Bahá'í-Inspired Educational Endeavors and Social Justice[1]

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Abstract
Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors naturally seek, among other aims, to instill capacity in young people to build a more just society. Other educational efforts in North America share this aim, which is often expressed using the term "social justice." This paper analyses conceptions of authority, freedom, power, equality, and identity that are mobilized in the context of educational endeavors associated with the aim of social justice. Some of these conceptions, it is argued, can lead to certain confusions in educational thought and practice. If education, Bahá'í-inspired or otherwise, is to contribute to social justice, careful attention needs to be given to the way these concepts are understood and translated into action.

Résumé
Les initiatives pédagogiques d'inspiration bahá'íe visent naturellement, entre autres objectifs, à faire naître chez les jeunes la capacité de bâtir une société plus juste. En Amérique du Nord, d'autres initiatives pédagogiques poursuivent le même objectif, souvent désigné par le terme de « justice sociale ». Le présent article analyse les conceptions de l'autorité, de la liberté, du pouvoir, de l'égalité et de l'identité qui sont utilisées dans le cadre des initiatives pédagogiques axées sur la justice sociale. Certaines de ces conceptions, soutient-on, peuvent entraîner une certaine confusion dans la pensée et la pratique pédagogiques. Si l'éducation, qu'elle soit d'inspiration bahá'íe ou non, doit contribuer à la justice sociale, il convient d'accorder une attention particulière à la manière dont ces concepts sont compris et transposés en actions.

Resumen
Los esfuerzos educativos de inspiración Bahá'í naturalmente buscan, entre otros objetivos, inculcar capacidad en personas jóvenes para construir una sociedad más justa. Otros esfuerzos educativos en América del Norte comparten este objetivo, el cual a menudo se expresa usando el término de "justicia social." Este artículo analiza los conceptos de autoridad, libertad, poder, igualdad, e identidad los cuales se movilizan en el contexto de esfuerzos educativos asociados con el objetivo de la justicia social. Se argumenta que algunos de estos conceptos pueden resultar en ciertas confusiones en pensamiento y práctica educativos. Si la educación, de inspiración Bahá'í u otra, es para contribuir a la justicia social, se necesita que se preste cuidadosa atención a la manera que estos conceptos son comprendidos y traducidos a la acción.

Introduction

Bahá'ís all over the world are engaged in educational activities that aim to raise capacity in young people to become protagonists in the emergence of

1 The authors would like to thank Dr. Marika St. Rose Yeo for her insights and inputs in the generative conversation on these themes, as well as her substantial contributions to this paper.

just and unified communities, a contribution towards the construction of a new, global civilization. These educational activities are carried out in every corner of the world and range from informal, community-based endeavors to schools and teacher-training. One of the distinctive features of these activities is that Bahá'ís and others with whom they are collaborating are striving to carry them out within a single conceptual framework—drawing on the same set of principles, concepts, and methods. Naturally, there is an ongoing conversation about the nature of this framework, which evolves in light of experience and as understanding deepens. Some contributions to this ongoing conversation have unfolded in the pages of this journal.[2] We hope that this article, which explores the theme of social justice in relation to this framework, will constitute a meaningful contribution to this conversation, one in which we ourselves are involved as active participants in the educational endeavors of the Bahá'í community.[3] We are, simultaneously, members of academic communities that are striving to articulate and put in practice approaches to education that serve the cause of social justice. This article might therefore also prove helpful for those who, while not involved in the educational activities promoted by the Bahá'í community, are convinced that young people have a role to play in bringing about a more just society, and that education can release this potential.

Why the theme of social justice? First, as mentioned above, we share the concern that permeates our academic fields that education should contribute to the emergence of a more just society. The theme of social justice has also, undoubtedly, become far more prevalent in public discourse generally and in education specifically in recent years.

Second, there are particular challenges associated with maintaining consistency between aims and methods when seeking to advance social justice in the moral and intellectual environment of North America—the context in which we operate. Social justice educators themselves are keenly aware of these challenges: they are conscious, for example, that many efforts that are intended to empower youth may in fact inadvertently perpetuate various forms of injustice.[4] As such, they strive to remain vigilant for gaps between,

2 We refer the reader to the following articles published in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* over the years: Haleh Arbab, "Learning to Read Social Reality in the Light of the Revelation"; Sona Farid-Arbab, "Advancing in Bahá'í-inspired Education"; Gerald Filson, "A Reading of Sona Farid-Arbab's *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*"; Paul Lample, "In Pursuit of Harmony between Science and Religion," "Toward a Framework for Action," and "Exploring a Framework for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America."

