

Position Statement on Education

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Baha'i International Community Task Force on Education

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Introduction

The designation of the 1990s as the World Decade for Cultural Development has focused attention more directly than ever on a worldwide, ever-deepening educational crisis. It is usually accepted that the most immediate concern is the condition of illiteracy that affects the lives of nearly one billion people--one-fifth of the world's population. Indeed, when literacy is defined as more than merely reading and writing simple sentences, the scope of the problem increases substantially, involving nations at all stages of development. Inevitably, those principally affected are the groups already seriously disadvantaged: the poor, rural populations, and especially women.

A growing consciousness of the requirements of justice has stimulated renewed efforts to respond to this widespread crisis; especially noteworthy are the joint endeavours under way by a number of United Nations agencies and related organizations. The magnitude of the challenge, however, calls for political determination at both national and international levels, and for a degree of international cooperation greatly surpassing achievements of the past. Already it is obvious that the enormous human and financial resources required to meet this challenge can be released only through profound changes in the organization of human affairs. But equally demanding, in a different way, is the need for a global redefinition of education that frees it from today's largely economic context and acknowledges its transformational role in both individual lives and social organization.

It will be, necessary to define concepts such as basic education, literacy, and vocational education in a way that does not limit the horizons of the great majority of humanity to the acquisition of a few skills and the grasp of a few simple facts. The minimum requirements of education need to be conceived in terms of the basic knowledge, qualities, skills, attitudes, and capacities that enable individuals to become conscious subjects of their own growth, and active, responsible participants in a systematic process of building a new world order.

Recognizing the urgent need for a broad discussion on education and cultural development, the Baha'i International Community would like to present views arising from its own experiences. Comprising a cross-section of most of the world's ethnic, national, social, and cultural diversity, the Baha'i community has, for several decades, devoted much of its energy to the tasks of education. Its efforts have been directed not only towards intellectual development and training but also to the inculcation in its members of moral values appropriate

to life in a rapidly changing social environment.

This global program is founded on a conception of man and society which is spiritual in its nature. That is to say, it views mind as the fruit of a spiritual dimension of existence which distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation and endows them with potentialities that become apparent through a process of spiritual and material evolution. While acknowledging the value of material forces in the advancement of civilization, Baha'is attribute a central role in this evolutionary process to the religious teachings of diverse peoples which constitute the wellspring of the cultural history of the human race.

Education and its minimum requirements

Education is seen by Baha'is as a continuous and creative process. Its aim is to develop the capacities latent in human nature and to coordinate their expression for the enrichment and progress of society. At certain moments in history, Baha'is believe, education may also act as a powerful instrument for profound societal transformation. Within this creative process, it is possible to achieve an essential harmony between faith and reason through an approach to education that encourages the free investigation of all reality and trains minds to recognize truth, irrespective of its origin.

According to their conception of education, then, Baha'is are encouraged by the direction in which progressive educational theory is tending. Although economic considerations are recognized as necessary in educational planning, resistance is growing against the conventional view that education is chiefly a means for improving the individual's own economic situation. Increasingly, it is becoming evident that education should be examined in light of its contribution to individual growth and to bringing about fundamental structural changes in society, changes which are necessary for the creation of a just, peaceful, and harmonious environment. Indeed, the cultivation of positive attitudes towards learning is now coming to be perceived as a pre-condition for the achievement of most social and economic goals and objectives.

An educational approach directed towards personal growth and societal transformation, and based on the belief that human beings are essentially spiritual, however, must go well beyond a mere statement of purpose. When words and actions are not directed by a moral force, scientific knowledge and technological know-how conduce as readily to misery as they do to prosperity and happiness. But moral values are not mere constructs of social processes. Rather, they are expressions of the inner forces that operate in the spiritual reality of every human being, and education must concern itself with these forces if it is to tap the roots of motivation and produce meaningful and lasting change.

Within this context, the Baha'i International Community proposes that programs of literacy and basic education look beyond the skills of reading, writing, and simple arithmetic, and also consider the following achievements as compelling goals for their participants.

1. The realization that it is chiefly service to humanity and dedication to the unification of mankind that unlock individual capacity and release creative powers latent in human nature.
2. The understanding that the mere knowledge of principles is insufficient to ensure personal growth and social change, that both require the exercise of volition and the application of will.
3. A firm conviction that human honor and happiness lie in self-respect and noble purpose, in integrity and moral quality, and not in the mere pursuit of wealth and power for their own sake.
4. A reasonable degree of excellence in at least one productive skill through which individuals can experience the truth that work is worship when performed in a spirit of service, and can secure the means of existence with dignity and honor.
5. An adequate understanding of some of the concerns of programs of social progress, such as health and sanitation, agriculture, crafts and industry, at least in the local context.
6. Some development of the individual's capacity for intellectual investigation as a distinguishing power of the human mind and as an indispensable instrument for successful community action.
7. Some capacity to analyze social conditions and discover the forces that have caused them, and a corresponding ability to express ideas, so as to be able to contribute to consultation on community problems.
8. The capacity to take part in community planning and action as a determined yet humble participant who helps overcome conflict and division and contributes to the establishment of a spirit of unity and collaboration.
9. A disposition to analyze and a desire to understand the features of different forms of government, law, and public administration.

