

Summer school presentation 2022

Expansive prospects for educational initiatives

Mihi:

Ko ia te Kororia o nga Kororia

Tenei te karanga, tenei te tangi kia tuwhera nga tatou i te whai-ao ki te ao marama,
Tihei Mauri Ora.

He is the Glory of Glories.

This is the call, this is the cry to open the doorways of the Spiritual realm to the physical realm.

This is the breath of creation.

Acknowledgements:

National Spiritual Assembly

Organizers/hosts

Participants

Universal House of Justice

Introduce myself

The title and theme of this presentation is 'expansive prospects for educational initiatives'

I'm going to share about:

-The purpose and importance of education as described in the Baha'i writings.

-Then discuss a few principles which have shaped and continue to guide the work of the Baha'i community in contributing to a global learning process about education.

-We will then think about what Baha'i educational endeavors have emerged so far, and what are some unique features of the Baha'i approach to education.

-Then we will look more deeply into the institute process as an educational system and how our understanding of the nature and purpose and reach of the institute process is expanding as we enter further into the new series of Plans

the purpose and importance of education as described in the Baha'i writings.

Purpose of Baha'u'llah's Revelation is to bring unity and to heal the world of suffering

The Manifestations of God are 'Divine educators' - 'Fountain of wisdom' - 'Dawn of knowledge'. The knowledge which the Manifestations of God bring to humanity is the cause of the elevation and transformation of society. The Manifestations come to relieve the suffering of humanity and provide knowledge which enables humankind to achieve spiritual and material progress.

"I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight."

— Baha'u'llah, Tabernacle of Unity

The knowledge They reveal - the education They provide - is the cause of human progress and upliftment. History provides ample evidence of this. About knowledge, Baha'u'llah states:

“Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent... In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him.” (“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, pp. 51–52)

This follows that the acquisition of knowledge, according to Baha’u’Allah, “is incumbent upon everyone.”

We are not to be passive recipients of education, but that **we must take charge of our own learning**. Abdu'l-Baha stressed:

“...I most urgently request the friends of God to make every effort, as much as lieth within their competence, along these lines. The harder they strive to widen the scope of their knowledge, the better and more gratifying will be the result. Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts.”

(Abdu'l-Baha- From a Tablet, translated from the Arabic)

In the life of the individual and in society, **learning never ends**. The more we understand and the more conscious we become of our purpose, the greater our yearning for understanding becomes.

The education referred to is **not only material, but also spiritual education**. The Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

“...Bahá’u’lláh considered education as one of the most fundamental factors of a true civilization. This education, however, in order to be adequate and fruitful, should be comprehensive in nature and should take into consideration not only the physical and the intellectual side of man but also his spiritual and ethical aspects.”

(9 July 1931 to an individual believer)

The type of Education we are concerned with is education for development - it should impart knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities which enable human beings to serve the needs of their society, to address fundamental challenges which impede spiritual and material progress, and to take charge of their own destiny.

Centrality of knowledge to social progress:

One implication of what we have discussed so far - A guiding principle at the heart of all that the baha'i community does to bring about positive social change - is the centrality of knowledge to social progress - that to bring about spiritual, social and economic development, the primary concern must be access to knowledge and participation in its generation.

The Baha'i writings and in the experience of the Baha'i community indicates that the root cause of wrongdoing, of suffering and hardship is ignorance or lack of access to knowledge and understanding.

This guiding principle stands in contrast to other conceptions of progress and what drives human development and wellbeing. In broader society, it is common to see the assumption that access to money and participation in economic growth is central to driving human wellbeing and progress. The work of Governments and the most powerful development agencies in the world, as well as the lifestyle of individuals and communities is shaped by the assumption that, in order to achieve human wellbeing, to overcome problems of poverty, violence, disease, addiction, conflict etc, the highest priority of development efforts should be giving people access to money and to participation in the economy, with the expectation that this will lead to all other aspects of life improving. Resources are therefore channeled towards efforts concerned with increasing employment, commerce, and GDP. Even the school system, then, is largely (but not entirely) organized around the goal of getting children into the workforce - as if participating in the economy to generate material wealth is the greatest goal.

This assumption has been shaping society for a long time. While there has been a reduction of the most extreme poverty in the world, we see growing extremes of wealth and poverty, and growing tension and polarization in society. We observe institutions and entire populations which appear incapable of or unwilling to bring about changes needed to solve our problems and to relieve suffering. We struggle to address serious social and economic problems surrounding us because we lack moral and scientific capabilities that come only from spiritual and material education and understanding.

