

# Bahá'í Inspired Education in the West

Quddús George, Ridván 2022, v1.0.6

My home is filled with avocado saplings. Maybe ten of them. They are beautiful little things, green and full of life, we worked hard to raise them from seeds. I'm not an experienced gardener, nor an accomplished educator; what follows is the collection and arrangement of some of my thoughts. Please weigh them against your own and see if they might integrate into what you already understand.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said "*The instruction of these children is even as the work of a loving gardener...*"<sup>1</sup> and "*These children are the plants of*" God's orchard.<sup>2</sup> Just as with the avocado saplings, we educate and train them in hopes of the day they give wonderful fruit for the benefit of mankind.

\*

Bahá'u'lláh has said, "*the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony.*"<sup>3</sup> We know from His Writings we should think of all children as "*mines rich in gems of inestimable glory...*", and that these matchless gems can only be revealed, can only benefit mankind through education.<sup>4</sup>

And He has said, "*We prescribe unto all men that which will lead to the exaltation of the Word of God amongst His servants, and likewise, to the advancement of the world of being and the uplift of souls. To this end, the greatest means is education of the child.*"<sup>5</sup> It is important that the education be proper, otherwise Bahá'u'lláh has said that man is deprived of that which he inherently possesses.<sup>6</sup>

And the beloved Master has, in so many tablets, helped us get a clearer interpretation of what Bahá'u'lláh intends by proper education. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that, "*education is of three kinds*"; material, human and spiritual, and that spiritual education is true education.<sup>7</sup> That, "*Instruction in the schools must begin with instruction in religion.*"<sup>8</sup> And regarding the content of school, "*First and most important is training in behaviour and good character; the rectification of qualities; arousing the desire to become accomplished and acquire perfections, and to cleave unto the religion of God and stand firm in His Laws: to accord total obedience to every just government, to show forth loyalty and trustworthiness to the ruler of the time, to be well wishers of mankind, to be kind to all.*"<sup>9</sup>

\*

We feel the responsibilities for the education of children, which are so weighty, I don't need to quote from these passages because you know them well. The weight becomes more pressing as the children reach age five when it is time for formal schooling. None of us wants to be called into presence of the Name of God, the "*stern Lord*"<sup>10</sup>.

We hope,

We may go and examine the schools in the area for the best option: a public school that welcomes all, a private or lottery school with more resources, a particular ideology shown to cultivate intelligence to great heights. We may visit each, weigh the strengths and weakness, benefits and harms. We might feel that none of them are ideal. The particular challenges of these options wouldn't be a big problem, but the children will spend most of their day in this atmosphere. But these are the only choices, we might feel; after all, both parents must advance their careers, and this requires them each to work long hours every day. Often they will have to consider moving to another city when an opportunity to advance their careers arises. It is not ideal, but it is the only choice. And we might conclude, "Wouldn't any other approach to schooling isolate them from society?" So then we might decide how we would try to strengthen them to withstand the "*moral and spiritual poisons and temptations*"<sup>11</sup> which would surround them. We might then pick the best looking option, enroll the children, and then as much as we are able, talk them through the various attitudes and behaviors they encounter.

How else could we have moved forward?

We could, on the other hand, view the children's education from a collective perspective, feeling that their progress will be tied to that of those around them. We could work together with other families, grappling with a similar issue, drawing on consultation and collaboration. We could together explore a vision of education that springs out of the Vision Bahá'u'lláh has for humanity, and a set of means consistent with those ends. We could sacrifice the fleeting and immediate indulgence in material benefit around which the cities are built. We could make our primary occupation the advancement of Civilization, rather than the sustaining of, and rise to prestige in a system that we know is bound to be swept away. We might ask which are the organizing principles of our lives, and determine that our prosperity lies in the rapid progress and success of the teaching and community building work. As the House called to our attention, "*to the task of constructing a world civilization founded on the divine teachings, He*

*summons every member of the human race. Might one not ask, in contemplating the breadth of His vision, upon what foundation shall humanity realistically build hope for the future, if not this?”<sup>12</sup>*

