

# Valleys, Mountains, and Teacher Preparation

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## *Abstract*

Inspired by The Four Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh—well-known and well-loved as a description of the journey of the soul to its Creator—this article draws upon the metaphor of the soul's journey to illustrate the practical work of building a team of college and school-based practitioners in the central Rocky Mountains to design a new program to prepare teachers for service in the public schools of that region.

## *Résumé*

S'inspirant de l'œuvre Les Quatre vallées de Bahá'u'lláh – œuvre bien connue et très aimée qui décrit le voyage de l'âme vers son Créateur – l'auteure utilise la métaphore du voyage de l'âme pour illustrer le processus d'établissement d'une équipe d'intervenants de collèges et d'écoles de la zone centrale des montagnes Rocheuses chargée de concevoir un nouveau programme destiné à préparer les enseignants à servir dans les écoles publiques de la région.

## *Resumen*

Inspirado en Los Cuatro Valles de Bahá'u'lláh—una descripción bien conocida y muy amada sobre el viaje del alma hacia su Creador—este artículo se nutre de la metáfora del viaje del alma para ilustrar

la labor práctica de construir un equipo de profesionales de universidad y escuela en las Montañas Rocky centrales para diseñar un programa nuevo con fines de preparar a maestros sirviendo en las escuelas públicas de esa región.

The writings and recorded words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá regarding the power, promise, and requirements of spiritual and practical education for all people have inspired the founding of schools, the development of curricula, and the engagement of the worldwide Bahá'í community in grassroots community education processes that include the spiritual education of children everywhere. Who indeed could resist the call of words such as the following: “The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favour of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 129).

As an educator eager to help build this indispensable foundation of excellence, I currently serve as a teacher and administrator at a small college in the U.S. Rocky Mountains, which serves students spread over 12,000 square miles—an area larger than the state of Maryland—by providing classes, certificates, associate, and bachelor's degrees at assorted campuses throughout our rugged mountain terrain. When our various communities consistently identified teacher

preparation among the top three bachelor's degrees needed, I volunteered to work with the development of our college's first educator preparation program with the hope of contributing to "the advancement of the world of being and the uplift of souls." As Bahá'u'lláh explains, "To this end, the greatest means is the education of the child" (qtd. in *Bahá'í Education* 4).

New to both the college and the region when this work began in late 2009, I wanted—like well-meaning people in all walks of life—then as now, quite simply to strive for the betterment of the human family. As a Bahá'í working in a publicly funded secular institution, I endeavor to understand and apply basic principles of the Faith through my occupation as well as in my private life. As the Universal House of Justice observed in its Ridván 2010 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, our "primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world" (10). It is to that end that this work aspires, and I am fortunate in that it also aligns with the stated mission of the college. Because this article attempts to describe the efforts of an individual to contribute to human wellbeing through a work setting, I shall refer to our college and our region in general terms but not by name.

While our region includes ranching areas considered rural and remote, it also includes resort communities, mining towns, and large holdings of public lands. Our community members

comprise both the very wealthy and those who struggle to meet the basic expenses of life. Although European settlers displaced much of the indigenous population in the nineteenth century, almost half of our residents speak Spanish in their homes; people from all over the world staff our resorts; and ranching families cherish their connections to the land. In short, we share in the diversity of the human family, and our college endeavors to serve this diversity.

In its 1985 message to the peoples of the world, the Universal House of Justice linked the need for universal education to universal understanding of the oneness of humanity, the pivotal principal "round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 42):

Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for the reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind. Universal acceptance of this spiritual principle is essential to any successful attempt to establish world peace. It should therefore be universally proclaimed, taught in schools, and constantly asserted in every nation as preparation for the organic change in the structure of society which it implies. (*Promise* 13–14)

With permission from my college to undertake this work, I redoubled my exploration of the questions: If

the principle of the oneness of humanity is to be taught in schools, what are its implications for teacher preparation? Lacking any particular authority, what can I do to embed this concept and other key principles related to child education into the processes and programs of a public institution? How might I build a team of school-based and higher education colleagues to design and implement an educator preparation program that will result in enduring benefit to the children, teachers, families, and communities we serve?

As I undertook this project, I drew upon the Four Valleys of Bahá'u'lláh to guide my work. To the extent that I am able to perceive at least one of the potential meanings of this mystic text, it appears to me that each Valley delineates the approach of travelers to the Manifestation of God. Bahá'u'lláh explains, "Those who progress in mystic wayfaring are of four kinds," and He describes the "grades and qualities of each kind" (*Four Valleys* 49). In each Valley, it seems that travelers progress by drawing upon the particular "grades and qualities" of that kind. And in each case, the strength of those particular grades and qualities reaches a limit; for further progress, travelers must sacrifice those qualities to be enabled to draw closer to and even draw upon the much greater strength of "the Beloved."

Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the peoples of the world to view "the entire human race as one soul and one body" (*Summons* 81), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá

explains that "the spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world" (*Promulgation* 9). With these concepts in mind, we might well find it possible to apply Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual guidance for wayfarers in the path of God to service involving a variety of individuals reflecting their own personal and professional perspectives. In my case, the work seemed to follow a kind of trajectory that led me and my colleagues through these Four Valleys as we explored the "self" or identity of the community we served; as we drew on reason and the power of the mind to explore the scientific study of the disciplines of child education and educator preparation; as we further fostered bonds of love to form a functioning working group capable of carrying our project to completion; and, finally, as we applied our work in the realm of action by building a teacher education program that reflects promising practices in the field while also endeavoring to express authentically the spirit of the age, which our team might choose to call a global vision and "twenty-first-century skills."

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "reality or truth is one" (*Promulgation* 62). Consequently, we might discern how Bahá'u'lláh's description of "four kinds" of wayfarers might also apply to the journey of an individual soul drawing closer and closer to its Creator, and perhaps this description might also be applicable to a process. In the same way that an atom manifests "traces of the sun" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 30), this relatively brief phase of program

development might emulate and mirror much larger processes of growth and development in the human family. In this same manner, the qualities of self and selflessness, of reason and love—essential qualities articulated in the Four Valleys—might also take expression in the everyday work of educators striving to design a program that prepares teachers to educate all the children of the community. The test of this process, of course, would be in discerning whether or not such a program increases the capabilities of those children to contribute their own talents toward the building of a better world.

### THE FIRST VALLEY

If the travelers seek after the goal of the Intended One (maqsúd), this station appertaineth to the self—but that self which is “The Self of God standing within Him with laws.” [Hadíth]

On this plane, the self is not rejected but beloved; it is well-pleasing and not to be shunned. Although at the beginning, this plane is the realm of conflict, yet it endeth in attainment to the throne of splendor. . . .

This station hath many signs, unnumbered proofs. Hence it is said: “Hereafter We will show them Our signs in the regions of the earth, and in themselves, until it become manifest unto them that it is the truth,” and that there

is no God save Him. [Qur’án 41:53]

One must, then, read the book of his own self. . . .

Likewise is it written, “And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves. These are the wicked doers.” [Qur’án 59:19] (*Four Valleys* 50–52)

As we begin our journey, we seek the self; we look for the signs of God in ourselves and in the world. With the goal of preparing excellent teachers to be of genuine service to the community, we need to understand the context for our work: What is the “self” or identity of the community? Who are the children? What is their condition? Who are the teachers? What do we know about them? What strengths or “signs of God” can we find in the community, the children and their families, the schools, and the teachers?

As a Bahá’í, I naturally am challenged to reflect on the exhortation by the Universal House of Justice contained in a letter to the Bahá’í youth “to understand the real condition of humanity and to forge among themselves enduring spiritual bonds that free them not only from racial and national divisions but also from those created by social and material conditions, and that will fit them to carry forward the great trust reposed in them” (24 May 2001).

## SETTING OUT ON OUR JOURNEY

Our inquiry began with the documentation of demographic information. Notwithstanding the economic crisis of 2008, which depleted the population in some parts of our service area and cut school funding throughout the state, the population in our region grew significantly from 2000 to 2010, increasing by 23% overall.

Our largest and fastest-growing ethnic population has been Latino or Hispanic. The Latino/Hispanic population in our region increased 71% from 2000 to 2010, and this growth is projected to continue. According to our state Department of Education data for fall 2013, 59% of all elementary schools in our most populated counties serve a majority of Hispanic pupils, and almost a third of all students in those schools are also learning English, the language of instruction for most schools in our communities. This trend is reflected throughout the college's service area, with Latino students ranging from 10% to 70% in the counties served.

Overall population growth in our service area indicates an increasing need for teachers, which is reflected in labor projections for our region. Our state is a net importer of teachers, and the U.S. Department of Labor projects a 20% increase in the numbers of elementary school teachers needed in our state by 2022. Teachers in our most populated counties are 76% female, of which 5% are Latino and 0.43% are Asian; all others are

white, non-Hispanic. Our local school districts report the need to hire about 15% of their teaching force each year due to teacher turnover. Elementary teachers represent 40–50% of all new teachers hired, and school superintendents anticipate these hiring patterns to continue into the future.

Our region enjoys magnificent natural beauty. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá stopped overnight in our area in 1912, and took a brief respite from His travels, He is reported to have said, "May God have mercy on the tyrants who kept the Blessed Beauty in prison for forty years. Such scenes were loved by Him" (qtd. in Ward 158). This beauty creates the context for our largest industry—tourism—and provides the milieu in which our children grow and our schools operate.