3 Of course, the ideas in this article are ultimately our own and should not be seen as "the perspective of the Bahá'í community."

4 For a recent example, see Hosseini et al. (2025).

say, stated principles or commitments and educational approaches. We are similarly concerned about this kind of consistency between principles and practice; this paper aims to illuminate certain areas where this consistency can be strengthened.

Naturally, Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors are guided by a framework that is explicitly inspired by religion, specifically the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as the accumulating experience of the Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís have been encouraged to foster consistency "among the explicit and implicit convictions which underpin an initiative, the values promoted by it, the attitudes adopted by its participants, the methods they employ, and the ends they seek" ("Social Action"). The following paragraph, from the same document, comments on the complexities associated with striving to avoid contradictions and to operate within an evolving framework:

> If contradictions are to be avoided, the participants in an endeavour need to become increasingly aware of the environment within which their work advances. On the one hand, they are to freely draw insights from the range of philosophies, academic theories, community programs and social movements within that environment and to keep current with the technological trends that influence progress. On the other hand, they should remain watchful lest they allow the teachings [of the Bahá'í Faith] to be bent into conformity with this or that ideology, intellectual fad or fashionable practice. In this connection, the capacity to measure the value of prevalent approaches, ideas, attitudes, and methods in the balance of the Faith is vital. This capacity enables one, for example, to uncover the aggrandizement of self so often lying behind initiatives that are nominally concerned with empowerment, to discern the tendency of certain development efforts to foist upon the poor an entirely materialistic worldview, to perceive the subtle ways in which competitiveness and greed can be promoted in the name of justice and prosperity, and ultimately to abandon the notion that one or another theory or movement which may fleetingly acquire some prominence in the wider society can provide a shortcut to meaningful change. ("Social Action")

In North America, there are myriad "philosophies, academic theories, community programmes and social movements" from which Bahá'ís draw insights as they endeavor to raise the capacity of young people in their communities. These philosophies, theories, and approaches are not all consistent with one another, neither are they entirely consistent with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Again, there is an analogous issue for all social justice educators, who need to use their judgment to sift through the large number of

theories about and approaches to social justice, not all of which are consistent with one another[5] and some of which may be implemented in ways inconsistent with the aim of social justice itself. The purpose of our paper, then, is to examine a few concepts that are central to the loose set of philosophies, theories, and approaches to social justice education that are prevalent in North America, and to determine areas of overlap and inconsistency with the evolving framework guiding Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors.

Approach

We first offer a very brief overview of some of the most prominent "philosophies, academic theories, community programmes and social movements" that link social justice and education. The aim here is to outline a general trend, not to exhaustively list approaches, let alone describe the subtleties of each approach. This is because our purpose in this paper is not to assess a particular theory or movement, or even a group of them, but rather to reflect on the general "ethos" of mainstream social justice education. We recognize, of course, that "social justice education" is not a monolithic enterprise but rather encompasses diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches—from Freirean critical pedagogy to antiracist education, from multicultural curricula to decolonizing movements. Our interest is in the broad assumptions and sensibilities that cut across these approaches, particularly as they manifest in North American educational settings.

Next, we situate social justice education within the context of a much broader long-term intellectual and moral movement we call the "modern struggle for justice," which gave rise to our modern sense of justice. This genealogical approach helps reveal the historical contingency of the assumptions of social justice education and opens room for alternative interpretations of its formative concepts.

The bulk of the remainder of the paper is then dedicated to an assessment of the general ethos of social justice education today. We analyze three themes that are central to the language invoked in the context of this discourse: (1) authority, freedom, and power; (2) equality and egalitarianism, and (3) identity. For each theme, we first explain why it has become salient, and then uncover some of the assumptions made about it in social justice education. The North American reader in particular will likely recognize these assumptions, as they saturate our public discourse and educational system. We selected these themes for this very reason, and because, even as they bring certain positive elements into education, they also tend to generate some confusion in educational thought and practice, leading to unintended negative consequences (some of which we ourselves have observed). In many cases, these negative

5 There are even uses of the term "social justice" that are meant to provoke contention or obfuscation, such as the derogatory term, "social justice warrior."