We may feel a sense of loss at the facing of reordering such fundamental affairs, and we may look around to find many high minded and idealistic individuals and families, who sincerely desire the wellbeing of all leaving these matters unaddressed and they don't seem worse off. But, then we might call to mind the warning of the beloved House of Justice, *“The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and all Bahá'ís recognize that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world.”<sup>13</sup>* The choices we make about the most practical matters will set a direction for the path we follow.<sup>14</sup> And the House has brought to our attention that there are, *“patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted.”<sup>15</sup>*

Education is meant so that the individual might give fruit, and for the uplift of mankind, to strengthen character, not erode morals, and love for God, not to assault it, to raise capacity for cooperation, not to instill competition. The House reminds us that none of the educational theories are free of *“assumptions about the nature of the human being and society.”<sup>16</sup>* So what are the assumptions about the nature of the human being and society that are shaping education? It would seem they have a large influence on the individual and the path they walk, on the community and the direction it travels.

Some of the observations that have been made about the challenges facing education strike me as placing formidable challenges in the path of the individual and the purpose described by Bahá'u'lláh. We all witness a full and total rejection of religion in education and acknowledgment of the role of the Creator, let alone the absence of training love and gratitude for God. One text described how education finds itself afflicted with superficiality as a result of the blurring of assimilating information and understanding concepts.<sup>17</sup> Another observer pointed out that graduates struggle to build unity as a result of training young people to view matters through lenses of competition and conflict. A related text points out that individuals whose purpose is not shaped by appropriate forces become *“misdirected by the negative influences that everywhere abound in this age of transition. These influences, not always easy to detect, can be passively received and erode moral structures when clarity of thought is lacking or when sentiments are not aligned with reason.”<sup>18</sup>* Further, it pointed out that an *“increasing number of educational systems throughout the world have dedicated*

themselves to shaping minds and characters which are slaves to the analytical method, are overly concerned with procedure, and adhere to extremely narrow definitions of objectivity.”<sup>19</sup> And noted how false scales of prestige are fostered through the fracturing of practical and theoretical knowledge.<sup>20</sup> And a look at the relationship between any educational program and the black population is telling of the ills that affect the whole. They can be found tokenized, marginalized, and, poring over entire textbooks studied in the field of education we find the only mentions of black people is in the context of neediness and remedial development.<sup>21</sup> We noticed the fostering of elitism, where grades are divided into classes by test results and resources being given to those who perform well, and those students who underperform are deprived, in some cases, of even a teacher.<sup>22</sup> As once described, we find “Privilege demanding more privilege.”<sup>23</sup>

And why wouldn't it be so? Bahá'u'lláh came and created anew every word.<sup>24</sup> So the old systems and theories of education don't need to be sufficient, but what is being offered for reflection is the extent to which the methods they adopt, the attitudes and habits they instill, and the beliefs they engender, interfere with or endanger the contributions children will be able to make to the transformation of society, to their time of bearing fruit.

Okay, so we may say education is misdirected, that the form we find around us doesn't foster the type of individual we seek to raise, and maybe even deprives them of their innate treasures. What does the city have to do with that? Couldn't we address this together in the city? Wouldn't it be easier to find like minded people gathered in the same area to collaborate?

Recently, I eagerly mentioned my avocados to a skilled gardener in the area. His family had been growing in the region at least one generation before. I told him how eager I was to pick avocados from them. His response was mostly an expression, and I don't know how to describe it exactly, maybe pity, but, what was clear from that look is, that my avocados won't be giving fruit. I asked him many questions about different accommodations I could make, what if I waited until they were older and strong to plant them in the ground, what if I wrapped them up in the winter? But none of it would make a difference, he said, the environment I am growing them in is unsuitable for their nature.

In considering an environment for true education we can consider that the beloved Guardian was “*quite serious in stating that he believes that even in the large cities, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, Baltimore, etc., the Cause would not suffer if the membership were reduced to fifteen. The Bahá'ís, who have been struggling for practically fifty years to attract people to the Faith in these immense cities, have been wholly unsuccessful, when one considers the slight numerical increase in the voting*

*lists. He therefore feels that they had better go out and teach in towns and villages. They will be safer, in case war should break out, and they will be better off, spiritually, away from these centres of intense materialism, where so much time is wasted on trivialities and non-essentials.*"<sup>25</sup> What does it mean that something is a center of materialism? How are the choices of where to live being viewed, what values underly the decisions? The purpose here is to consider the "enervating" effects of materialism on decisions of where to live, and its bearing on the education of children.

The beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, further "*...has urged the Bahá'ís, for the sake of serving the Faith, to go out from these centres of intense materialism, where life nowadays is so hurried and grinding and, dispersing to towns and villages, carry the Message far and wide throughout the cities of the American Union. He strongly believes that the field outside the big cities is more fertile, that the Bahá'ís in the end will be happier for having made this move...*"<sup>26</sup> The House has observed, even before the triumphant progress achieved in Colombia, with the Ruhi Institute, which spread all throughout the rural areas of that country, "*In countries where teaching the masses has succeeded, the Bahá'ís have poured out their time and effort in village areas to the same extent as they had formerly done in cities and towns.*"<sup>27</sup>

It is in those places advancing quickly, where the real light of education is glowing. The House told us that it is when the pattern of activity is well established, and the friends push beyond the third milestone where the frontiers of learning about populations moving toward the vision of Bahá'u'lláh, where we are seeing the formalization of the educational processes.<sup>28</sup> And so Shoghi Effendi, beloved of our hearts, believed that the "*Bahá'ís should weigh these thoughts, and take action for the sake of spreading the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and for their own ultimate happiness as well.*" So sweetly then, he reminded us, "*Indeed the two things go together.*"<sup>29</sup> We may forget this from time to time, but we each deeply know it to be true.

\*

It is the hope of the House of Justice, that the friends of God will "*give constant attention to the spiritual education of their children.*"<sup>30</sup> We must never underestimate our "*capacity to mold their children's moral character.*"<sup>31</sup> I hope that you will regard the children's class material, Junior Youth program, the main sequence of courses, and the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global prosperity as the foundation and essential feature of their formal education.<sup>32</sup> That you draw on the staggering work that has already been done to articulate a coherent conceptual framework that springs out of the Revelation, and the bearing it has on education, such as in Discourse on Social Action Unit 2:

Education<sup>33</sup>, Sona Arbab's talk on Baha'i inspired education,<sup>34</sup> Farzam Arbab's talk on the Intellectual Life of the Baha'i Community,<sup>35</sup> the main sequence of courses itself, so many resources are available.

I hope that you will regard making explicit the values underlying the choices they make to be an act of engaging with and rising to the severe mental tests we face in the West. And that you will draw on the power of the Faith<sup>36</sup> and examine these matters thoroughly, together, not individualistically, but with other families.<sup>37</sup> I hope you will view the matter in light of the two dimensions of your mission, your twofold purpose of transformation. That you will deeply regard the success of your children's education as bound the success of the teaching and community building work. I hope that will try to weigh fairly the attention the children's education merits during its period of your own lives. And that as the Guardian wished, you will weigh the matter of leaving cities to advance the cause, be happy and spiritually healthy, and act. And consider its bearing on the education of your children and their contribution to societal transformation.

I have been fascinated, like so many others, with the life of Rúḥu'lláh Varqá. In reading about his family in search of an explanation for his remarkable character and powers, I saw it mentioned briefly that Ali Muhammad Varqa, his father, was very strict and insistent that his children study. This small detail was called to my mind upon reading the following encouragement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá regarding the education of children, "*The more ye persevere in this most important task*", He said, "*the more will ye witness the confirmations of God, to such a degree that ye yourselves will be astonished.*"<sup>38</sup> And so I hope too, that you persevere in the path of the true education of children.

May our children, and those children around them fulfill the longing desire of the heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and become "*accounted as the foremost professor in the academies, and in the school of inner significances, each one becoming a leader in wisdom.*"<sup>39</sup> May they be nurtured in their love of the Blessed Beauty and their understanding of His mission, so that they may be able to arise and ensure the ultimate success of the Nine Year Plan.<sup>40</sup> May they be endowed through effort and loving sacrifice with the powers to "*crush the forces of error*"<sup>41</sup>, to become "*lamps aglow with upright conduct*",<sup>42</sup> "*become flourishing trees laden with fruit in the orchard of knowledge*".<sup>43</sup> May their inherent and priceless treasures be revealed, so that mankind can benefit therefrom.