While our communities throughout the central mountains share the rural, remote designation due to our relatively low population density and rugged terrain, they differ widely in social and economic conditions. For example, the average home price in some areas is \$6,000,000, but more than 50% of the children attending school only a few miles down the road from these neighborhoods are eligible for free or reduced lunch in public schools because of their family's low income. Tourists or part-time residents in our area see majestic mountains, rushing rivers and streams, and charming mountain towns. What they *don't* see are the dilapidated trailer courts or tumble-down miners' cabins that all too often house the people who work

in those towns. Some of our schools are among the best in the state; others have reduced schooling to four days a week (instead of the customary five) in an effort to save money. In some school districts, more than 90% of the entire student body graduates on time from high school; in others, barely 50% of some segments of the population complete their high school education. Overall, when our state compares the educational attainment rate of whites with the next largest ethnic group (Hispanic/Latino in our case), our state's strategic plan for education notes that we face the second highest "education gap" in the United States, with only California facing a larger gap.

Factors that school districts face in our hard-to-staff geographic area include a location removed from major urban areas and the resultant high cost of living in our resort-driven economies. School leaders hope to reduce teacher turnover, increase the quality of new teachers, increase the number of Latino teachers, and prepare all teachers in this program to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, with an emphasis on the large and growing number of Latino students in our schools.

With the goal of better understanding the needs of our community, we conducted listening meetings with school superintendents, principals, and master teachers in all the eleven school districts we served. Beyond expressing support for the program, these school leaders provided detailed

information about the sorts of teachers they needed. Teachers must learn to create a positive, focused classroom environment, and to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of children with varied linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. They must become able to discern what the children are actually learning (or not) and adjust their classroom practice accordingly. They must genuinely love all children; they must be able to express that love in the learning environment that they create. They must create global citizens, engender twenty-first-century skills, and foster deep learning for all. Our school leaders further explained that for teacher candidates to learn these professional practices, they must be accorded highly structured field assignments in the schools, beginning in their first year of study. These field placements must gradually progress in complexity, duration, and focus throughout the program so that pre-service teachers develop their skills in a way that assures a high-quality education for all students.

In their input to the design of the program, school district leaders explained that one of their goals is to provide opportunities for qualified paraprofessionals, many of whom are place-bound, to prepare for teacher licensure. School principals also tell us that they will recommend this program to their students, with particular outreach to Latino students, not only to increase access to higher education for our largest under-served

population but also to help redress the ethnic imbalance of teachers and students in our schools.

In our quest to understand the real conditions of our community—the “self” that we seek to recognize and serve—we must also look closely at the children. Both my participation in plans of the Universal House of Justice that call for neighborhood Bahá’í classes and my engagement with local schools help me to perceive how children experience the beauty, challenges, and opportunities in our area. This engagement allows me to see remarkable resilience and splendid strengths in our children; it also shows how they bear the cost of the economic disparities their parents face.

In the mountains where the terrain limits towns to narrow river valleys, our towns can be both constrained in size and widely separated. When the high cost of living in a resort town prevents families from living near their work, parents may need to take the bus for over two hours each way to keep their jobs. And when resort economies rely upon an immigrant workforce that may not have access to work visas, families can be broken by deportation, and children may grow up without legal access to jobs, driver’s licenses or other identification cards, higher education, and other basic rights of citizenship.

In the families I know, parents often work long hours at multiple jobs to make ends meet. They have long commutes, often by bus, to the resort towns where they work. Their

employment is seasonal, so during “off season” finances become even more difficult than usual. When a parent is deported—not an unusual circumstance in our community—or otherwise prevented from being with her or his children, the family suffers. In a particularly poignant example, when a mother in our community took her young children to visit their dying grandmother in her home country, only the children were allowed to return. Although the children are U.S. citizens by birth, their mother lacked the necessary documents to re-enter the country; the family was separated at the border. As the children had lived their whole lives here with English as their primary language, they are now living with another, more distant relative who also faces the difficulties of a hardscrabble life.

If we begin this process by striving to understand the real conditions of the children in our community, we end it by striving to transform those conditions. As Bahá’u’lláh concludes His description of the first valley, He quotes Rumí, saying, “The death of self is needed here” (52). And as we begin to perceive the circumstances framing our community’s identity, we see a need for change. What does justice call for? How can we create an educator preparation program that will begin to mitigate the disparities in the educational opportunities available to the children in our service area? How can we begin to approach the standard upheld by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when He explains, “Every child is potentially the

light of the world—and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance” (*Selections* 130).

## THE SECOND VALLEY

If the wayfarer's goal be the dwelling of the Praiseworthy One (Mah.múd),<sup>1</sup> this is the station of primal reason which is known as the Prophet and the Most Great Pillar.<sup>2</sup> Here reason signifieth the divine, universal mind, whose sovereignty enlighteneth all created things—nor doth it refer to every feeble brain; for it is as the wise Saná'í hath written:

How can feeble reason encompass the Qur'án,

Or the spider snare a phoenix in his web?

Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee?

Teach it the science of the love of God!

On this plane, the traveler meeteth with many a trial and reverse. Now is he lifted up to heaven, now is he cast into the depths.

...