This isn't to imply that material progress isn't important. We just understand that it is secondary to and is an outcome of access to and participation in the generation and application of knowledge.

In a tablet titled the Secret of Divine Civilization, which was a statement intended as a contribution to the discourse of social progress and development, Abdu'l-Baha helps us appreciate the centrality of knowledge and education to bringing about spiritual, social and economic development:

“The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward.”

(“The Secret of Divine Civilization”, pp. 109–110; pp. 111–112)

The Universal House of Justice explains:

“[In the work of society building,] There are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers

to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation.”

— The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2010

Our approach to social transformation thus places emphasis on capacity building through systematic educational processes:

“Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world.”

— The Universal House of Justice, To the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2010

“The significance of education in the work of community building is unmistakable, and in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world.”

-30th December 2021

Implications of this concept for Baha'i community life

In the Baha'i community, knowledge is not owned and shared by any one group. We see then in the pattern of the Baha'i society building process, that the nature of the process is essentially educational - open to all. Baha'i community life is, increasingly, an educational system and a system of learning in action. In the four core activities - which we understand address the most fundamental spiritual needs of human beings - we find educational processes which are open to all. In the rhythm of three month cycles of activity we see the method of scientific investigation - study, action, reflection, analysis, and planning - a systematic approach to learning and generating knowledge which is open to all. In the organization of Baha'i institutions we see a pattern of learning in action and guiding communities not through instructions and rules, but through educational endeavors.

Even social action which arises from a vibrant and growing community of capable human resources places emphasis on capacity building through education and practice.

So, the Baha'i community is concerned with participating in a global discourse on education for human development and progress - a never ending learning process.

a few principles which have shaped and continue to guide the work of the Baha'i community in contributing to a global learning process about education.

We need to learn how to learn. This will take centuries. There are some principles which are helpful in guiding this learning process:

As we go about this learning process we assume that the educational theories currently existing in the world are incomplete - we do not align with any of them, but we draw insight from each. We also assume that there is not yet such a thing as 'Baha'i education' - The system of education that the Baha'i world is bringing into being is, in the words of the Universal House of Justice, **'an educational system in a state of constant refinement.'** Requires humility. Our approach to educational development should enable every generation of youth to contribute to the advancement of the learning process and the emergence of a new culture of education. It is an approach characterized by a constant interplay between study of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah, drawing on the accumulating knowledge of humankind, action in the field, reflection on experience, consultation and analysis, and gradual refinement of methods, content, pedagogy and theoretical frameworks that guide our educational endeavors.

Also, **the Baha'i world is engaged in a learning process with the rest of humanity.** While the Baha'i community is proactively contributing to this learning process and is developing educational systems, including the institute process, it is not the intention to create a new 'baha'i system' of education separate from and in isolation of educational systems of the broader society. The spirit of the age and the forces released by Baha'u'llah's Revelation are transforming all structures of society. There is no such thing as an 'old world order' system and a 'new world order' system. With humility, and without overstating the significance of our experience, we follow with determination and contribute to an unfolding discourse on education and releasing the potential of populations to take charge of their own spiritual and material progress.

Education must take into account and integrate traditional bodies of knowledge and methods of learning with those which are modern and are the outcome of scientific and systematic approaches to learning. Great harm is caused when forces outside a population impose on it new systems of education which overlook the knowledge and practices and learning already existing within a population. Educational processes should facilitate a conversation which enables people to give expression to the knowledge they already possess and the practices of learning with which they are already familiar. Related to this is the assumption that all people are capable of contributing to the generation and dissemination of knowledge.

what Baha'i educational endeavors have emerged so far, and what are some unique features of the Baha'i approach to education.

Summary of various educational efforts of the Baha'i community:

In the early stages of the Faith, educational endeavours relied on the agency and initiative of individuals to study the Revelation and develop understanding through the application of

knowledge in action. In 2010, reflecting on the experience of the Baha'i community in the field of education prior to 1996, the Universal House of Justice shared:

“To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community.” -Ridvan 2010

In 1996, recognizing the need for a systematic approach to education and human resource development, the Universal House of Justice called on the Baha'i of the world to establish formal programs of learning. Over time, educational endeavors became organized according to the three broad areas of Baha'i activity - Expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the prevalent discourses of society - and, while not being exclusive to any one, various educational systems have emerged which are organized around the aim of building capacity to contribute to one or more of these areas of activity. For example,

Discourses:

- ISGP seminars
- Scholarly organizations and seminars

Social action:

- Preparation for social action program
- Programs of various Baha'i inspired organizations around the world which develop content and programs in response to specific local realities. Some are concerned with teacher training and raising resources who assist in the formation of community schools.

