguishes between capability and functioning, and the centrality of agency in pursuing one's goals in life, or, in the absence of agency, the unfavourable possibility of disadvantage, as cautioned by Unterhalter and Walker (2007b).

Walker (2006) brings into focus the meaningfully interconnected relationship between agency and well-being by locating agency as the ability to pursue goals that a person values as important for the life she or he wishes to live. Robeyns (as cited in Gasper, 2007, p. 343) explains the importance of having personal choice over what one values in life, as she asserts that the priority is for individuals to “ have the freedom or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be” .

### **Reason to Value**

Having established the concept of capability as a salient aspect of the CA for developing individual well-being, a relevant discussion might focus on the question ‘Capability of what?’ Gasper (2007) suggests that in identifying capabilities, the prioritizing yardstick is guided by the notion of ‘what people have reason to value’, which primarily emphasizes the two principles of reason and personal choice. According to Walker (2005), the notion of reason to value is important as it directs one's attention to thoughtful and informed choices. Given the premium that the CA places on individual choice, and despite universal acknowledgement by CA

proponents that 'reason to value' is an important element of the framework, it nevertheless is perhaps the most debated, or at least diversely positioned aspect of the CA. Some CA advocates (most notably Nussbaum) argue that a global approach to well-being and social justice requires a prescribed list of capabilities. In Nussbaum's case, her frequently referenced inventory appears as ten predefined central capabilities that she believes are basic minimum requirements for satisfying the necessities to live one's life with genuine dignity (Nussbaum, 2011). In other CA literature, a number of capabilities lists have appeared with relevancy to a specific subject matter under study, to policy development, or to social, educational, or health programming being considered<sup>8</sup>.

Sen, on the other hand, is not such an outspoken advocate of lists; at least those that are static and assumed to be universally relevant in their application. He emphatically states, "I have nothing against the listing of capabilities (and take part in that activity often enough), but I have to stand up against any proposal of a grand mausoleum to one fixed and final list of capabilities" (Sen, 2005, p. 160). Sen's argument against a list of permanently endorsed capabilities centres on his staunch support for public dialogue and egalitarian practice. Nussbaum (2003) advises that Sen's rationale for his refusal to support a canon of central capabilities concerns his high regard for democratic deliberation. Nussbaum (1997-1998) does not necessarily agree with Sen on this issue, having once stated that securing her list of basic capabilities is of utmost urgency and priority. Although she now appears to have softened her stance by yielding her catalogue as open-ended and pliable to the point of revision; the notion of a central list of universal human capabilities that people have reason to value and can choose to operationalize is still in accord with her conceptualization of the CA (Nussbaum, 2011). List or no list, Robeyns succinctly

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<sup>8</sup> See Walker (2006) for some useful examples of lists in a variety of situations, although with some overlap of certain capabilities.

articulates the value of the CA in people’s everyday lives, as she asserts that the priority is for individuals to “have the freedom or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be” (as cited in Gasper, 2007, p. 343).

Having explored Soka education’s and the CA’s respective approaches to human development, the following section will explore various aspects of Soka education that align with those of the CA, particularly where they concern issues of well-being and social justice.

### **Mapping Soka Education to the Capabilities Approach**

Given space limitations in this particular analysis, I have chosen to track the notions of *value* and *happiness* for possible congruencies between the Soka education and CA perspectives. As the concept of value creation is so integral to the underpinnings of Soka education, the analysis will begin there.

#### **Value**

Soka education considers the creation of value as the *sine qua non* of life’s existence.

Daisaku Ikeda writes (as cited in Goulah & Ito, 2012, p. 68), “ Our daily lives are filled with opportunities to develop ourselves and those around us. Each of our interactions with others— dialogue, exchange and participation—is an invaluable chance to create value” . The creation of value is seen as both an individualistic and communitarian activity, and, in fact, one process cannot occur in isolation, or to its fullest potential, without the other. Moreover, Soka education

sees value creation as a process of life-enhancing “ social self-actualization<sup>9</sup>” that occurs regardless of one’s personal circumstances. Ikeda (in Goulah, 2012, p. 1001) notes that, according to Makiguchi, what ultimately defines value “ is whether something adds to or detracts from, advances or hinders, the human condition” .

