

Educating the Whole Child A Bahá'í Perspective

1. How do the Bahá'í Writings define “education?”

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote:

*“Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”*¹

A talisman is an amulet or a charm, something that produces extraordinary effects. Bahá'u'lláh explains that every human being has the potential to produce extraordinary effects, but that a lack of education takes away this power. To educate, then, means to release human potential. This Bahá'í definition echoes the Latin root of “education,” *educere*, which means “to draw forth.”

2. What potential does a human being possess?

The Bahá'í teachings explain that every created thing reflects one of God's attributes, but that only a human soul can reflect them all.

*Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.... To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him.*²

Most significantly, as human beings we have the capacity to know God and to love Him.

*“Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him - a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation....”*³

From a Bahá'í perspective, therefore, education releases our potential to know God, to love Him, and to reflect his myriad attributes (justice, kindness, wisdom, forgiveness, etc.)

3. What kinds of education do the Bahá'í Writings envisage?

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Son of Bahá’u’lláh and the authorised Interpreter of His Writings, elucidated three different kinds of education.

“But education is of three kinds: material, human and spiritual. Material education is concerned with the progress and development of the body, through gaining its sustenance, its material comfort and ease. This education is common to animals and man.

Human education signifies civilization and progress: that is to say, government, administration, charitable works, trades, arts and handicrafts, sciences, great inventions and discoveries, and elaborate institutions, which are the activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal.

Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: it consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the words, “Let Us make man in Our image and after Our likeness.” This is the goal of the world of humanity.”⁴

4. What, then, does it mean to educate the whole child?

In the context of the above passages from the Bahá'í Writings, it becomes clear that true education goes far beyond the narrow conceptions so prevalent today. Yes, education is for children, but it is for adults too. It begins when our soul comes into being, continues throughout our life on this earth, and does not cease at death when we move to the next world. Yes, education involves schooling. The Bahá'í Faith requires society to provide universal, compulsory schooling. Parents must ensure that their children learn basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. Yet they are equally responsible for the moral and spiritual education of those children.

From a Bahá'í perspective, therefore, to educate the whole child means releasing that child's full potential to reflect all of God's attributes, to know Him and to love him, and to become the supreme Talisman in this world of creation. It means to mine all of the many gems of capacity that God has placed within each soul, not to value the diamonds while ignoring the emeralds, not to promote the intellectual but ignore the moral, or the creative, or the physical, or the artistic, or the emotional. It incorporates all levels of education: material, human and divine. Education cannot be deemed a success until each child, each human being, can fully reflect the light of God.

“O SON OF BEING! Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favour upon thee.”⁵

¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXII, pp. 259-260

² *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 177

³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 65

⁴ *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 8-9

⁵ *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 6