These precepts are not advanced in the abstract, but are based on real experience. Although the Baha'i community cannot claim to have created its desired system of universal education, it feels encouraged by the progress of its several decades of organized educational efforts. Moreover, it is convinced that the principles underlying its approach are applicable universally and can contribute to a global campaign to extend the benefits of education to the generality of mankind. The application of these principles does not necessarily imply a prolonged educational program, where circumstances do not immediately make this practicable. For children, the process is set in motion an early childhood as a concerted effort to develop character and encourage the emergence of the spiritual qualities latent in human nature. Upon this firm foundation, then, a properly designed initial program extending one to two years beyond elementary school can endow a community with youth who not only are prepared for further stages of education but who already constitute

valuable human resources for social development. For adult education, these principles imply the implementation of innovative and effective methodologies that rapidly free people from the limitations imposed upon them, and channel the wisdom and knowledge they already possess into a constructive process of social transformation.

Organizing Principles for a Global Educational Endeavor

In its efforts to implement programs within the philosophical framework described above, the Baha'i International Community has discovered the great value of adherence to certain organizational and methodological principles which it is pleased to share with other interested organizations.

Some of these principles can be expressed in terms of values and imperatives, such as the compulsory nature of education, the importance of the role of the family, the urgency of promoting an awareness of the fundamental unity of humanity, the necessity to free people from religious fanaticism, and the need to abolish all forms of prejudice. The compulsory nature of education is expressed as an element of individual belief, as an obligation of every family, and as the responsibility of the entire community, which must assign the necessary funds to ensure its fulfillment. The emphasis on the importance of the family as an educational environment makes parent education an integral element in the process of educating children. Commitment to the unity of mankind implies a balance between a study of one's own cultural heritage and an exploration of those universal qualities that distinguish the entire human race. Awareness of the necessity to free people from religious bigotry and fanaticism gives rise to a non-sectarian yet spiritual approach to moral education. The zeal to abolish all forms of prejudice leads to policies that favor groups who have suffered systematic discrimination, including women, entire races, and disadvantaged social classes, to help them overcome the obstacles most social systems have incorporated into their structures. In connection with this policy, the education of girls is given primary importance, with boys and girls following the same curriculum so that women may take their place alongside men in the sciences and arts, commerce and public administration, and every other field of human endeavor.

Other important principles relate directly to the content and the methods of educational programs. There is a strong tendency to encourage the initiation of educational endeavors at the grass roots, and then to support and enrich them from other levels. A basic principle of universal participation reinforces this inclination and strongly influences methods used in teaching-learning situations. For example, sharp distinctions between teacher and student often disappear after students reach a certain age, so that an individual may be a trainee in one aspect of a program and a teacher in a parallel aspect, allowing educational endeavors to empower a vast pool of human resources for change. The value placed on service, and the elevation of work to an act of worship when it is done in the spirit of service, helps programs achieve a balance between working with one's hands and acquiring abstract knowledge. The student's attention is focused from the beginning on needs and aspirations of the local

community, and curricula seek to develop those skills and capacities that render acts of service meaningful and effective.

Yet another set of principles has to do with organization, as the approach to education set forth in this document can bear fruit only if organizational channels capable of responding to the complex requirements of a worldwide educational endeavor are also in place. In the Baha'i community, these channels are constantly being created and perfected in the context of a more comprehensive plan for the development of an administrative order.

Although the importance Baha'is attribute to this administrative system transcends their concerns for education, from the standpoint of education it may be presented as a growing international network embracing more than 30,000 communities in 150 countries and independent territories around the world.

The members of each local and national community annually elect a governing council which disburses funds, prepares and approves plans and programs of activities, and reports developments and achievements to its constituency. Decisions are arrived at through consultation within and between communities and administrative bodies. Suggestions and proposals, whether formulated by individuals or arising in the process of community consultation, are considered, reviewed, and adopted by the elected governing councils. Parallel to this elected branch, appointed boards of knowledgeable individuals function at all levels in an advisory capacity. At the international level, this administrative system is guided by a governing body which coordinates the development of the worldwide Baha'i community.

This administrative structure is perceived as a means for coordinating the initiatives of sincere and determined individuals and groups who have accepted to follow its common direction and abide by its rules. The financial needs of the educational services of this system are met through the voluntary contributions and services of community members. There are strong recommendations in the Baha'i writings to allocate a portion of one's income, and to bequeath a part of one's estate, to the education of children.

As far as conditions permit, those who render service do so with no expectation of remuneration, which, when necessary, is almost always for direct deliver of educational services. The voluntary work of the members of councils and committees reduces administrative costs to a bare minimum, and this is reinforced by consistent emphasis on sincerity, humility, and a spirit of disinterested service as indispensable prerequisites for the functioning of this administrative order.

These are simply examples of principles guiding the organization of Baha'i education efforts, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this document. What the Baha'i International Community wishes to share with others is the heartfelt assurance that, in spite of great difficulties, these ideals are ultimately attainable and can be translated into the daily practices of diverse peoples. It is possible to create networks of organizations which foster local initiative while benefitting from national and international

coordination of resources. These organizations can be brought into existence through a process of building unity, rather than conflict, which has become accepted as normal in the world today. Within such networks, people from all walks of life can join forces, and communities from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds can become partners of equal voice in a common enterprise to build a new world order. Through these organizations the real resources of the world, which are its people, whether literate or illiterate, rich or poor, from the north or the south, the east or the west, can be mobilized to educate and be educated, to overcome all obstacles and to create new conditions for human existence. It is the firm conviction of the Baha'i International Community that a global effort towards the goal of education for all in a foreseeable future must necessarily take into account such an approach to the mobilization of human resources, at the same time it elicits political will and financial resources from the governments of the world and tries to open new channels for effective international cooperation.

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