Value, from the CA perspective, is also primarily concerned with advancement of the human condition. In order to live a life of value, or a life that one has reason to value, opportunities or substantive freedoms must be secured for individuals that allow them to make reflective and informed choices. Such is the process, according to the CA, of transforming a life that one has the potential to live, or is capable of living, into a life that one can actually live. Wood and Deprez (2012) comment that Sen strongly believes that the most basic human right is one’s ability to ‘ invent’ oneself to live a life of value. The notion of inventing a life of value has a great deal of affinity with Soka education’s concept of *human revolution*. Ikeda states that, “ Bringing the creativity of life to its fullest flowering is the work of human revolution” (as cited in Goulah 2010b, p. 264).

The personal transformation process ascribed to the CA can easily be seen as paralleling that of Soka education, in that the principal generator of value, whether it is ‘ value inventing’ or



' value creating' , is the individual. In the Soka education approach, one cannot create another person' s value for them (although one might create value that could influence another person).

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<sup>9</sup> As suggested by J. Goulah (personal communication, April 29, 2014).

This is an equally valid position for the CA, as ultimately one cannot determine what another has reason to value<sup>10</sup>. So, value creation and value reasoning are both internally driven and subjective human developmental processes, that, when operationalized, lead to the realization of lives of greater well-being and happiness. Insofar as this process is an on-going interconnected activity with one's surroundings, the well-being or betterment of society is naturally impacted as a result.

Makiguchi (in Bethel, n. d.) stressed that a consciously-driven motivation to create a more harmonious communal life aims at both personal well-being and the betterment of others, and cannot be based from a desire for self-interested benefit alone. Ikeda (2010) echoes this sentiment with his long-held belief that education should be a character-building vehicle for developing the spirit to embrace and augment the lives of others. Correspondingly, the CA engenders a similar altruistic and humane outlook. Unterhalter and Walker (2007b) state that Sen endorses the view that people should develop the ability to not only help themselves, but to also influence the world. Wood and Deprez (2012) suggest that education's responsibility to students is to provide opportunities to help them develop broad-based skills required for enhancing their capacity and freedom in order to choose agentive and valued lives for themselves, as well as to contribute to expanding capacity and freedom in the lives of others.

## **Happiness**

For Soka education, the notion of happiness is inextricably linked to that of value creation, in the sense that the pursuit of value leads to a life of happiness. Debates over the

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<sup>10</sup> There are counterarguments, however, that this approach is not so readily adapted to certain populations, such as children, particularly those with special needs, and persons with severe cognitive disabilities (Norwich, 2014; Nussbaum, 2001; Unterhalter et al., 2007).

meaning of human happiness have persisted for centuries, and they will not be reproduced here for fear of minimizing the considered attention it requires. Suffice to say, as the commonly understood meaning of happiness is that of a highly subjective, and often momentary internal state of being, it is a challenging notion to grasp. Consequently, applying metrics to the concept of happiness has also proven difficult, if not controversial, particularly where it relates to quantifying, with any degree of accuracy, notions of well-being and quality of life.

Sen (1985) chimes in on the debate, concluding that, while he believes happiness is obviously and directly connected to well-being, it is not an adequate representation of well-being. His position in this regard is founded largely on the utilitarian-based interpretation that happiness is fundamentally a mental state, and that it ignores other aspects of well-being.

Furthermore, Sen feels that “ valuing a life and measuring the happiness generated in that life are two different exercises” (as cited in Ootegem & Spillemaeckers, 2010, p. 387). Nevertheless, there are certain proponents of the CA who believe that happiness has its place within the framework. Kotan (2010) believes that a robust argument could be made for using happiness to indicate whether the combination of various functionings – as well as the extent and nature of people’ s actual freedom – is of consequential value to their lives. Ootegem and Spillemaeckers (2010) conclude that, while reported happiness should not be the solitary variable in evaluating well-being, they do concede that ‘ being happy’ should be given due consideration as a functioning or capability.

### **Limitations of Notions of Value and Happiness**

While there is much to appreciate about Soka education’ s notion of value creation as a

self-empowering approach to living, it seems to suffer from an apparent ambiguity and lack of empiricism that similarly befalls the CA's notion of reason to value. The value that individuals create in their lives, their perceptions of happiness, and the beings and doings that people have reason to value, are highly personal. The degree to which these processes contribute to well-being and social justice are – while very real for the individual – not usually subject to the level of scrutiny required to properly evaluate their impact on the individual and society. Although the CA is making inroads, it continues to struggle with its practical application and evaluative metrics to assess the influence of its framework on individuals and society. Likewise, Soka education does not currently conduct quantifiable-based research with respect to its practical application in daily life. However, as elucidated by Sen, the essence of agency freedom is to simply pursue opportunities to create value in one's life and in the lives of others, without necessarily applying external metrics to determine the impact of the value created<sup>11</sup>. In this regard, it might be worthwhile to consider whether pursuing a life of value creation requires measurement and analysis, and for what purpose.

