

# Advancing in Bahá'í-inspired Education<sup>1</sup>

SONA FARID-ARBAB

## *Abstract*

In order to advance significantly in Bahá'í-inspired education, we need to keep in mind Bahá'u'lláh's extraordinary vision of the human being who will walk this earth in the fullness of time. While being respectful of accomplishments in the field of education, we need to remember that in its present state, it is incapable of cultivating such an individual. Humbled by the realization of the magnitude of the work ahead, a growing number of us, together with other like-minded individuals, have to labor in diverse cultural and ecological settings, identifying educational needs, developing elements of a coherent pedagogy, and creating a series of teaching-learning experiences in which these elements are given practical expression. The experience of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program is offered as an example of an endeavor to advance Bahá'í-inspired education in which modest contributions accumulate and lead to significant progress.

## *Resumé*

Si nous voulons véritablement progresser dans le domaine de l'éducation d'inspiration

1 This article is the edited transcript of a talk presented at the 40th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies held in Montreal, Quebec, in August 2016.

bahá'íe, nous devons garder à l'esprit cette vision extraordinaire qu'avait Bahá'u'lláh de ce que deviendra l'être humain ici-bas dans la plénitude des temps. Tout en respectant les réalisations accomplies, souvenons-nous que le système d'éducation actuel n'est pas en mesure d'engendrer un tel être humain. Prenant humblement conscience de l'ampleur du travail à accomplir, nous sommes de plus en plus nombreux à collaborer avec d'autres personnes animées des mêmes valeurs et à œuvrer dans divers contextes écologiques et culturels pour cerner les besoins en matière d'éducation, mettre au point les éléments d'une pédagogie cohérente et créer une série d'expériences d'enseignement/apprentissage qui permettent de concrétiser ces divers éléments. L'expérience du programme d'autonomisation spirituelle des pré-jeunes est présentée comme exemple d'une démarche pédagogique d'inspiration bahá'íe dans laquelle de modestes contributions s'accumulent et mènent finalement à d'importants progrès.

## *Resumen*

Para poder avanzar significativamente en la educación de inspiración bahá'í, necesitamos mantener en mente la visión extraordinaria de Bahá'u'lláh del ser humano que caminará sobre esta tierra en la plenitud del tiempo. Al ser respetuosos de los logros en el campo de la educación, necesitamos recordar que en su estado actual es incapaz de cultivar semejante individuo. Humillados por la realización de la magnitud del trabajo por venir, un número creciente de nosotros, junto con otros individuos del mismo pensamiento, debemos laborar en entornos cultural y ecológicamente diversos, identificando necesidades educativas, desarrollando elementos de una pedagogía coherente, y creando una

serie de experiencias de enseñanza-aprendizaje en las cuales se les da expresión práctica a estos elementos. La experiencia del Programa para el Empoderamiento Espiritual de Prejóvenes es ofrecido como un ejemplo de un esfuerzo por avanzar la educación de inspiración bahá'í en la cual contribuciones modestas se acumulan y llevan al progreso significativo.

Bahá'í efforts in education have a long history, dating back to the early years of the Faith in Iran. Although much has been achieved over the decades, it has been clear to all who have contributed to these efforts that the vision of what may be called “Bahá'í education” is a distant one. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, we read that “there is as yet no such thing as a Bahá'í curriculum” and that “the task of formulating a system of education which would be officially recognized by the Cause, and enforced as such throughout the Bahá'í world, is one which the present-day generation of believers cannot obviously undertake, and which has to be gradually accomplished by Bahá'í scholars and educationalists of the future” (qtd. in Hornby 212).