Expansion and consolidation:

- Network of national and regional training institutes around the globe

-Informal, but equally essential initiatives such as summer schools, firesides, deepening programs, study groups and classes - all arranged through individual initiatives or by the institutions.

look more deeply into the institute process as an educational system and how our understanding of the nature and purpose and reach of the institute process is expanding as we enter further into the new series of Plans

“Pre-eminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá’í world to offer education is, of course, the training institute. Indeed, the network of national and regional training institutes operating with such proficiency around the globe is among the choicest fruits of the previous series of global Plans.”-30th December 2021

Narrative of the emergence of the network of Training Institutes and the nature of the institute process in relation to the new series of Global Plans:

In 1996, the Universal House of Justice, while affirming the value of and ongoing need for informal systems of education, called upon all National Spiritual Assemblies to establish formal educational entities referred to as training institutes - the purpose of which was to learn about and develop programs of education to raise human resources who could serve in various ways essential for the growth and development of the Baha’i community. In reflecting back on that period in 1995/96, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

“We made clear at the time... that another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation.” - Ridvan 2010

Institutes around the world experimented with and developed content and programs with this aim, with varying degrees of success.

In 2005, the courses of the Ruhi institute were adopted by all training institutes. Because -By that point the House felt assured about the efficacy of the courses in achieving the aims of the Plan. It was observed that national assemblies which had adopted its courses were far ahead of all others

-the House felt assured that the courses had proven their effectiveness in every part of the globe

-the Ruhi institute was drawing on worldwide experience in the ongoing development of its programs

What is the institute process? How does it work? What are its unique features?

Referring to the effectiveness of the institute process, the House of Justice remarked in 2010: “...understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá’í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá’í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the

Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.” - Ridvan 2010

In New Zealand, in recent years, individuals, communities and the institutions have developed a deep certitude in the effectiveness of the institute process to empower the people of New Zealand - a certitude arising not just from obedience to the Universal House of Justice, but also from experience. As the Baha'i community has developed an outward orientation, they have learnt to engage a majority of participants in the institute process from the wider community, many of whom are arising to serve and apply the insights and capacities they have acquired through the institute process. There is now, in New Zealand, an entire generation of youth and young adults who bear the imprint of the educational endeavors which crystallized in last series of Plans, and who, while still requiring the indispensable support of the entire community are now at the forefront of the community building work in clusters and neighborhoods.

We just began a new series of global plans focused on releasing the society building power of the Faith. The Universal House of Justice has made clear that the institute process will remain central to the work of the Faith in this new series of Plans, but we have been invited to adopt a more expansive view of the nature and purpose of the institute process.

At the beginning of this new series of Plans, The house of Justice shared:
“When we first introduced the concept of the training institute, it was in the context of the need to raise up human resources to take on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. At this juncture, when a new series of Plans has just begun, we invite you to take a more expansive view. Increasingly, participation in institute courses is preparing the friends of God for an ever deeper engagement in the life of the wider community; it is endowing them with the knowledge, insights, and skills that enable them to contribute not only to the process of developing their own community, but to the progress of society. In short, the institute is a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release.” -30th Dec 2021

How do we go about expanding our view and understanding?

“With respect to raising the capacity of institutes to deliver each of the three stages of the educational process, we are glad to see that attention is increasingly being given to **enhancing the quality of the educational experience itself**, in addition to **expanding the system for its delivery.**” -30th Dec 2021

Expanding the system - it is intended for all of humanity:

“What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise. A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the

masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.” 28th Dec 2010

How are all those supporting the work of training institutes giving attention to the fundamentals of **raising teachers, animators and tutors** and **engaging ever increasing numbers of participants** who benefit from the institute's programs?

Building capacity for conversation and accompaniment.

In clusters which are moving beyond the second milestone, and especially the third, we need to ensure that a cadre of tutors are following the development of the institute process in four dimensions:

- 1) the baha'i community and their friends broadly across the cluster forming and working in expanding nuclei.
- 2) The youth movement across the cluster.
- 3) Neighbourhood and village centres of intense activity.
- 4) Distinct populations, such as particular ethnic groups.

A cadre of tutors in every cluster needs to follow these four dimensions of growth.

In the context of the globe, the institute process is a system which can extend to every village and city on the planet, enabling all of humanity to access spiritual and material education which enables them to take charge of their own development.