This station conferreth the true standard of knowledge, and freeth man from tests. In this

realm, to search after knowledge is irrelevant, for He hath said concerning the guidance of travelers on this plane, “Fear God, and God will instruct thee.” [Qur'án 2:282] And again: “Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.” [Hadíth] (*Four Valleys* 52–54)

As we learn about the “self” of our community and face the conditions that require its transformation, we become like the traveler who calls on the power of “primal reason” and the “divine, universal mind” that “enlighteneth all created things.” If reason is to guide our next steps, what can we learn from the decades of research on educator preparation conducted by numerous scholars and summarized by global institutions and professional organizations? How might we draw on the universal revelation of truth that is resulting in a vast increase of knowledge in every setting without succumbing to outmoded cultural patterns that result in vastly different outcomes for various segments of society? How can we gain the “true standard of knowledge” so that the mind does not become a trap, or so we do not sink into the “trial and reverse” of political controversy that surrounds questions of child education, teacher preparation, and schooling?

What can we learn about the relationship between teacher preparation and student learning? How might new teachers increase their effectiveness given the diversity of children's

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1 An attribute of God and one of the titles of Muhammad.

2 Maqám-i-Mahmúd—Praiseworthy Station—is the rank of Prophets endowed with constancy.

backgrounds, interests, inclinations, talents, and out-of-school opportunities? Our school leaders told us that teacher turnover increases their costs and reduces student learning; what, therefore, can we learn about teacher resilience and retention? To what degree are the strategies of the highest-achieving nations transferable to our context? Do we need to reaffirm the practices of former generations to foster excellence in teacher preparation and student learning, or is something else needed?

At the outset of this next phase of our journey, we can acknowledge that current research on educator preparation takes into account the needs of this global age in which “change, ever more rapid change, is a constant characteristic of life at this time” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1990, 4). Further, as Shoghi Effendi explained many decades ago, the world has “already contracted into a neighborhood” (*Citadel of Faith* 126), and the resultant movement of peoples increases the linguistic, social, and economic diversity of classrooms everywhere.

The needs of society have changed. By and large, low-skill jobs are being replaced with knowledge work; fewer jobs require routine manual or cognitive work, and more and more positions involve non-routine interactive and analytic skills. While a high school education provided sufficient education for many types of work for previous generations, about 70% of all jobs in the United States currently require some form of higher education.

More people must be educated to higher standards than ever before. The easiest skills to teach and measure are the ones that are increasingly less needed in the workplace and for responsible citizenship. While economic measures are the single most powerful predictor of student success in the United States, the quality of teachers offers the most powerful leverage that schools can use to increase student learning (Darling-Hammond and Bransford 13). In order to meet current needs, teacher preparation cannot be what it was in the past.

Great teacher training programs are coherent, up to date, based in research, and they prepare teachers with solid subject mastery. They build upon a shared vision of good teaching that is consistent in both coursework and partner classrooms. They have a strong field-practice and mentoring component in which expert teachers in local public schools model a rich repertoire of effective practices in classroom management and student learning. Prospective teachers learn to teach in real-life settings with strong, sustained coaching and mentoring. They become experts in the subjects they are to teach, learn research-based practice for teaching those subjects well, and become skillful in discerning what students actually know and how to work through common misunderstandings. Teacher candidates learn about child development, cognitive processes, and how to select educational materials and processes that link the child’s current stage of

development with new content and new experiences. They learn to draw upon children's strengths to build new strengths, all within a busy classroom of active children who have diverse capacities, interests, needs, and challenges; unique potential and promise; and individual contributions to make toward building a better world. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us, "Children are even as a branch that is fresh and green; they will grow up in whatever way ye train them. Take the utmost care to give them high ideals and goals, so that once they come of age, they will cast their beams like brilliant candles on the world" (*Selections* 136).

Professional organizations, colleges, and universities have responded positively to the work of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC), a group of state education agencies and national educational organizations that articulates standards for excellence in teacher preparation (ccsso.org). These standards have been endorsed by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and mirror those upheld by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

UNESCO's 2013 *Education for All Monitoring Report* calls attention to successful practices from around the world, including the following:

- Preparation to help students from a wide range of backgrounds and with different needs, including those with inherited disadvantage
- Linkage of educational theory

with classroom practice and ample time for school-based experiences and community work

- Assurance that teachers thoroughly understand the subjects that they are to teach
- Balance of training in subject knowledge and methods of teaching subject knowledge
- Practice developing well-planned lessons with richness and variety in the tasks presented
- Training in diagnostic assessment to be able to provide targeted support when needed
- Strong communication skills to be able to provide feedback to students on their progress
- Opportunities to learn how to teach students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as those with physical disabilities
- Sustained periods of mentoring and coaching under the supervision of expert teachers (236–41)

When teacher preparation programs follow this general pattern, student learning increases and opportunity gaps are reduced. While effective teacher education cannot be seen as a replacement for eradicating poverty, it can help mitigate its effects.