That the emergence of Bahá'í education is a distant goal does not mean, of course, that there is not a great deal of work to be done at present. A statement prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre in 1993 and approved by the Universal House of Justice suggests that

the gradual development of contents and methods of Bahá'í

education will most probably occur as the result of the diverse activities of an increasing number of educators working in varied cultural and ecological settings throughout the world. Systematic research and high quality academic study are called for, not as isolated activities, but as components, albeit important ones, of a process in which the design of curricula is closely connected with educational practice and systematization of educational experience. (Office of Social and Economic Development 6)

A concept that has been of great assistance to those striving to visualize the gradual evolution of educational effort throughout the Bahá'í world in recent decades is that of “Bahá'í-inspired education”—a term that is meant to suggest incremental contributions to both theory and practice in the field that are inspired by the Bahá'í teachings. This concept has allowed Bahá'ís to become fully involved in hundreds of educational endeavors, free from the pressure created by the expectation that these efforts will, in a relatively short span of time, produce the elements, principles, and curricula of a comprehensive Bahá'í education. But even with this evolutionary perspective, clarity should be sought on what is to be achieved. What—we need to ask—can reasonably be expected from Bahá'í-inspired endeavors? How can they help us advance toward the realization of Bahá'í ideals?

To answer such questions, it is necessary to assess today's educational theory and practice, analyze the underlying assumptions, and understand the forces that determine the directions in which the field of education moves. This is not the place to address such an enormous challenge, but an overall picture is apparent. In 1939, Shoghi Effendi wrote: "Let us be on our guard lest we measure too strictly the Divine Plan with the standard of men. I am not prepared to state that it agrees in principle or in method with the prevailing notions now uppermost in men's minds, nor that it should conform with those imperfect, precarious, and expedient measures feverishly resorted to by agitated humanity" (*Bahá'í Administration* 62). In this same passage, he asks for an "uncompromising adherence to that which we believe is the revealed and express will of God, however perplexing it might first appear, however at variance with the shadowy views, the impotent doctrines, the crude theories, the idle imaginings, the fashionable conceptions of a transient and troublous age" (62).

In the case of education, a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi indicates that people "tend to be very superficial in their thinking, and it would seem as if the educational systems in use are sorely lacking in ability to produce a mature mind in a person who has reached supposedly adult life! All the outside influences that surround the individual seem to have an intensely distracting effect, and it is a

hard job to get the average person to do any deep thinking or even a little meditation on the problems facing him and the world at large" (*Directives* 22).

Although much time has passed since these statements were written, one can hardly argue that today's situation is any better. Contemporary educational systems around the world seem just as impotent to nurture mature minds. While the value of the experience and the ideas generated throughout the years is not being questioned, there are too many thoughtful analyses of the shortcomings of current educational systems and processes for anyone to deny that the crisis of education has continued to deepen over the decades.

Cognizant of this profound crisis in education, we need to reflect on the Bahá'í community's ability to advance in new directions. The claim I wish to make is that the ability to take significant strides in advancing Bahá'í-inspired education does exist, but much of it depends on our appreciation of the nature and magnitude of the work—on how much we expect from ourselves and how willing we are to do the hard work required.

A Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavor could be defined simply as an effort carried out by a group of Bahá'ís and other like-minded individuals inspired by the vision and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. As such, it strives to incorporate Bahá'í principles in the content and the approaches of its programs, particularly the principles of the oneness of humankind,

of equality between men and women, and of the elimination of prejudice. It inculcates a sense of world citizenship and the virtues of an upright character. However, as far as educational practice *per se* is concerned, it simply tries to adhere to the latest educational theories according to the training that the Bahá'ís involved have received at any given time—behaviorism a few decades ago, a combination of computationalism and culturalism along with an emphasis on behavioral objectives some time later, more recently a curious mixture of constructivism and outcome-based curricula, and then whatever may be coming next.<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively, we could be somewhat more ambitious, and that is the approach being proposed here. In that case, we would value insights from established theories and draw on them when it is appropriate, but at the same time we would be engaged in a rigorous search for educational content and methods that would progressively endow each successive generation with the characteristics of a human race entering the age of maturity.