Enhancing the quality - learning more about change in culture:

“What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly... so that the potential of local populations to create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.” -Ridvan 2010

Increasing the Quality of the institute process will come from better understanding the nature, aims and dynamics of the institute process:

“A **critical requirement** is to enable all those contributing to the work of the institute to progressively advance their understanding of the educational content: its objectives, its structure, its pedagogical principles, its methodology, its central concepts, its interconnections.”

The study of the higher courses and also the branch courses in the sequence will be important for better understanding the intent and potential of the earlier courses, and the dynamics of the transformation under way. While the higher courses address the topics of social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society, the institute process as a whole - from the lessons of the children's program right through to the main sequence - is a means to releasing the society building power of the Faith. The higher courses and the branch courses in

the sequence will do much to expand our understanding of the dynamics of social transformation and about raising the quality of the entire educational experience.

Society building includes social action - efforts concerned with applying the teachings of the Faith to improve spiritual and material conditions. One way we can think about social action is, action taken by members of a community to address and overcome barriers to their spiritual and material progress. The Universal House of Justice describes social action and society building as follows:

“As the intensity of community-building work in a cluster increases, the friends there inevitably become more conscious of social, economic, or cultural barriers that are impeding people’s spiritual and material progress. Children and junior youth lacking support in their education, families needing help with navigating unfamiliar systems of healthcare, or long-standing prejudices arising from a legacy of hostility between different groups — when a Bahá’í community’s efforts in the field of expansion and consolidation bring it into contact with these situations and many others, it will be drawn to respond to such realities as its circumstances permit.”

We know that central to addressing these challenges needs to be an educational process concerned with capacity building of individuals and institutions to make appropriate decisions themselves. Having a more expansive view of the institute process will also involve identifying challenges and barriers to progress, and then turning to the content of the institute which explores concepts and capacities which, if better understood, enable individuals, families and communities to overcome the challenges holding them back. The institute process addresses many such challenges.

Example from Manurewa regarding the use of JY text ‘drawing on the power of the word’ to help youth to take better ownership of their education.

Example of book 2.

Short film skit, excerpt from “Glimpses of a hundred years of endeavor” (52.27 - 1.02.11) which portrays three children’s class teachers preparing for their classes and assisting each other to understand the content of the institute process, the intent of the institute, the dynamics of capacity building that underlie it, and the significance of their efforts with the institute process - in this case in relations to the program for the spiritual education of children - in fostering a profound process of social transformation.

FILM EXCERPT - (52.27 - 1.02.11)

Questions which we now need to follow:

-How are we sharing our experience of the institute process with individuals, institutions and communities of the wider society with humility and audacity, and inviting them to participate in a

language which removes suspicion and hesitation, so as to significantly increase the number of those benefiting from the institutes programs?

-How are all those supporting the work of the training institute giving attention to the fundamentals of raising tutors and engaging ever increasing numbers who benefit from the institute's programs while also orienting themselves towards thinking and learning as to how the institute process is contributing to transformation and the rebuilding of society?

-How does the institute process prepare people for an ever deeper engagement with the life of society and prepare them to contribute meaningfully to social transformation?

-In addition to preparing individuals to carry out specific acts of service, what patterns of thought, habits and developments in culture does the content of the institute seek to foster - not just the main sequence, but also the lessons of the children's program and texts of the JY program?

-How does the transformation of the individual achieved through the institute process manifest itself also in the changing social norms and patterns of community life and in the way that institutions operate?

-What social, economic or cultural barriers are impeding our progress, and how can the content of the institute be of assistance to us in learning and building capacity to overcome these challenges?

-In our cluster, how are our tutors, our animators and our teachers being assisted to adopt this more expansive view? Is it just the coordinators of the institute who are advancing in their thinking, or is everyone being encouraged to relook at the institute process more deeply?

-In turn, how are the participants in the core activities being assisted to better understand the meaning and significance of what they are doing? Are they being assisted to see the training institute as the means for developing new attitudes, habits and patterns of life – and not just for developing skills and capacities to run specific activities?

-How can we ensure that this learning process is unfolding among different social and cultural groups in our clusters?

Our efforts to contribute to this learning process is essential. Being concerned with acquiring knowledge and capacity for service, taking charge of our destiny, and inviting others to do so alongside us is central to Baha'i identity and to the identity of all those concerned with the welfare and prosperity of the human family. The greatest oppression in the world is that souls, seeking knowledge and truth, do not know where to go or from whom to find it, and therefore suffer the consequences of ignorance. Our efforts to strengthen the institute process are a most fundamental response to lifting this oppression. Abdu'l-Baha tasked us:

“we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge.”