Additionally, Soka education does not necessarily weigh in on such matters as establishing quantifiable measures of happiness or value creation<sup>12</sup>. A scan of biographical English-language resources (Understanding Soka Education, n. d.) from the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue, while well populated with references to dozens of relevant scholarly articles, shows a paucity of empirical research on any aspect of Soka education<sup>13</sup>. While still in its infancy with respect to academic research, as well as in its international

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<sup>11</sup> See especially Sen's definition of "agent" in the Freedom and Agency section of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Miyata (1995) indicates that Makiguchi wrote about the possibility of conducting scientific research into the value creating activities of humans.

<sup>13</sup> J. Goulah (personal communication, April 29, 2014) advises of two relatively recent empirical studies related to Soka education by J. Goulah and J. Nagashima, in *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 1-2: 2012.

recognition, it might be useful to consider studying Soka education and its principles on an empirical platform. Insofar as Soka education steadfastly links happiness to its notions of value creation and human revolution, it might prove instructive to develop a metric that quantifies Soka education's notion of value creation. Certainly, scientific investigations into this subject matter might prove a worthwhile and valuable exercise in shedding light on how the principles and application of Soka education might facilitate the promotion and expansion of capabilities and agency freedom for individuals and the community at large. There are undoubtedly intriguing possibilities for studying possible connections between Soka education, well-being, and social justice, as perhaps inadvertently suggested by Gebert (2009, p. 163), "Makiguchi viewed authentic happiness as inextricably linked to agency and empowerment. Thus, not only are empowered people happy, but happy people are empowered to reshape and reform society toward more ideal directions" .

### **Applications of Soka Education to Well-being and Social Justice**

Examples of Soka education's capacity to empower people to create value in their own lives and for the betterment of society are illustrated in this section. Based on generalist social work practice, Krogsrud Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois (2012) offer an appropriate structure for exploring how the principles of Soka education translate into practical applications for social welfare.

**Micro (specific to individuals and small units).** Ryan Hayashi is a recent graduate of Soka University of America and began teaching mathematics at an alternative high school in a small American community that "struggles with issues of severe poverty, violence, gangs, drugs,

discrimination, and immigration” (Hayashi, 2014, p. 117). As a newly minted educator working with teens experiencing constant school failure and extreme personal hardships, Hayashi felt challenged to incorporate into his lesson plans the Soka education ideals of social contribution, value creation, and happiness. He struggled with how to achieve academic relevancy for his students who apparently had little interest or understanding of abstract mathematical concepts. After engaging his students on a more personal level, Hayashi developed algebra and geometry lessons based on his students’ intimate knowledge of the town’s murder rate, which was considerably high for many years. By introducing relevancy into his math lessons, Hayashi found his students motivated and excited to engage in their schoolwork. Not only did the students’ math skills improve, they started to engage in discussions about how to raise awareness and take action about the issues that deeply affected their lives. In framing this teaching method as ‘social justice mathematics’, Hayashi positions his role in education as “to teach students to use math as an analytic tool to better understand, critique, and positively transform social inequities” (Hayashi, 2014, p. 112). As a Soka educator, Hayashi sees a resonance between Soka principles and social justice mathematics in that this teaching methodology encourages students to actualize Makiguchi’s notion of ‘good’, using math as a tool for social contribution (Hayashi, 2014, p. 116).

**Mezzo (specific to organizations and formal groups).** There are numerous examples of how Soka education advocates for social justice at an organizational level. Two central principles of the Soka education system are, “to uphold the dignity of life” and “to oppose violence”; values that are embedded in the ethos and curriculum of all Soka schools, from kindergarten to university. On a wider organizational scale, a populist global peace movement,

comprised largely of adherents<sup>14</sup> to Soka philosophy, has emerged subsequent to Josei Toda's public declaration in 1957 calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Chowdhury (2014) notes that since 1983 on an annual basis, Daisaku Ikeda has published peace proposals containing his thoughts on significant themes such as global peace, humanism, contributions of women, and promotion of the United Nations (of which the Soka Gakkai International [SGI] is an accredited nongovernmental organization). Constituent SGI organizations frequently participate in such activities as interfaith dialogues and public exhibitions on peace and disarmament. Navigating through SGI's website ([www.sgi.org](http://www.sgi.org)), one quickly appreciates the impressive array of community-based initiatives that explore and call to action various issues of social justice, such as, sustainable development, human rights education, and humanitarian activities. The basis for all of the aforementioned mezzo-level actions—from a school-based curriculum that promotes anti-violence and respect for life, to community-based pro-social activities, to a worldwide peace movement—is Soka education's theoretical underpinning of individual empowerment through the pursuit of value creation for the betterment of oneself and others.