Shoghi Effendi writes that the “supreme and distinguishing function” of

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is “the calling into being of a new race of men” (*Advent* 17). “A race of men,” according to Bahá'u'lláh, “incomparable in character, shall be raised up which, with the feet of detachment, will tread under all who are in heaven and on earth, and will cast the sleeve of holiness over all that hath been created from water and clay” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 32). What is rather obvious in this regard is that no matter how far in the future human beings of such extraordinary powers and incomparable character are to appear, their emergence will not be a sudden phenomenon. It cannot be that for the longest time, human beings behave more or less the same as they do today, and then all of a sudden a new humanity comes into being as if by magic. A process has to be set in motion by which notable changes in character and powers of a growing number of individuals will take deeper and deeper root from generation to generation. Education—the concepts, methods, and content of which will have to systematically develop over time—will be a most significant component of this process.

There are a number of questions that present themselves the moment we place such weighty expectations on Bahá'í-inspired education. Is what we know about education today, including the knowledge contained in fields such as sociology of education, philosophy of education, psychology, ethics, philosophy of mind, and neuroscience sufficient to enable us to educate souls who will “cast the sleeve of holiness

---

2 For a discussion of computationalism and culturalism, see Jerome Bruner's *The Culture of Education*. For an incisive analysis of the behavioral objectives model, see Joseph Dunne's “Teaching and the Limits of Technique: An Analysis of the Behavioural-Objectives Model.” And for an overview of constructivism, see Denis C. Phillips and Jonas F. Soltis's *Perspectives on Learning*.

over all that hath been created from water and clay" (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 32)? The answer is clearly no, far from it.

The next question, then, is whether there is enough knowledge in these fields to show us a way forward, at least to enable us to take the first few steps in the desired direction. We can give an affirmative response to this second question, but in order to succeed, we must follow the guidance offered in the statement quoted at the beginning of this presentation. We should look at Bahá'í-inspired efforts as components of a long-term process of action and reflection in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. We should become well-versed in the theories and practices of education and those fields closely associated with it. We should be engaged in a rigorous process to generate new knowledge that we can share openly. To advance in this process, we should view theories and practices as sources of insight that enrich our own experience.

At the same time, we should avoid fads, not make unreasonable claims, be humble, and cling scrupulously to the highest standards of honesty and rectitude of conduct. We need to search in the rapidly growing river of knowledge flowing through the world for clues and indications that would assist us in solving the innumerable puzzles we will find along the way. We need to identify one by one the elements of an educational process that will—incrementally, to be sure—help cultivate the kind of person Bahá'u'lláh

has envisioned. And we need to refine these elements as we learn from experience, articulate insights, and make conceptual advances.

Everything we do in this complex enterprise will present us with its own challenges; to meet them, we have to organize and reorganize our process of action, reflection, study, and consultation. As we do so, we need to pay special attention to the way we interact with existing educational theories and practices. How should we approach ideas, methods, and content of educational models when we profoundly disagree with some of their underlying assumptions? For example, we do not believe that the human mind is a supercomputer. Yet, there are aspects of the brain's functioning that lend themselves to its being treated as such.

The computationalism of the cognitive movement, then, does have insights to offer us when we are seeking to enhance certain aspects of the workings of the mind. We must be able, however, to select appropriate aspects of computationalism to be incorporated into a Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavor for specific purposes, while avoiding the tendency to disregard a more holistic encounter with the human mind—a tendency that robs the teaching-learning experience of the richness it deserves.

The same holds for culturalism, to use another example, which is the complement to computationalism. According to this perspective, education should initiate the young into a culture, helping them to become participants

in processes that constantly negotiate, create, and recreate meaning. That culture plays a significant role in how human beings develop from infancy is an obvious fact with which no one can disagree. Yet, we believe that educational efforts should enable each generation of youth to contribute more decisively than the previous one to the construction of a new culture and a new civilization. Insights from theories based on culturalism, therefore, are bound to be of some help to us. But no matter how much truth there is to the statement that knowledge is socially constructed, we cannot totally subscribe to constructivism and deny the existence of a reality that is the final arbiter determining the validity of the knowledge being constructed, or ignore the fact that this reality has both material and spiritual dimensions.