In the United States, residential, economic, and educational inequality have increased over the past two decades, as international rankings on tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have fallen. While students in well-funded U.S. schools score at the very top level of these assessments, it

is the disparity in performance between high-income and low-income schools that lowers the U.S. ranking overall. The highest performing nations in these international tests of student learning have not only increased their investments in teacher preparation, schools, and a curriculum that emphasizes higher-order thinking, but they have dramatically reduced educational inequality while also increasing their social supports for children and families. Finland and Singapore have famously risen to the top of international measures since 1970. Both of these nations fully reflect the standards called for in the UNESCO report; they also have invested heavily in teacher education programs, completely subsidize teachers in training, and provide both time and structures to support ongoing learning for their practicing teachers (Darling-Hammond n.p.).

We were delighted that input from school leaders in our region aligned directly with international research on effective educator preparation, as briefly described above. U.S. professional and policy statements reinforce these same points in publications such as the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel Report, titled *Transforming Teacher Education through Clinical Practice*; the report sponsored by the National Academy of Education and edited by Darling-Hammond & Bransford, *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World*; the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards mentioned above; standards articulated by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation

(CAEP); and our state's requirements for teacher licensure and performance.

#### LOOKING TO THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS FOR GUIDANCE

'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance regarding the use of the mind encourages travelers in this valley by reminding us that, "God has created in man the power of reason, whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors. He has endowed him with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept" (*Promulgation* 291). At the same time, we recall Bahá'u'lláh's cautionary advice when He cites the poet Saná'í: "Wouldst thou that the mind should not entrap thee? / Teach it the science of the love of God!" (*Four Valleys* 52)

Of course, as a Bahá'í, I ponder how I can help us weigh our research in light of the guidance revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, and I search through what the Bahá'í Writings explain about the qualifications of teachers and how they can be best prepared.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the education and training of children" is "among the greatest of all services that can possibly be rendered by man to Almighty God," and that "it is . . . very difficult to undertake this service, even harder to succeed in it" (*Selections* 133). Teachers must exert "strenuous efforts toward this end" (qtd. in *Bahá'í*

*Education* 34) and “struggle unceasingly to perfect [themselves] and win ever higher achievements” (qtd. in *Bahá'í Education* 32). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further explains:

How wonderful it will be when the teachers are faithful, attracted and assured, educated and refined Bahá'ís, well grounded in the science of pedagogy and familiar with child psychology; thus may they train the children with the fragrances of God. In the scheme of human life the teacher and his system of teaching plays the most important role, carrying with it the heaviest responsibilities and most subtle influence. (qtd. in *Foundations* 178)

It is not just the teacher, but also the system of teaching that “plays the most important role” in child education. The text *Foundations for a Spiritual Education: Research of the Bahá'í Writings* describes a rich repertoire of teaching methods in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, which include means for directing education toward the recognition of God, and in so doing establishing a loving environment, engaging both minds and hearts, involving service to humanity, and encouraging private study. Teachers are admonished to establish bonds of unity and friendship among the children and to use consultation and peer teaching, independent investigation and the power of reasoning, memorization and

recitation, meditation and reflection, parables and stories, music and drama, creativity and the arts, science and investigation of nature, play and manipulatives, and travel and recreation (*Foundations* 152–68).

As every soul develops in accordance with its own “capacity and capability” (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in *Bahá'í Education*, 3), Shoghi Effendi urges children to “devote extreme diligence to the acquisition of learning” according to their tastes, inclinations, capacity, and powers (qtd. in *Bahá'í Education*, 49–50). While minds vary in capacity, “thanks to a teacher’s loving efforts, the children of the primary school may reach the highest levels of achievement” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 132).

It is because of this natural variation in children that such careful preparation is required of teachers, to enable them to “be a doctor to the character of the child” and to “heal the spiritual ailments of the children of men” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 129). Teachers must learn to “first diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skillful physician” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 269).

With this rough alignment of contemporary research on educator preparation, input from local school leaders, and authoritative guidance from the Bahá'í Writings, it was time to move to action. How could the college make use of these principles to build a truly exceptional educator preparation program? How could I play my part in the process? The imperative was clear.

As the future of every community depends on what “the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2000, 8), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls on us: “Know ye the value of these children, for they are all my children” (*Promulgation* 53).

### THE THIRD VALLEY

If the loving seekers wish to live within the precincts of the Attracting One (Majdhúb),<sup>3</sup> no soul may dwell on this Kingly Throne save the beauty of love. This realm is not to be pictured in words. . . .

This plane requireth pure affection and the bright stream of fellowship. In telling of these companions of the Cave He saith: “They speak not till He hath spoken; and they do His bidding.” [Qur’án 21:27]

On this plane, neither the reign of reason is sufficient nor the authority of self. Hence, one of the Prophets of God hath asked: “O my Lord, how shall we reach unto Thee?” And the answer came, “Leave thyself behind, and then approach Me.” . . .