consequences actually work against the aims of social justice itself, generating a contradiction. Our argument, of course, is not (as some do argue) that we should abandon social justice education, but rather that, if we are serious about educating individuals who will promote justice, we should think more carefully about the origins of our core concepts and how we are to understand them and their practical implications.[6]

A thread running through all three themes is the idea that love—understood not as mere sentiment but as a transformative force—must complement and elevate our sense of justice if education is to serve its highest purposes. As we shall argue, the distortions that emerge in each thematic area can be traced, at least in part, to the modern tendency to separate love from justice, treating them as independent or even competing moral demands. We draw on the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's insight that justice requires what he calls a "logic of superabundance"—the logic of love—in order to fulfill its own aims (Ricoeur). This insight, we suggest, finds a profound expression in the Bahá'í teachings, which disclose that love and justice are not merely compatible but mutually necessary.

The selection of these themes was also informed by the authors' experience in the educational endeavors of the Bahá'í community, as well as our reading in the field of education. In both of these settings, the authors have worked closely with hundreds of adolescents and youth over the years who, alive to the injustices that surround them, are seeking, encountering, and testing frameworks of action and thought that might effectively address injustice. These experiences were gained in the context of weekly educational and service activities, as well as camp and seminar settings. Our assessment of the concepts associated with each theme draws on numerous sources, including the fields of philosophy of education, social justice theory, and history of education, as well as the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. While our focus is educational thought and practice, we often take up a wider perspective, since the ethos of social justice extends far beyond education.

Finally, the paper concludes by reviewing some elements of Baha'i-inspired educational processes and how they carry the potential to address the issues raised.

Social Justice and Education

The concern for social justice has, in a sense, been part of modern education from its beginnings. The drive to enhance access to education, especially among people who were previously denied it, may be the most basic manifestation of this concern. Early educational reformers in the United States were also concerned with how

6 Elements of this approach (and some of our analyses of specific concepts) are similar to those adopted by one of the authors in a recent publication. See, Ilya Zrudlo, *Navigating the Moral Landscape of Youth Development and Community Education*.

the content of education could advance social justice. The historian of education Herbert Kliebard, surveying the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, points to a loose group of reformers he calls the "social meliorists," which included the American educational theorist George Counts (1889–1974). The social meliorists drew attention to the potential of education to contribute to the work of restructuring society; as the title of Counts' famous book asks: "Dare the school build a new social order?" They felt that the education system could be oriented to empower students to combat a whole range of social ills, including poverty and other inequalities. Schools, they argued, should be democratic training grounds for vocal and active citizens. After World War II, and especially during the Civil Rights Movement era, educational efforts concerned with social justice were infused with, and invigorated by, the language of rights and empowerment. The 1960s Freedom Schools, meant to counter the educational segregation of African Americans, were among these new educational efforts.

Later in the twentieth century, the critical pedagogy movement, inspired by Paulo Freire and others, began to exert influence on education. Freire's analysis of the relationship between education and oppression—particularly his critique of the "banking" model of education, in which students are treated as passive receptacles of knowledge—was profoundly influential. His work spurred a greater focus on the oppressed and marginalized and the relationship between education and the broader social and economic structures of society. In terms of pedagogy, critical educators deemphasized the role of the teacher as a conveyor of knowledge, strove to equalize the relative statuses of student and teacher in the context of dialogue, and prioritized raising consciousness about injustices and inequalities. It is important to note that Freire himself understood dialogue as a demanding practice requiring both humility and a commitment to truth, not merely the elimination of the teacher's authority. His concept of "problem-posing education," (79) at its best, engaged teacher and student in a shared investigation of reality—an approach resonant of the spirit of consultation and collaborative inquiry that animates the educational endeavors of the Bahá'í community. Besides inspiring many grassroots movements, critical pedagogy also influenced the academic field of education. Today, there are whole departments and programs within faculties of education at universities that have a similar, critical orientation, such as the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

The influence of all these ideas on mainstream schooling has often been relatively limited, in part because there are other, competing forces affecting educational discourse and practice. Nonetheless, many educators, especially in the twenty-first century, have begun to absorb the kind of thinking and language associated with the social

meliorists and critical pedagogy. In recent years, especially since the global pandemic, certain social justice concerns—particularly eliminating racism and promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion—have become far more widespread in mainstream educational thought and practice in North America than they ever were before, although they have encountered strong backlash in some contexts.

