

Japan: Educating for a Global Society

A Baha'i View

The Education Special Interest Group

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Japan's miraculous reconstruction since the last war has brought an unprecedented level of material well-being to her people, but at what cost to the ordinary person's sense of family, community and personal spiritual life? The astounding material growth of the past five decades has been inversely paralleled by a decline in moral standards. The traditional moral fabric of the nation, the source of its public peace and social advancement seems to be unraveling.

This inner crumbling has led, among other things, to widespread corruption within political circles, increased crime and divorce rates, and more recently the specter of terrorism in what has been respected as one of the world's safest countries. International studies show that while Japan enjoys one of the world's highest income levels, the reported satisfaction with life and happiness of its citizens is one of the lowest in the world. While average citizens exercise admirable patience with social conditions, others, including increasing numbers of youth, turn to use of alcohol, even drugs, or other mind-numbing pastimes. There are also those who seek escape in so-called "religious" cults dubious in their goals and means, or other ways of gratifying personal desires. The notion of service to family, community, nation, and the world is losing ground.

Alarmed, the voices of concerned people at all levels have begun to raise a long overdue discussion in the streets, in scholarly papers, in mass media, newspaper editorials and conferences: Where is Japan going? What is to be its role in the evolving global society? How will the citizens of Japan be prepared for the future?

One perceptive Japanese commentator has pointed out "a pervading feeling of emptiness throughout Japanese society." A former official of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Sakaiaya Taichi, has been one of many to point out that Japan must turn away from an emphasis upon material goals and begin to emphasize spiritual goals. As these and other far-visioned thinkers indicate, Japan needs to find a new spiritual impetus if the nation is to advance.

But how? Japan has long recognized that the foundation of all long-term social advancement and excellence is education. This nation was already in the midst of its Meiji Reformation when a Persian moral educator in the late 1800s, 'Abdu'l-Baha, penned this advice to his own countrymen, as well as to the world:

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 principle reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time. ⁽¹⁾

Today, Japan is among many nations who have come to the realization that its education system needs to be reconsidered and redesigned to meet the needs of a rapidly changing world. School systems everywhere have in the past few decades come face to face with the fact that the present systems of transmission of traditional values and information is not adequate to the new perceptions of humanity's needs and capacity. The unprecedented surge in human knowledge, and its means of communication have created vast new possibilities and vistas for the upcoming generation. But simply inundating students with more information is not to educate them. Just piling fact upon fact, viewpoint upon viewpoint will not generate the new modes of thought that will allow them, as concerned world citizens, to seek actively and cooperatively better solutions to new or long-standing global problems. Educational experimentation by itself can only lead to further chaos. Educators in every nation are in need of a clear vision of the goals of human beings as individuals and society as a whole. Fundamental principles are needed to guide the development of education for the 21st century.

We, the members of the world-wide Baha'i Community, believe that important principles and the vision necessary to bring our education systems, based on human wholeness and well-being, into synchronicity with the rapidly evolving changes of these times are offered in the sacred writings the Baha'i Faith, particularly by Baha'u'llah, its Founder, and 'Abdu'l-Baha, its authorized interpreter.

Baha'u'llah explained that this is the age of the maturity of mankind. The transition from an age of separate nations, to a collective world-wide unity in all essential aspects of society would be tumultuous, like the springtime in which storms wash away the old to make way for the new. The world's people are as unable to resist this change as a youth is unable to prevent his own becoming an adult. The smoothness of this maturing process, however, would depend on our recognizing and accepting the challenges and responsibilities that this new age has thrust upon us.

The world civilization, Baha'u'llah maintained, can only be built upon the foundation of awareness of the oneness of humankind. Education must address this principle in all its implications for the understanding and application of our history, our social and economic organization, our attitudes and goals in arts, sciences and all fields. This oneness is not to be realized simply by integrating different cultures, nor by making all culture uniform. Just as a human body is not merely a random collection of organs, the impulse to organization must derive from a deeply imbedded innate drive to see the complementary and distinct virtues of every part coalesced into a living whole. For this, we must deeply know and value ourselves as individuals, and the particular qualities of our own culture, as well as the cultures of others.

All education systems are founded in a particular view of man which is transmitted both directly and indirectly to learners. Baha'u'llah has said,

Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. ⁽²⁾

And further:

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. ⁽³⁾

The word "Talisman", meaning an object with special or greater than normal powers, suggests that we have not yet adequately tapped the potential of the human being due to our inadequate education. What would be considered a "proper" education? 'Abdu'l-Baha notes that education must address three aspects of man's nature:

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 interventions and discoveries and elaborate institutions, which are the activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal. Divine education ...consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education. ⁽⁴⁾

The curricular elements in this third area of education include wisdom, good conduct, integrity and righteousness. It is the development of noble qualities of human beings such as justice, love, dignity, forbearance, initiative, excellence and conscientious curtailment of negative qualities such as greed, selfishness, prejudice, laziness and the like. It is the acquisition of positive virtues through active engagement in the challenges of the time one lives in that is the foundation of human happiness. There have been some who have thought that if pupils are merely educated in the humanities (the second area of education), that intelligence, high resolve and enthusiasm would naturally lead students to choose a moral high road in life. However, history, both past and recent, reveal that a highly educated person without a well-grounded moral education may easily become a terrible menace to society. 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