The denizens of this plane speak no words—but they gallop their chargers. They see but the inner reality of the Beloved. To them all words of sense are

meaningless, and senseless words are full of meaning. . . .

In this realm, instruction is assuredly of no avail.

The lover’s teacher is the Loved One’s beauty,

His face their lesson and their only book.

Learning of wonderment, of longing love their duty,

Not on learned chapters and dull themes they look. [Mathnaví] (*Four Valleys* 54–56)

If we seek the third valley, we must find “the beauty of love” that cannot “be pictured in words.” As this plane requires “pure affection and the bright stream of fellowship,” we would need to move forward together; traveling alone would no longer suffice. In my quest, I would need to build a new and unified team that was more grounded in the work of K–12 child education than our college-based committee, and this team would need to grow strong enough for its members to be able to “gallop their chargers” toward our goal. But how could I achieve this?

Bahá’u’lláh once again helped show me the way by stating that, to move forward, “neither the reign of reason is sufficient nor the authority of self.” Acknowledging the real conditions of our community’s identity—our collective “self”—provided a place for us to begin, but we would hardly rest there. And drawing upon the reason and research of even the best contemporary minds would not suffice. We needed to work together, listen to each other, and

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3 The attribute of God that draws all creatures to Him.

generate enough of a shared vision to move forward collectively. In this regard, Bahá'u'lláh's guidance once again served us well: going forward, as we listen, we may find that some things we share sound meaningless, but He explains that "senseless words are full of meaning" if we will truly listen. To do that, we must find "the Loved One's beauty" in each other, and study the "lesson" to be found in every face. In short, we would need to create a cooperative environment of loving respect and collaboration with one another.

Therefore, following our assessment of the region's strengths and after a period dedicated to reviewing research related to educator preparation, we invited nearby school districts to nominate their own teachers, principals, or curriculum experts to work in partnership with us to create our teacher education program. Because this program was not yet embedded in the college curriculum, we had no faculty of education; we relied on school district partners and professors from other institutions who happened to be in our region.

Through the guidance articulated by Bahá'u'lláh, we found that this ostensible weakness became our strength. With the majority of our team members based in local schools, we engendered strategic partnerships that assured robust linkages between theory and practice, expert mentoring and coaching, and close connections with the real needs of our community's schools. Although appropriately

qualified school district personnel formed the largest portion of our team, they were not yet familiar with the research on educator preparation, nor had they previously had the opportunity to develop college courses or to design academic programs. Likewise, our higher education colleagues needed to learn to work with school district personnel as equal partners who were grounded in the everyday needs of children, teachers, and schools.

My task was to foster unity of thought and action in response to the stated needs of our school districts, align our work with research on educator preparation, and, most importantly—at least to my own way of thinking—provide a means for our service to the community to reflect the principle of the oneness of humanity as the most coherent expression of the spirit of the age. There could be no compulsion in this process—our team needed to agree.

To that end, we worked again and again to develop, articulate, and continuously refine a shared vision of excellence in teacher preparation, classroom practice, and strength-based student learning stemming from strong connections with students' families and communities. Without directly drawing upon the Bahá'í Writings in this secular setting, the group evolved a loose consensus regarding children as "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 162), with teachers called to discover and polish these gems and bring them out for the benefit of the children,

their families, and the world. We utilized appreciative inquiry processes to reflect upon the best of our own experiences, articulate our dreams for educator preparation, listen with care to each other, and build a program to express those dreams in action.

We made every effort to draw out the genuine thoughts and feelings of the individuals present, and we consulted until we reached an authentic and genuine consensus about the nature and type of program we intended to build. Agreement was not always easy, because sometimes “words of sense” can indeed sound “meaningless.” For that reason we returned again and again to the faces of the children in our communities—the faces in which we could see reflections of “the Loved One’s beauty”—and renewed our moral imperative to serve them well. As the Universal House of Justice explains,

Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. (*Promise 3*)

We engaged in repeated cycles of study, candid consultation, and visioning in concert with the hands-on work of program development. We endeavored to stimulate the “spiritual attraction” that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains “is requisite in order that hearts may willingly take the step forward” (*Promulgation 250*). While only infrequently directly referencing the Name of Bahá’u’lláh in this setting, I made every effort to incorporate words, phrases, and concepts from Bahá’í Writings on a regular basis and listened with care as my co-workers responded to these ideas. In most cases they responded positively and added key insights of their own. We discussed the implications of resilience studies related to the wellbeing of children and drew upon research related to such concepts of mindfulness in the classroom and the imperative to respect the inner reality of both the child and the teacher. The shared discussion and study seemed to foster a climate of trust: individuals with backgrounds in higher education listened attentively to their colleagues from school districts, and school-based professionals discovered processes related to the requirements of higher education. Curriculum coaches and principals learned from the day-to-day experiences of practicing classroom teachers, and those from wealthier districts worked side-by-side with those who work with children facing the daily challenges created by poverty, distance, and the lack of a shared language.