To be able to meet all such challenges, we will have to rely on a robust framework for Bahá'í-inspired education, which we are only beginning to elaborate. Working within this evolving framework, Bahá'í-inspired efforts should be able to avoid the extremes of both determinism and radical constructivism and nurture individuals whose constructive powers of thought and action are not governed by vain imaginings but are harmonized with reality, with the will of God and His purpose for humanity. Gaining insights from and carefully modifying elements of existing practices on the way to discovering new and more effective ones calls for scientific rigor. Science cannot advance if

it is required to accommodate every view in the pursuit of a hazy notion of inclusivity. Clearly, that which works is not equivalent to that which does not; claims should be supported by evidence. But to examine evidence rigorously, it is necessary to reject emotivism as a form of social interaction.

Emotivism—the doctrine that our judgments about truth are no more than expressions of preference, attitude, or feeling—has deeply penetrated modern culture, and many strands of progressive education find affinity with its underlying premises. The resulting “emotivist” self is moved only by personal feelings and preferences. For such an individual, it is not the choice between good and evil that matters, but the free rein given to self to choose. Thus, rational arguments contribute little to moral judgments; agreements are to be reached through the expression of feelings and the force they exert. In the eyes of the emotivist, the world is a meeting place of individuals, all exerting their own will to accommodate their preferences, and a stage that presents a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for the achievement of their own satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> This emotivist self is nurtured not only by mass media and advertising, but also by educational approaches that reduce morality to personal preference. In these approaches, divine purpose is at best ignored, and the existence of truth, moral or

---

3 For an analysis of emotivism, see Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.

otherwise, outside the subjective self is denied. How different is the emotivist self from the image the Bahá'í Writings give of the human potential:

O my servant!

Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer's knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, Persian no. 72)

O son of man!

If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, Arabic no. 7)

This reference to emotivism is meant only to illustrate the care with which we need to examine current educational theories and practices. Emotivism, of course, is just one of many doctrines that stand in direct opposition to the kind of system of thought and practice that will, in the fullness of time, give rise to those who, "incomparable in character, . . . with the feet of detachment, will tread under all who are in heaven and on earth, and will cast the sleeve of holiness over all that hath been created from water and clay" (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 32).

In our endeavor to advance Bahá'í-inspired education, we find ourselves in a delicate situation: we have to borrow ideas, methods, and content from current educational theories and practices and, at the same time, be constantly on guard lest we overlook the adverse effects that they can produce in the psyche of the human being. We cannot afford to forget that the concepts, categories, and principles that the field of education has so far generated will undergo fundamental transformation, one to which we should contribute. And we must find the courage to elaborate concepts inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh that are being neglected today.

A brief examination of two concepts, those of "understanding" and "spiritual qualities," will help us appreciate the enormity of the work before us as we try to advance in Bahá'í-inspired education. Understanding has been a central theme in education and philosophy, but it needs to be recast in light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. The notion of spiritual qualities as a category of the attributes of the human soul has often been neglected or lost in muddled narratives of virtues, which include culture-specific dispositions, social dexterities, and mental, as well as physical, skills. There is much to be done to clarify the nature of these constituent elements of our being and how they are to be systematically fostered. The concepts of understanding and spiritual qualities are intimately connected, and Bahá'ís are in a unique position to treat them at

the appropriate level of depth both in theory and in practice.

Even a cursory survey of the Bahá'í Writings impresses on us that for human beings to manifest the powers of the human spirit such as justice, humble service, pure and goodly deeds, and love, both the individual and the human race as a whole have to reach new shores of understanding. To help humanity move toward this goal, education is in need of a more accurate depiction of the nature of understanding. This is necessary if educators are to transcend the dichotomy between nature and nurture, between student-centered education and content-focused education, and between subjective and objective knowledge. It is time to free our thinking from the grip of the duality we have inherited from Locke and Rousseau and from the reductionism of educational fads.