The plan is to send the avocados to a friend in Florida if we can find someone, maybe there they will give fruit if they survive that long. But, for our children the fruits are infinitely sweeter, the sacrifice so great, the need so urgent, mustn't we make more fitting accommodations? Without the proper tools to combat them, social forces would be able to rob them of their identity as noble

beings.<sup>44</sup> The thing which has, time and time again, deprived man of his inherent powers and the culmination of his development is lack of a proper education. We must not let our eyes become veiled as to what a proper education is. We must not let the successive harvests, on which their maturity promises and our unnumbered sacrifices and hopes rest, be lost to these social forces, disintegrating winds that blow with tremendous force. And we must never forget the relationship between our own happiness and the world embracing triumph of the Cause of God. After all *“If the teachings brought by Bahá’u’lláh are what will enable humanity to advance to the highest levels of unity, then one must search the soul for the right response... What else will rescue the world but the efforts of countless souls who each make the welfare of humanity their principal, their dominating concern?”*<sup>45</sup>

These are the things that occupy my mind and heart in my prayers for you.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> (Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) [www.bahai.org/r/892647062](http://www.bahai.org/r/892647062)
- <sup>2</sup> (The Promulgation of Universal Peace) [www.bahai.org/r/745373589](http://www.bahai.org/r/745373589)
- <sup>3</sup> (Trustworthiness: A Cardinal Bahá’í Virtue) [www.bahai.org/r/363538019](http://www.bahai.org/r/363538019)
- <sup>4</sup> (Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd) [www.bahai.org/r/009015192](http://www.bahai.org/r/009015192)
- <sup>5</sup> (Bahá’u’lláh, from a Tablet—translated from the Persian) (Social Action) [www.bahai.org/r/595099590](http://www.bahai.org/r/595099590)
- <sup>6</sup> (Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd) [www.bahai.org/r/009015192](http://www.bahai.org/r/009015192)
- <sup>7</sup> (Some Answered Questions) [www.bahai.org/r/803129223](http://www.bahai.org/r/803129223)
- <sup>8</sup> (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet—translated from the Persian) (Social Action) [www.bahai.org/r/684491287](http://www.bahai.org/r/684491287)
- <sup>9</sup> (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet—translated from the Persian) (Social Action) [www.bahai.org/r/684491283](http://www.bahai.org/r/684491283)
- <sup>10</sup> (Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) [www.bahai.org/r/925545422](http://www.bahai.org/r/925545422)
- <sup>11</sup> (2 December 1976 – The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States) [www.bahai.org/r/009756533](http://www.bahai.org/r/009756533)
- <sup>12</sup> (October 2017 – To all who celebrate the Glory of God) [www.bahai.org/r/517496901](http://www.bahai.org/r/517496901)
- <sup>13</sup> (1 March 2017 – To the Bahá’ís of the World) [www.bahai.org/r/963073955](http://www.bahai.org/r/963073955)  
“...Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent. With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one’s generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one’s eyes to injustice and privation.”
- <sup>14</sup> Ruhi Book 12: Family and the Community, Unit 1: The Institution of Marriage, Section 17
- <sup>15</sup> (12 December 2011 – To all National Spiritual Assemblies) [www.bahai.org/r/030751541](http://www.bahai.org/r/030751541)
- <sup>16</sup> (Social Action) [www.bahai.org/r/860544643](http://www.bahai.org/r/860544643)
- <sup>17</sup> Discourse on Social Action, Unit 2: Education, Section 3: Concepts and Information
- <sup>18</sup> Discourse on Social Action, Unit 1: Basic Concepts, Section 5: Attraction to Beauty

19 Discourse on Social Action, Unit 2: Education, Section 2: The Enhancement of Understanding

“...The approach of the often very sharp-minded graduates of these systems to intellectual inquiry is to zero in on more and more minute parts of reality, to the point that they seem incapable of seeing things in larger and larger contexts. In general, they tend to be ahistorical and able to dismiss the moral and ethical implications of their actions in the name of the “bottom line”, practicality and pragmatism. The havoc these apparently polished and educated minds, with alarmingly narrow ranges of understanding, have brought to both our physical and social environments is only gradually being recognized. The harm they will continue to inflict on society in the future is difficult to estimate as their grip on numerous fields of human endeavor grows increasingly strong.”