**Macro (specific to larger communities and societies).** A third platform upon which Soka education promotes social justice and societal well-being relates to its commitment to the ideals of global citizenship. Students attending the Soka system of schools are widely encouraged to value friendships with students from other countries, and Soka University students are required to engage in a full semester of study abroad, where they become immersed in a language, customs, and culture different from their own. Over the past two years I have been fortunate to witness the importance that Soka education places on the promotion of internationalization, as I, and my undergraduate students, have engaged in study abroad

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<sup>14</sup> Estimated at 12 million practitioners in 192 countries and territories worldwide (Soka Gakkai International, para. 1, 2014).

exchanges with university, elementary, and high school students from the Soka schools in Tokyo. In these various exchanges, one appreciates how profoundly the Soka students cherish their interactions with students from schools outside of Japan, and how keen they are to learn about life in other countries. The intention behind this aspect of Soka education is not simply one of intercultural curiosity; rather, it is to cultivate an understanding, respect, and empathy for those in other cultures who are experiencing circumstances perhaps unfamiliar to Soka students.

Whether at the micro, mezzo, or macro level of engagement with one's surroundings, adherents to the principles of Soka education are endeavoring to create meaningful value in ways that address societal well-being and social inequities. Ikeda's notion of the interconnectedness of life (from Buddhist philosophy) is a significant factor behind Soka education's impetus to promote social justice, as this humanistic concept is derived from the belief that what affects one, affects all. Soka, as a unique educational philosophy that has outstretched its original focus beyond the educational system into a broader societal application, clearly has the highest regard for addressing and resolving issues of social injustice, and holds great promise for doing so through the practical implementation of this philosophy in all spheres of society.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aims at exploring the relatively unfamiliar philosophical approach of Soka education and its facility to promote well-being and social justice, by examining possible congruence with the internationally well-known Capability Approach framework. For the most part, there appears to be a fairly strong affinity between the two perspectives. Given the CA's authoritative standing in the domain of social welfare, I would argue that this resonance provides



a certain credibility to the principles and practices of Soka education for advancing well-being and social justice.

Both perspectives place a strong emphasis on the promotion and sustainability of individual well-being and social betterment. Soka education primarily concerns itself with the notion of value creation, and envisions its approach as one that emboldens individuals to pursue lives of creating the greatest value for themselves and for others, regardless of one's circumstances. In doing so, a progression of socio-personal transformation, referred to as *human revolution*, transpires in the life of the individual and, by virtue of the interconnectivity of individuals with their surroundings, this process *de facto* contributes to societal transformation.

The Capability Approach is also concerned with the conceptualization of value, in the sense that for individuals to be truly capable of actualizing various lifestyle opportunities, they must be able to exercise genuine freedom to decide what beings and doings they value – or have reason to value. Similar to the Soka education approach, the CA sees this process as transformational for both the individual and society.

One area where the two perspectives perhaps diverge concerns the notion of happiness. For Soka education, the aim of life is happiness, and a life of pursuing value creation leads to a condition of being, or, more aptly, becoming happy. Proponents of the CA are mixed in their views on where happiness is situated within their framework. Amartya Sen concedes that happiness and well-being are related; however, he does not believe the relationship is such that happiness equals well-being. Others believe that happiness could be employed as a worthy signal for quality of life, and perhaps even considered as a capability or functioning. Parenthetically, I would offer that consideration be given to Soka's concept of *value creation* as an appropriate candidate for designation as a universal capability within the CA framework.

The relative dearth of evaluative metrics, empirically-based or otherwise, in the Soka education body of research can be viewed as a possible impediment to acknowledging its credibility – especially in its claims that the pursuit of a value creating life leads to overall happiness, well-being, and an improved quality of life. It might prove a worthwhile exercise to undertake empirical research into the various theoretical claims of Soka education. There is certainly an abundance of practical applications of Soka philosophy worldwide—from teaching methodology in the school setting to citizen engagement initiatives in the community—that can be examined in this regard. It is quite conceivable that Tsunesaburo Makiguchi—educator, geographer, and father of Soka education—would be in agreement with this approach. With nearly 85 years passing since the official formulation of the System of Value Creating Pedagogy (in 1930), perhaps the time is approaching to put Makiguchi’s theories to robust scientific study.

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