To nurture understanding, we have to deal with at least three interrelated and inseparable entities: the “subject of understanding,” the student who possesses actual and latent intellectual and moral attributes; the “objects of understanding,” items of varying degrees of complexity that are to be grasped and acted upon; and the “process of understanding,” the process by which greater insight into reality and the way it is to be transformed is gained. The methods by which the student is helped to advance in understanding depend on that which is to be understood; thus, the process of understanding for different objects cannot be reduced to the application

of a single approach—whether behavioral, cognitive, cultural, empirical, or constructivist. As well, the process of understanding is conceptualized in light of an explicit or implicit notion of the subject of understanding—for example, as a highly complex computer in computationalism, a negotiator of values in culturalism, and so on. For us, the process of understanding will have to correspond to the conception of the subject of understanding evoked by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the “new race of men.” Just as we cannot separate this process from either its object or its subject, it would be a mistake to sharply separate the subject from the object of understanding. The understanding of a specific set of concepts both demands and contributes to the development of certain relevant intellectual and spiritual qualities and attitudes.

Reality is one, and there is continuity between its physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Concepts that help us understand this complex reality are not isolated and self-contained, but closely intertwined and intermingling. So, “understanding” in this respect cannot be circumscribed; there is a boundlessness to it, and nurturing it requires that we do not view it as a point of accomplishment—whether in terms of theory or practice—but as an ongoing engagement of the subject of understanding with its objects.

In a certain sense, understanding is a notion that defies all manner of definition. It is not synonymous with

how the human mind sorts out and processes information; it is not merely a culminating point at which one arrives once certain facts are assimilated; it is not simply the conclusion reached after following one procedure or another; nor is it reducible to sound, rational judgments based on one's beliefs. Understanding differs from both physical action—say, planting a tree—and mental occupation—say, thinking about how to plant the tree. It is also distinct from the mental activity involved in gathering and sorting information. All these contribute to understanding, especially when carried out purposefully, but they do not make up the process in its entirety. As one advances in understanding, at least in relation to substantive concepts, there are significant moments of insight and grasp of specific facts and meanings, but the process is more like moving forward along a path that, although marked by certain milestones, by no means has a predetermined end.<sup>4</sup>

According to this vision, in order to nurture understanding, we need to appreciate that one advances in his or her understanding of reality with the aid of God's grace and bestowals. Understanding is, ultimately, a gift bestowed by God: "First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man," states Bahá'u'lláh, "is the gift of understanding" (Gleanings 195).

When we examine carefully passages in which the word "understanding" is employed in the Bahá'í Writings, we see that it is not mentioned only in the context of truths that we need to apprehend, but that it is often used as an adjective to describe the person, to refer to an attribute of the soul. Thus, understanding is intimately linked to our state of being. Like spiritual qualities such as justice, love, generosity and truthfulness, it is a constituent element of who we are.

Spiritual qualities are reflections of divine attributes in the mirror of the human heart, and the development of these qualities defines the capacity of the human soul to set itself on its infinite journey toward God. Understanding, too, is a crucial determining factor of this capacity. Here, then, appears a profound connection between understanding and spiritual qualities, and in the context of Bahá'í-inspired education, between fostering spiritual qualities and nurturing understanding. This would be an obvious connection if we were to refer only to the understanding of concepts directly associated with specific spiritual qualities—to understand, for example, the notions of selfless giving, of forgiveness, and of sympathy in the development of generosity as a spiritual quality. But the claim being made here is much greater. Bahá'í-inspired educational programs are being challenged to engage simultaneously in fostering spiritual qualities and in nurturing understanding of concepts belonging not only to the spiritual realm, but also

---

4 For a more extensive exploration of this theme see my book, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*.

to the realms of the physical and social sciences, to literature and the arts, to history and political thought. This is a call to scale the walls that tend to separate education centered on the material and social aspects of human existence from education focused on a moral and spiritual life. It is a call for a level of integration that has not been achieved before.