There is much that Bahá'ís can learn from and appreciate about these ideas and efforts. For example, to the extent that approaches to education inspired by social justice theories and movements assist students to overcome self-centeredness or apathy and nurture in them a genuine and universal concern for the well-being of others, especially the marginalized, we can say that these approaches manage to strengthen certain dimensions of young people's sense of justice,[7] which is certainly an aim of Bahá'í-inspired education. Some programs can also help students understand how prejudice "permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness" (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010), a condition to which the Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the worldwide Bahá'í community, has drawn the attention of all those working to advance community-building efforts, including educational activities. This type of education is paramount in assisting young people to sharpen their perception in order to detect the more subtle operations of prejudices in society—an important capacity for someone aiming to contribute to the betterment of their community. Relatedly, social justice approaches to education often help students appreciate the extensive range of changes that need to be made if our world is to become more just. Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts should also yield a vision of the magnitude of social transformation ahead of us. Finally, educators such as bell hooks have shown how love and care can be placed at the center of pedagogical practice—an idea that also resonates with Bahá'í-inspired education. These examples suggest that, in many ways, Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors and social justice education look towards the same horizon—a more just and loving world.

The Modern Struggle for Justice and the Modern Sense of Justice

The process described above, in which mainstream education has been gradually infused with various concepts and values associated with social justice, can be situated within a much broader moral and intellectual movement, stretching back even before the

7 One example, which involves undergraduate students, is the Multi-Racial Unity Living Experience (MRULE) program at Michigan State University (see Gazel). Briefly, MRULE aims to facilitate intercultural understanding and friendship by involving students from different backgrounds in discussions and service projects.

emergence of modern schooling. For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to this broader movement as "the modern struggle for justice" and the ethos or sensibility associated with it as "the modern sense of justice." This historical view can help us better analyze the motivations behind the endeavor to promote social justice in education, as well as its key concepts and assumptions. It also helps us avoid extremes in our assessment: historical shortsightedness can lead us to either over-glorify or, conversely, to undersell this endeavor, depending on which of its aspects we have within our sights.

Justice is not an invention of modernity. In the pre-modern period, however, most people's sense of justice would not have been particularly offended by, say, a rigid social hierarchy with poor laborers at the bottom and the nobility on top, or even the practice of slavery. That individuals were unequal by nature—say, in "honor" or worth, with implications for the social order—was a widespread, almost unquestioned assumption. One of the forces that contributed to the erosion of the assumption of natural inequality was the gradual unfolding of the Christian notion of the equality of souls in the eyes of God. Philosopher Larry Siedentop, for example, traces the influence of monastic practices, church canon law, and theological debates on Western European thought and norms, gradually leading to the emergence of the ideas of natural rights, moral equality, and even representative government. The philosopher Charles Taylor explains this shift in terms of a gradual replacement of the notion of "honor"—a key concept of the social imaginary that sustained pre-modern social hierarchies—by the modern idea of "dignity" (Taylor, *Multiculturalism*). Where an individual's honor could be earned, bestowed, lost, or taken away, dignity was inherent, inalienable. While at first the concept of dignity was extended only to Christians, over subsequent centuries it inevitably came to encompass others. The Enlightenment thinkers carried this burgeoning sense of universal equality into a new key, using it to critique the authority of both clergy and absolute monarchies. Liberty and reason were recast as diametrically opposed to authority and tradition.

Thus, a relatively new set of convictions—about individual freedom, universal equality, and human dignity—emerged in the modern period, gradually giving a new impulse and direction to our sense of justice (Taylor, *Sources*). A modern mission eventually took shape to eliminate suffering, injustice, and grave inequalities. Concern for the conditions of workers, the abolition movement, efforts to advance the rights of women and children, and various revolutionary movements can all be considered part of this modern struggle for justice. Over time, the circle of those included within the scope of this mission was painstakingly expanded; it now encompasses all of humanity, at least at the level of reasonable public discourse. We might say, then, that in the modern period humanity is gradually developing an acute

sense of justice. For Bahá'ís, this is, in a sense, to be expected: the Bahá'í teachings explain that humankind as a whole is currently in a period of transition akin to adolescence (Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013), and the experience of the Bahá'í community suggests that adolescents, far from being naturally egocentric, are distinguished by their acute sense of justice. The entire range of contemporary theories and movements dedicated to social justice can, in this light, be seen as expressions of humanity's developing sense of justice.