We studied school-based applications of brain research to illustrate the power of social and emotional learning for children's success in school. We documented the power of home connections to support academic learning. We explored ways that our state's detailed standards for teachers might look and feel as good practices in our schools. Our shared vision of these standards *in practice* provided the context for the team's endeavors to create a "demanding, clinically based approach" to teacher preparation that provides "varied and extensive opportunities for candidates to connect what they learn with the challenge of using it, while under the expert tutelage of skilled clinical educators" (NCATE ii).

After articulating our goals for the program as a whole, we organized working groups to construct courses, identify useful texts and other resources, specify research and written assignments, and design school-based skill practice and performance-based assessments, which the team as a whole then reviewed, edited, and integrated into a coherent program. With eight to nine team members from local school districts and four to five members from institutions of higher education, the design reflected our commitment to merge theory with practice and college coursework with school-based classrooms on a day-to-day basis for every course, every assignment, and every assessment.

This process of learning to listen and learn from each other required the cultivation of heartfelt respect for the

experiences and contributions of each other, as well as a certain element of humility regarding our own experiences. We needed to trust each other enough to collectively "gallop [our] chargers" toward the goal of a bright future for all the children in our communities. And we needed to find a way to embed this spirit of learning into the courses and program that we had developed. As we had now cultivated the capacity to learn and work together, our next challenge became the quest to teach teachers to learn from their students. In this vein, Bahá'u'lláh explains that "instruction is assuredly of no avail" (*Four Valleys* 56) and quotes Rumi to remind us,

The lover's teacher is the Loved One's beauty,

His face their lesson and their only book.

Learning of wonderment, of longing love their duty,

Not on learned chapters and dull themes they look. (*Mathnaví* qtd. in *Four Valleys* 56)

How could we teach teachers to look for and find the beauty in their students—all students, not just some—and then employ the perception of that beauty as a guide for their professional practice as teachers?

#### THE FOURTH VALLEY

If the mystic knowers be of those who have reached to the beauty of the Beloved One (Mah.

búb), this station is the apex of consciousness and the secret of divine guidance. This is the center of the mystery: “He doth what He willeth, ordaineth what He pleaseth” . . . . [Qur’án 2:254; 5:1, etc.]

Verily, the wayfarer who journeyeth unto God, unto the Crimson Pillar in the snow-white path, will never reach unto his heavenly goal unless he abandoneth all that men possess. . . .

Speak in the Persian tongue, though the Arab please thee more;

A lover hath many a tongue at his command. [Mathnaví]

How sweet is this couplet which revealeth such a truth:

See, our hearts come open like shells, when He raineth grace like pearls,

And our lives are ready targets, when agony’s arrows He hurls. . . .

This is the realm of full awareness, of utter self-effacement. Even love is no pathway to this region. . . .

Herein the high heavens are in no conflict with the lowly earth, nor do they seek to excel it, for this is the land of mercy, not the realm of distinction. Albeit at every moment these souls appear in a new office, yet their condition is ever the same. . . .

These are they who see with His eyes, hear with His ears, as it is written in the well-known tradition.

Concerning this realm, there is many a tradition and many a verse. . . .

The first is His statement: “O My Servant! Obey Me and I shall make thee like unto Myself. I say ‘Be,’ and it is, and thou shalt say ‘Be,’ and it shall be.” (*Four Valleys* 57–63)

According to Bahá’u’lláh, if we are to reach our “heavenly goal,” we must abandon “all that men possess.” This is the realm of “utter self-effacement” that finds “no conflict with the lowly earth.” It is “the secret of divine guidance” where “He doth what He willeth.” If we are to “say ‘Be,’ and it shall be,” we may find ourselves speaking languages and undertaking tasks when other actions may please us more. We must be willing and “ready targets, when agony’s arrows He hurls.” Yet, if this valley allows us to reach “the beauty of the Beloved One,” then surely it is truly where we wish to be. We may never know whether our work reflects divine guidance or not; we may never develop the capacity to “see with His eyes” or “hear with His ears,” but we are also assured that “Whoso maketh efforts for Us, in Our ways shall We assuredly guide him” (Qur’án 29:69).

The program that we developed entails the same processes that made us into a functioning team. Through modeling and example, study and consultation, reflection and carefully designed field experiences, we endeavor to build pre-service teachers’ capacity

to learn from their students. They are asked first to set aside their own prior experience as students—the twelve years spent observing their own primary and secondary school teachers from the viewpoint of a student—by undertaking structured observations of teacher-student interactions in the classroom, targeted interviews with teachers and principals, and reflections on what they learn. They then focus on a single child, befriend that child, visit the child's home and map the child's neighborhood—always looking for strengths—and then learn to use these strengths as a bridge to school-based learning. They study child development, brain structure and function, the content they'll be responsible for teaching, and research-based methods for teaching that content. They work closer and closer with expert teachers over four integrated years, all the while with intensive coaching and mentoring. We are interested in what our teacher candidates can *do*, not just what they know.