To meet the challenge of such integration, Bahá'í-inspired education needs a rich account of spiritual qualities in a language sufficiently clear to allow for the design and evaluation of educational activity. This language must embrace an expanded rationality, drawing on the discourses of religion, science, the arts, and philosophy. In developing such a language, we need to avoid relativism and moral equivalency. The language has to set a path toward the higher ground but avoid moralizing. There is a qualitative variance between nobility and baseness that should not be blurred. The desired language must be able to express sensitivity to this contrast, motivating us to aspire to lofty goals and to keep away from unworthy pursuits.

Moreover, a language that is to serve as a vehicle for exploring spiritual qualities and for cultivating susceptibility to the contrast between the noble and the base must convey a vision of human existence that extends beyond the requirements of day-to-day life. The understanding achieved with its aid should enhance the ability to distinguish between superficial and lasting results of one's words and

actions, directing moral purpose toward that which has permanence.

The comprehensive account of spiritual qualities to be elaborated over time should address their autonomous character and offer insights into the dynamics of interaction among them. Further, it should not lose sight of their non-exhaustive, eternal nature, although it must explain evolutionary changes in their meanings as humanity advances from childhood to maturity. Spiritual qualities are not bound to their expressions in finite contexts, no matter how much our capacity to manifest them expands. They exist on a transcendent plane, vital structures in that dimension of reality we call spiritual.

Ponder for a moment these words of Bahá'u'lláh describing how one day, in the Garden of Ridván, He "gazed on one of the Beauties of the Most Sublime Paradise, standing on a pillar of light, and calling aloud saying: 'O inmates of earth and heaven! Behold ye My beauty, and My radiance, and My revelation, and My effulgence. By God, the True One! I am Trustworthiness and the revelation thereof, and the beauty thereof. I will recompense whosoever will cleave unto Me, and recognize My rank and station, and hold fast unto My hem. I am the most great ornament of the people of Bahá, and the vesture of glory unto all who are in the kingdom of creation. I am the supreme instrument for the prosperity of the world, and the horizon of assurance unto all beings'" (*Tablets* 38).

Although spiritual qualities are to express themselves in action, our account of them cannot be limited to observable behavior. Yet, it is necessary to have at least some qualitative measures of how we advance in their acquisition. This is where the concept of service takes center stage. Service refers to acts that are directed by the twofold purpose of pursuing one's own spiritual and intellectual growth and contributing to the civilization-building process, acts seeking the transformation of some aspect of the essential relationships that define human existence. In this connection, the image of a path is being increasingly used in the Bahá'í community to visualize effort and movement as well as resilience in the face of difficulties and the ability to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones. A path of service invites participation, and participants advance along it at different paces and strides. One does not walk the path alone; there is faith in the capacity of others and joy in their accomplishments.

In addition, the efficacy of service is not to be evaluated merely by the perceived success or failure of an enterprise; the extent to which understanding has advanced and the necessary spiritual qualities have been developed is a more important factor to be considered. This is not an evaluation carried out by external observers, but by every single participant. Further, the reality of service is not confined to specific actions, for service infuses the environment with the potency to

transform the relationships that shape it. Service changes selfish grumble to selfless joy in giving, greedy exploitation to reciprocity and fairness, and arrogant knowing to a humble posture of learning. Although it is manifested through action, service is inseparable from one's state of being. It unites doing and being. At a most fundamental level, it is a requirement of what it is to be human: "That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 250).

The argument presented so far may be summarized as follows: In order to advance significantly in Bahá'í-inspired education, we need to keep in mind Bahá'u'lláh's extraordinary vision of the human being who will walk this earth in the fullness of time; and while being respectful of accomplishments in the field of education, we need to remember that in its present state it is incapable of cultivating such an individual. Humbled by the realization of the magnitude of the work ahead, a growing number of us, together with other like-minded individuals, have to labor in diverse cultural and ecological settings, identifying educational needs, developing elements of a coherent pedagogy, and creating a series of teaching-learning experiences in which these elements are given practical expression. Each group would see itself engaged in a systematic process that involves action—namely, carrying out educational activities and evaluating them—reflection on action, consultation, and analysis of progress