20 Discourse on Social Action, Unit 2: Education, Section 6: Coherence between the Spiritual and the Material

21 This was Diane’s experience so far in her Bachelors in Education.

22 We found this in both the community where we are pioneering and in the neighborhood we were in Atlanta. We are more familiar with the anecdotes at our pioneering post in Greenwood SC, where many of our friends were placed in the lowest group and only had substitute teachers. Diane spoke with a teacher from the school during her studies who described how all of the teachers fight over not getting the lower grade students, and how pitiful it is.

23 Farzam Arbab, The Intellectual life of the Baha’i Community

24 “For if God, glorified be His Name, should today speak a word that all people have spoken heretofore and shall speak hereafter, that word would still be new, were ye to reflect upon it.”

(Additional Tablets and Extracts from Tablets Revealed by Bahá’u’lláh) [www.bahai.org/r/313265404](http://www.bahai.org/r/313265404)

25 (23 May 1954 to a Bahá’í committee) Compiled and included in a Universal House of Justice response to an individual believer in the U.S.A, December 2020, [https://bahai-library.com/compilation\\_calamities\\_sustainability\\_communities](https://bahai-library.com/compilation_calamities_sustainability_communities)

26 (20 June 1954 to a National Spiritual Assembly), Also included in the above compilation from Dec 2020.

27 (13 July 1964 – To all National Spiritual Assemblies) [www.bahai.org/r/024848101](http://www.bahai.org/r/024848101)

28 (Riḍván 2018 – To the Bahá’ís of the World) [www.bahai.org/r/458252473](http://www.bahai.org/r/458252473)

29 (20 June 1954 to a National Spiritual Assembly), Also included in the above compilation from Dec 2020.

30 (Riḍván 2000 – To the Bahá’ís of the World) [www.bahai.org/r/246716299](http://www.bahai.org/r/246716299)

31 Same as above.

32 They deliver on so many of the essential requirements given for education. They can be used very repeatedly because they approach education at the conceptual level, not just the delivery of information. You can’t wear these things out, their underlying pedagogy and the extent they draw on the Writings ensures it!

33 These courses are available for study online at. <https://lazoslearning.org>

34 <https://yewtu.be/watch?v=uBfEaKjJPg>

<sup>35</sup> <https://yewtu.be/watch?v=By4IDyhjJ9Y>

<sup>36</sup> Indeed the believers have not yet fully learned to draw on each other's love for strength and consolation in time of need. The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to fully draw on these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith.

(From a letter dated 8 May 1942 to an individual believer) (Family Life) [www.bahai.org/r/492746766](http://www.bahai.org/r/492746766)

<sup>37</sup> In practice, this means the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they live. It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus. Such groups of friends set about widening the circle of participation in their activities by engaging with the networks to which they belong – networks created through a place of work or study, a local school, or a community hub of another kind – and by accompanying others who arise to serve alongside them.

(30 December 2021 – To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) [www.bahai.org/r/758524486](http://www.bahai.org/r/758524486)

<sup>38</sup> (Social Action) [www.bahai.org/r/771911556](http://www.bahai.org/r/771911556)

<sup>39</sup> (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá) [www.bahai.org/r/823259655](http://www.bahai.org/r/823259655)

<sup>40</sup> (3 January 2022 – To the Auxiliary Board members throughout the world) [www.bahai.org/r/458854288](http://www.bahai.org/r/458854288)

<sup>41</sup> (Bahá'í Prayers and Tablets for Children) [www.bahai.org/r/783245707](http://www.bahai.org/r/783245707)

<sup>42</sup> (Additional Prayers Revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá) [www.bahai.org/r/226284753](http://www.bahai.org/r/226284753)

<sup>43</sup> (Additional Prayers Revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá) [www.bahai.org/r/997029423](http://www.bahai.org/r/997029423)

<sup>44</sup> (Riḍván 2010 – To the Bahá'ís of the World) [www.bahai.org/r/923291670](http://www.bahai.org/r/923291670)

<sup>45</sup> (October 2019 – To all who have come to honour the Herald of a new Dawn) [www.bahai.org/r/110159598](http://www.bahai.org/r/110159598)