Training in morals and good conduct is far more important than book learning. A child that is cleanly, agreeable, of good character, well behaved - even though he be ignorant - is preferable to a child that is rude, unwashed, ill-natured, and yet becoming deeply versed in all the sciences and arts. The reason for this is that the child who conducts himself well, even though he be ignorant, is of benefit to others, while an ill-natured, ill-behaved child is corrupted and harmful to others, even though he be learned. If, however, the child be trained to be both learned and good, the result is light upon light." ⁽⁵⁾

Thus, this moral leader of encompassing global vision described three prime duties of a school:

First: Wholehearted service to the cause of education, the unfolding of the extension of the boundaries of pure science, the elimination of the causes of ignorance.

Second: Service to the cause of morality.

Third: Service to the oneness of the world of humanity; so that each student may consciously realize that he is a brother of all mankind, irrespective of religion or race.⁽⁶⁾

At the individual level, where education has its most profound influence, there must be a balance of training of various physical and mental capabilities: use of the senses as well as the body; use of reason, comprehension, and imagination as well as the memory; arts as well as sciences. Education systems must prepare students to work both independently and cooperatively in diverse groups. Today's students will face problems in creating a safe, peaceful and just planet that the traditions of the past have never before experienced. Students must have a broad and deep vision of the world as well as flexibility of mind.

Training students to investigate truth for themselves is a key element to unlocking the complex problems faced by a diverse society. Recognition of the principle of unity in diversity is another part of the combination. Each person must be informed of the needs of the whole society, and be prepared to develop and offer his or her own particular talents and qualities in service of the goals of justice, peace, welfare and happiness of all. Service to the community is another important aspect of the educational process and engagement of students in application of the things they are learning to volunteer for projects for the good of community, nation and the world is highly encouraged as one of the pillars of an educational curriculum as Baha'is see it.

One of the key elements of educating the spiritual and moral aspect of human nature, in particular is to acquaint pupils with the fundamental wisdom, the history, the laws and observances of the world's great religions. The universal religions of the world have been the moral foundations of all civilizations. The study of religions is essential to understanding other cultures and ways of thinking. Baha'is do not recommend "indoctrinating" young minds through the narrow view of any of the numerous sects or branches, but rather, to teach students to make a broad and respectful investigation into the rich history, noble scriptures and underlying truths that can be identified at the basis of every culture. Biographical studies of great saints and sages can provide students with the broadest and deepest means for pondering their own relationship to life, and can act as a guide to propel the development of themselves as individuals and their contributions to the world. To ignore religion in the school curriculum due to the confusion of educators over this subject area, is to belie the truth of its importance, and to leave students ill-equipped to understand their own culture or the culture of others. Without a knowledge of the fundamentals of religion and its development, teachers and students lack the means to delve into the deeper questions of the meaning of life, or to navigate the treacherous tides of contending ideas and claims regarding spiritual and moral matters.

Another principle embedded in the Teachings of Baha'u'llah that is bringing a positive approach to bear on educational problems is the principle of consultation. Consultation is a cooperative approach to the investigation of truth that is useful in developing creative and effective solutions to complex issues without creating opposing factions or breaking the unity of a group. Applied with children in classroom settings, it is proving to be an effective means of engaging children actively and cooperatively in their own educational processes. Consultation allows students of varying background, interest and ability levels to work diligently

together to discuss problems, search for facts, identify operating principles and seek harmonious solutions on unified projects inside or outside of the classroom. It creates a noncompetitive atmosphere of appreciation for the talents and qualities of each member of the group, a safe-guard against the problems of isolation and bullying which plague present school systems.

Beyond the classroom, this approach to consultation is finding practical applications in the decision-making and governing systems of the world. The Baha'i International Community, as an NGO with consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, works actively and diligently with people of sincerity everywhere to bring about unifying solutions to the complex issues of this age of transition. The members of the Baha'i International Community numbering over 5 million people representing every national, racial, cultural and ethnic group throughout the planet have, with their own modest means, been active for over a century in developing and improving education systems wherever they reside. There are currently 178 Baha'i academic schools, over 400 tutorial schools, and hundreds of less formal Baha'i educational projects throughout the world. Though our numbers are few in Japan, our hearts and our vision are world embracing. We offer our vision, our experience and ideas, as well as our services wherever we are able to the development of the global citizens of Japan, and to the realization of Baha'u'llah's words ⁽⁷⁾:

Bend your minds and wills to the education of the people and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City.

References

- 1 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 109
- 2 Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 259
- 3 Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 260
- 4 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 10
- 5 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 135-36
- 6 'Abdu'l-Baha, (From a statement made to President of American College of Beirut, Syria)
- 7 Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 333-34