both conceptual and practical, leading to repeated modification of ideas, methods, and materials. In this way, through a series of approximations, curricular elements would emerge that could be shared with others engaged in similar endeavors. What is being suggested is that such a process, which is in fact already in place in several settings throughout the worldwide Bahá'í community, will advance the theory and practice of education as long as action is carried out within an evolving conceptual framework, the knowledge being generated from various experiences is synthesized in a coherent manner, and models and theories are considered sources of insight and not truths to be adhered to at all costs. It is to be expected, of course, that in the pursuit of the distant goal of Bahá'í education, formidable challenges will have to be met. The earlier discussion of emotivism illustrates the kind of capacity that is needed if we are to identify and analyze the false doctrines that tend to invade educational theory and practice. As is evident from the brief mention of the cognitive and other movements, valuable insights can be gained from various educational theories, even when we disagree with some of their basic assumptions. But our interactions with existing theory and practice constitutes only one component of our Bahá'í-inspired endeavors. Many fundamental ideas in education have to be transformed and new ideas have to be elaborated as an ever-deeper understanding of the implications

of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is gained. The search for a proper conception of understanding and a corresponding account of spiritual qualities is but one among the multitude of tasks to be addressed in the effort to advance Bahá'í-inspired education.

It seems reasonable at this point to ask for some indication of the efficacy of the approach being described here. Why should we be so confident that adopting it will actually enable us to advance in Bahá'í-inspired education? There is clearly no decisive evidence to cite this early in the process. Yet the impressive accomplishments of endeavors in the Bahá'í community that have followed this approach is a source of confidence. The number of such undertakings is not large, but witnessing the transformation they have achieved in a diversity of settings is reassuring. The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program, now established in thousands of clusters around the world, is a clear example.

Many years ago, in Colombia, it was noticed that the Bahá'í Faith was attracting large numbers of youth between the ages of twelve and fifteen. They tended to form a very special kind of attachment to the Bahá'í Faith and its ideals. Over the years, through a systematic process of action and reflection on action, a program for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth was developed and implemented in an increasing number of regions. Reflection on the results made it clear that much of the literature on the characteristics of individuals in this

age range was bound to specific cultures and historical circumstances and did not offer sufficient insight into the reality of a human being during early adolescence.

It could be said that in the history of the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation, the story of the life of one stalwart youth, Rúhu'lláh Varqá, had already falsified predominant theories about this age group. A different description of a junior youth gradually emerged from action, reflection, study, and consultation and was recorded in Book 5 of the curriculum developed by the Ruhi Institute. The degree of transformation of tens of thousands of youngsters who have benefited from the program is a testimony to the efficacy of its content and the spiritual and social concepts that underlie it.

Two sets of ideas that have contributed to the accomplishments of the program are worth mentioning. One addresses the relationship between the structure of language and the mind's moral structure, and the other deals with the all-important question of spiritual perception. As to the first, repeated reference in the Writings to the influence of utterance confirms the vital role language plays in cultivating the moral as well as the intellectual powers of the individual. Language structure is extremely complex and cannot be discussed in any depth here.

Consideration of a few simple facts, however, leads to valuable insights into the relationship between the way words are organized in one's mind and one's moral structure. It is evident,

for example, that words do not float around arbitrarily; the meaning of a concept comes partly from the connections it has with other concepts. These connections help us understand the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Some of the connections, such as the one between the noun "chair" and the verb "to sit," are obvious.

But not all connections are so immediate. Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors can be guided by the wealth of meaning enshrined in the Sacred Writings to discover and create connections among words and concepts that go beyond the obvious and the immediate. The objective would be to open channels in the mind and heart of a young person that would generate profound insights into reality and the ways it can be transformed. Focus would be on the intimate relationship between language structure and moral structure. *The Human Temple*, a textbook inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's *Súriy-i-Haykal*,<sup>5</sup> is a modest attempt to address such an objective in the program. For instance, that which is closely associated in the language structure of a junior youth with a verb as common as "to see" is assumed to have noteworthy effects on the moral structure governing his or her thought and behavior. Thus the deliberate effort in that text to connect in a natural way the verb "to see" with words such as "knowledge," "mind," "observing," "thinking,"

---

5 See Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*.

and “understanding”: seeing with the light of the sun, seeing with the light of knowledge, seeing with our mind, seeing friends not strangers, and thinking of unity.