We aim to interweave the principle of the oneness of humanity into all key elements of the program so that it will be impossible to disentangle this fundamental principle from the program itself, no matter what circumstances or individuals may work with it in the future. We seek to provide structure and support so that our teacher candidates will understand the power of a teacher to love, influence, and foster deep learning in children; we also cultivate their understanding that, beyond the power of teachers

and schools, the community as a whole must rise up in support of children and their learning to be able to mitigate the ravages of poverty and of a society divided against itself.

As an open-admissions community college, we welcome all people to explore the possibility of becoming teachers. With the goal of increasing the numbers of Latino teachers in our schools, we are now actively recruiting future teachers among high school students, paraprofessionals, and community members of that ethnicity. The objective is not only to provide a better ethnic match of teachers with their pupils but also to recruit teacher candidates that may already have developed the ability to recognize and draw upon linguistic and cultural strengths in our Latino children and their families, capacities that may be underutilized for school-based learning.

Recognizing that our current educational system results in vastly different outcomes for students coming from different social, economic, and linguistic backgrounds, the college now attempts again and again—through various approaches to supplemental instruction, face-to-face and online tutoring, and pre-college coursework—to assist under-prepared students to bring their academic skills up to college level. Our teacher education program also entails learning experiences aimed at developing the capability of students who may be academically strong but require work to overcome perceptual limitations inculcated by

the unequal privileges of society at large. The program further requires all teacher candidates to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skill through progressively more challenging performance assessments.

Our program provides a pathway for dual endorsement in Elementary Education and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Education. The CLD endorsement is embedded within our program—and not merely an optional extra as it is in most programs—because it prepares teachers to work effectively with children who speak languages other than English in their homes and whose backgrounds reflect the rich diversity of our communities. We likewise aim to prepare outstanding teachers through a four-year sequence of coursework that is fully integrated with practical experiences in the elementary classroom. These field experiences reinforce coursework that addresses how students learn, how teachers teach, and how families, schools, and classrooms contribute to learning. The program includes the broad base of content knowledge necessary for the elementary school teacher and focused attention on educating all students in our increasingly diverse communities of the twenty-first century.

When the team presented its program design at a regional school superintendents' meeting, the superintendents commented, "people from other colleges have listened to us, but you're the first to do what we said," and "your graduates will be head and

shoulders above other candidates." This appreciation for the work was not limited to school leaders in our region, as state agencies responsible for the authorization of teacher education programs also approved the program, saying that they were "impressed" with its design. A representative on the state's Council for Higher Education stated that he hoped other colleges and universities would follow this same pattern to assure that all teachers could become effective with all the children in our communities, not just some.

#### RECOGNITION OF THE RESULTS

With the program now in its second year of operation, approximately seventy students are progressing through their early courses in this program. About 40% of the students are of Latino heritage. We are working side by side with our students to learn more about the conditions that increase their success. While the percentage of Latino students in our program does not yet match the ratio of Latino students in our public schools, it far exceeds the current percentage of Latino teachers in our schools. And while this increase may represent a few small steps toward realizing our aim, we recognize that continuous learning and ongoing efforts will be necessary to achieve our goals.

With our teacher education students beginning to develop their knowledge and skills, we hope that they will become exceptionally well prepared for

their work with the children of our communities and that they will show the results of their study in their “deportment and deeds” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Compilations*, vol. 1, 203). Will we be successful? What will be the outcome of these efforts? And what will we learn that will start another realm of investigation and exploration, and launch the next stage of our journey?

We know that this first cycle of exploration in the Four Valleys only starts us on our travels, for Bahá’u’lláh provides many and varied descriptions of processes for spiritual wayfaring in His writings. In *The Seven Valleys*, He explains that “these journeys have no visible ending in the world of time” (40). And as the journey continues, we hope that the work of teachers in our schools will contribute to our community’s “realization of the oneness of humanity, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation” (“Ridván 2010” 10).

#### CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates an individual Bahá’í’s efforts to participate in the life of society, offer the life-giving teachings of Bahá’u’lláh within a workplace context, and thereby, hopefully, “improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly” (Universal House of Justice, “Ridván 2010” 9). It traces a newcomer’s work to discover the “self” or identity of a given community and recognize both its God-given strengths as well as conditions that must be

changed. It seeks to draw upon “reason and the power of the mind” to articulate some of the work of scholars in the field of education and to demonstrate how that work unquestionably reflects some of the verities in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh about the noble profession of education. Hopefully, this paper also portrays something about the power of love to foster unity of thought as a prerequisite to unified action. Regarding the outcome—that this work may contribute to a better future for the children of the community and for the community that these children will themselves build in only a few short years—we can only rely on Bahá’u’lláh’s promise that He will guide our efforts in His path, for “we come with . . . no good deeds to tell of, only hopes” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 7).

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