A great deal of progress has been achieved thanks to this modern sense of justice—a great deal we would want to maintain, emphasize, strengthen, and so on. However, the question remains: is this modern sense of justice up to the task of building a more just world, a task to which we hope the graduates of our educational systems will dedicate themselves? Like all elements of modernity, the modern sense of justice is a mixed blessing; we must sift the gold from the dross (Taylor, *Sources*). Moreover, it is a premise of this journal that the Bahá'í teachings offer insight into reality—including, as we will attempt to show, into the concepts that give shape to a sense of justice that can empower individuals to contribute to the construction of a more just and mature civilization. Again, the suggestion is not to downplay what has already been achieved by the modern sense of justice. Rather, we argue, this sense of justice needs to be further developed, refined, and elevated in order to ready it for the work ahead. The three sections below, each focused on one salient theme, offer some analysis that may help us identify areas for this work of refinement. The themes we now examine—authority/freedom/power, equality, and identity—are each products of this modern struggle. They represent achievements of real moral progress: the critique of arbitrary authority, the quest for equality, and the demand for recognition of diverse identities have each contributed to a more just world. But they also carry assumptions shaped by the particular historical conditions of their emergence—assumptions that, when absorbed uncritically into educational practice, can generate confusions that undermine the very justice they seek.

Authority, Freedom, and Power

Our modern sense of justice, especially in the West, has been particularly sensitive to any limitations placed upon the individual, often perceived as an imposition upon their freedom and rights. Combined with our collective awareness of the defectiveness of our institutions—both historically and today—we have become inclined to radically distrust any and all authorities. Freedom is of course an important good, and its wanton and unjustified restriction by various authorities, past and present, is to be denounced. The Bahá'ís of Iran are unfortunately all too familiar with the indiscriminate use of authoritarian power to limit their educational and economic freedoms (see

Karlberg, “Constructive Resilience”). However, the modern struggle for justice has yielded a tendency to think of authority and power as at best necessary evils, which need constant and rigorous checks and balances, and of freedom, defined narrowly as being able to do what one likes, as a good always to be increased. These assumptions are widely held in society, and they influence education in particular ways that demonstrate their limitations.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt (“Crisis”) observed that this radical suspicion of authority could cause major problems in education. She saw that educators were becoming overly self-conscious about their authority and were inclined to relinquish it, or to share their power with their students, who were to govern themselves, the teacher only intervening if necessary. This contributed to widening the gulf between child and adult, relegating the former to their own world, somewhat cut off from the world of adults. Arendt pointed out that, although under this arrangement the student was to a degree emancipated from the authority of the teacher, they were now under a potentially far more dangerous authority: the tyranny of their peer group. While an authoritarian teacher was undesirable, the peer group could be even more tyrannical. She explained that the result was “either conformism or juvenile delinquency, and . . . frequently a mixture of both” (*Between Past and Future* 182).

There is a close connection, for Arendt, between authority and responsibility: if you have authority, you have the responsibility to, for example, make laws for the public good, while others have the responsibility to uphold them. The modern flight from authority has entailed a widespread relinquishing of responsibility in public life, both for making and following the law. However, Arendt felt that authority was a natural part of educational practice and could not be jettisoned:

> Children cannot throw off educational authority, as though they were in a position of oppression by an adult majority—though even this absurdity of treating children as an oppressed minority in need of liberation has actually been tried in modern educational practice. Authority has been discarded by the adults, and this can mean only one thing: that the adults refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children. (Arendt, *Between Past and Future* 190)

What Arendt helps us see is that the relinquishing of authority is not, as it may appear, an act of love or generosity toward students. Rather, it is the abdication of a responsibility rooted in care—the adult’s care for the child and for the world the child will inherit. True authority in education, then, is not the opposite of love but one of its expressions. A teacher who loves her students exercises authority precisely because she cares about their development and about the world they will help shape.

The influential American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey warned in 1938 that "progressive education" was leaning dangerously towards the other extreme in its reaction to the errors of so-called traditional education: "When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority" (21). We can see this distrust of authority in education in the moral sensibility that prompts some educators to insist that they are not teachers but merely "facilitators." The solution is not to reinstate the traditional form of authority in education, but rather, as Dewey suggests, to search for a more suitable conception of authority.[8]