As to the question of spiritual perception, at least two interrelated ideas need to be carefully examined. The first idea is that the enhancement of spiritual perception requires the removal of veils covering the inner eye: the veils of passion and desire; of covetousness, greed, and envy; of vain imagining and idle fancy; and of egotism. The challenge before us is not just the suppression of inordinate passions and desires, curbing greed and envy and restricting the operation of the ego in order to promote civility. We would not be mistaken in assuming that the human being Bahá'u'lláh envisions walking this earth in the future will have succeeded in burning away these veils. Bahá'í-inspired education, then, must enable the individual to rend asunder the veils that cover the inner eye.

The second idea is that the enhancement of spiritual perception requires setting aside the duality between mind and heart. Some schools of thought believe that emotions and sentiments hinder the operation of rational thinking. Others recommend suspending reason and objectivity so that emotions such as care and sympathy can manifest themselves.<sup>6</sup> Even

spiritual qualities tend to be divided: we love with the heart, and we exercise justice through the power of the mind. This rift between feelings and thoughts reduces our understanding of both and creates an artificial picture of the interacting faculties of the human soul. We must realize that sentiments such as love and respect, which transcend the self, are vitalized by appropriate thoughts, just as noble thoughts are empowered by appropriate self-transcending emotions such as passion for truth, yearning for justice, and attraction to beauty.

In refusing to make an artificially sharp distinction between thoughts and sentiments, we acknowledge that there is a spiritual as well as an intellectual dimension to perception in which both thinking and feeling take part. In this respect, it is noteworthy how even a small effort to cultivate the perception of forces that emanate in the realm of the spirit, such as divine confirmation and hope, and to set aside the duality between heart and mind in treating a theme such as excellence has appealed to so many junior youth and has exerted such a transformative influence on their lives.

The intention of this reference to some of the ideas that have helped define the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program is to illustrate how we can make incremental advances in Bahá'í-inspired education. The assertion being made is that modest achievements of this nature will accumulate and lead to significant progress. What is required is for more and

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Nel Noddings's *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*.

more of us to fix our eyes on the vision of the human being and the future civilization revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, to gain a more profound understanding of the attributes of that human being, and, through a systematic process of action, reflection, study, and consultation, move toward the goal of Bahá'í education. In this endeavor, we should not attach ourselves to fashionable educational models. We should create a culture that does not favor fads or the dominance of technique over substance. We must do our best to integrate spiritual insights gained from the study of the Bahá'í teachings and from our experience in applying them to the life of humanity with knowledge generated through painstaking scientific research.

WORKS CITED

- Bahá'u'lláh. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985.
- . *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.
- . Súriy-i-Haykal. *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*. Bahá'í World Centre, 2002.
- . *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- Bruner, Jerome. *The Culture of Education*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- Dunne, Joseph. "Teaching and the Limits of Technique: An Analysis of the Behavioural-Objectives Model." *The Irish Journal of Education*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 66–90.
- Farid-Arab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.
- Hornby, Helen Bassett, editor. *Lights of Guidance*. India Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001.
- The Human Temple*. DL Publicaciones, 2012.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. U of Notre Dame P, 1981.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. U of California P, 2003.
- Office of Social and Economic Development. *Bahá'í Social And Economic Development: Prospects for the Future*. Bahá'í World Centre, 1993.
- Phillips, Denis C., and Jonas F. Soltis. *Perspectives on Learning*. 5th ed., Teachers College P, 2009.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971.
- . *Bahá'í Administration*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974.
- . *Directives from the Guardian*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994.