Dewey also pointed out that "an educational philosophy which professes to be based on the idea of freedom may become as dogmatic as ever was the traditional education which is reacted against" (Dewey, *Experience* 22). Freedom is a notoriously slippery idea. The philosopher of education Louis Arnaud Reid distinguishes between three interrelated types of freedom relevant to education: freedom from external restraints, freedom of choice, and the freedom that comes from submission to certain kinds of discipline or authority. He argues that students should be given as much of the first kind of freedom as possible, so that they can be assisted to freely choose to submit to the authority of the spiritual and physical laws that govern the universe and the disciplines that investigate this order—the source of the third kind of freedom, arguably the true end of education. Acquiring the discipline of scientific thought, for example, develops the student's rational powers, freeing them to undertake systematic action. Learning to distinguish between one's lower and higher nature[9] and submitting oneself to the discipline demanded by the latter allows one to be free from the demands of one's passing whims and desires. A dogmatic concern for freedom is often insensitive to differences between these three forms of freedom and can mistake even knowledge itself as a

8 While Dewey is, rightly to an extent, seen as one of the progenitors of progressive education, by 1938 (if not earlier) he no longer wished to associate himself with that label, in part for philosophical reasons, but also because of what he was seeing on the ground in terms of the influence of progressive pedagogical thinking on the discourse and practices of teachers.

9 Here we are referring to a concept in the Bahá'í Writings described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the following: "In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature" (*Paris Talks* 18:2).

kind of oppressive authority imposed on students.[10] The focus on the first two kinds of freedoms obscures the need to foster in students receptivity to the truth, without which it is incredibly difficult to advance understanding.

The concept of power is likewise distorted or narrowed as a result of our modern distrust of it. This is eloquently discussed elsewhere,[11] but briefly, power is often reduced to domination, or political or economic power. Analyses of these forms of power carried out by social justice theorists and educators have been and can still be insightful, helping students see previously hidden injustices. We can learn a great deal from penetrating analyses of this kind. However, if this is all we understand by power, we lose sight of its other manifestations, such as mutual empowerment. The former conception of power, often associated with politics or economics, is also usually conceived in a zero-sum fashion, ignoring the existence of powers that do not diminish when exercised (for instance, the power of love). An effective and loving teacher does not have to "give up" her own power and distribute it among her students. Sharing her knowledge does not reduce it in any way, and leads to mutual empowerment, releasing the powers of her students. Our spiritual and intellectual powers are quite unlike economic or political power as typically understood. Education clearly requires an expanded conception of power—one animated by love, in which the exercise of power serves the growth and flourishing of all involved.

Radical distrust of power and authority may also manifest in education in the emphasis placed on developing in students what are often called critical thinking skills. Social justice education typically emphasizes the need for students to develop skills and capacities to keep their government and other powerful individuals and groups in check by, for example, scrutinizing legislation or the actions of companies for traces of the abuse of power. The idea is to directly transmit to students the same suspicion of power and authority that animates the modern struggle for justice, a suspicion that is viewed as central to being a good citizen. We should be careful here to distinguish between different forms of critical thinking. The capacity to think independently, to evaluate evidence, and to reason carefully about complex problems is indispensable to education and to the promotion of justice. This

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10 There are cases in which illusions or superstitions are labeled knowledge and imposed on students. For example, the idea that human nature is fundamentally self-interested passes as knowledge in much of economics. For a profound discussion of the idea of sources of knowledge in education, and their relationship to oppression and empowerment, see Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*, especially pp. 281–284).

11 See, Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*; Michael Karlberg, "The Power of Discourse and the Discourse of Power," *International Journal of Peace Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1.

same kind of thinking is upheld as a spiritual principle in the form of the independent investigation of truth in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith. What is problematic is a specific orientation that goes beyond these capacities—an orientation we might call a "hermeneutic of suspicion," in which the student is trained to assume that hidden power dynamics and malicious intentions underlie all social arrangements. While students should certainly avoid naïveté regarding the injustices and tyranny that saturate many of the structures and systems in our world today, it is doubtful whether fostering in them the attribute of suspicion will aid them in their efforts to promote justice or effect lasting transformation. The suspicious eye tends to project malicious intentions onto others; the suspicious mind constrains its imagination of what is possible by taking self-interest and power-based manipulation as inevitable.[12] This can crush the will to act. For our own part, if we are to become true champions of justice, the Bahá'í writings suggest, we should cleanse our own deeds "from craftiness and suspicion" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 138).

Scholars have also pointed out that emphasizing the acquisition of "context-free" critical thinking in education may inadvertently increase societal distrust of science, which is already dangerously waning (Latour). Again, a measure of distrust is not entirely unwarranted, particularly in light of abuses committed by scientific institutions, but it is all too easy for this attitude to encompass scientific investigation itself, which after all takes place within institutions. Some scholars have even noted the link between educational efforts promoting uncritical forms of skepticism and the general upsurge of interest in conspiracy theories (Burbules). Taken to its extreme, an ethos that vindicates generalized suspicion of power and authority opens the way for individuals and groups to imagine, impute, and accept conspiracy.

These are some of the educational problems that emerge when authority and power are seen as inherently oppressive and freedom as an unqualified good. These assumptions ultimately prevent educators and students from cultivating loving relationships of trust that allow students to develop the many powers they will need to create a more just society.

Equality and Egalitarianism

The modern sense of justice is characterized by a passion for equality which contributes to its distrust of authority. In general, this passion has led to many positive developments, including a growing sensitivity to the extremes of wealth and poverty, the identification of structural injustices that reflect and reproduce prejudicial treatment of identity groups, and the general sensitization of individuals to multifarious

12 Book 10 of the Ruhi Institute, *Building Vibrant Communities*, offer a number of insights about suspicion, and how it interferes with the process of accompanying one another on the path of service (sections 3, 17, and 18 of unit 1).

inequities. All of these are entirely welcome developments for Bahá'ís, given the centrality of the principles of the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, and the equality of the sexes to our vision of the civilization we are striving to build. However, the modern passion for equality can also have undesirable effects on educational processes. The concept of equality intersects with education in many different ways, given the many ways in which human beings might be argued to be, or to deserve to be, equal. These merit unpacking, since unexamined assumptions about what we mean by equality can contribute to some of the undesirable effects of the concept's application.

At a fundamental level, the idea that we are equal before the law (or equal in the sight of God, etc.) informs the way teachers should interact with students and how students should behave towards one another. We might say that an ethos of equality by which each individual has an equal right to be treated with dignity should pervade schooling. As already explained, this does not mean that teachers should abandon their responsibilities. In fact, in order to preserve the dignity of each student, and create an uplifting environment in their classrooms, teachers *need* to exercise their authority. If a student mistreats another, the teacher cannot stand idly by.

Another important facet of equality in the educational context is equality of opportunity. It is crucial that educational systems should give each child an equal chance to succeed. It is already well-recognized in educational theory and practice that, far from implying that each student should be treated in exactly the same way, equality of opportunity requires recognition of the reality that human beings are *not* equal in the sense of being identical. In this connection, certain structural forms of injustice in every society create patterns in which certain groups struggle more than others in schools. Teachers should be aware of these patterns and ensure that they do not inadvertently reproduce them. This often requires giving additional attention to some students, or to all students in ways that are new to the educational setting.

While some forms of inequality between students result from structural injustices that should be dismantled, others stem from the irreducible differences between human beings. Thus, even if structural injustices are mitigated or eliminated, not all students will excel in the same way. We should encourage all, equally, to strive for excellence, but this does not mean that *outcomes* will be equal or identical. Human beings have different talents and capacities.[13] In this connection, Martha

13 In this connection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states the following: "There is nevertheless a difference in the intrinsic or natal capacity of individuals. Ten children of the same age, with equal station of birth, taught in the same school, partaking of the same food, in all respects subject to the same environment, their interests equal and in common, will evidence separate and

Nussbaum has suggested that, rather than measuring justice solely in terms of equal outcomes or equal resources, justice requires ensuring that each person has the opportunity to develop and exercise their central human capabilities. This resonates with the emphasis in the Bahá'í Faith on building the capacity of every individual to contribute to the common good. Crucially, from a Bahá'í perspective, none can know the full extent of an individual's capacities save God—not even the individual themselves. An individual, therefore, should strive to do their best, improving day by day, as opposed to comparing themselves to others.

The idea of comparison brings into view what we might call the dark side of equality. The writer Alexis de Tocqueville described some of the dangers lurking in the passion for equality in the context of his famous study of American democracy in the mid-1800s. While valuing many of the positive developments brought about in America due to its commitment to equality, he noted that this passion for equality could become twisted and "depraved" (41), encouraging us to drag others down to our level rather than causing us to take inspiration by their advances. This "depraved taste for equality" makes it nearly impossible to take joy in the progress of others and can also cause us to shun high standards and excellence. Individuals whose passion for equality has become corrupted in this way respond to the envy or guilt associated with perceiving a comparative standard of perfection that is out of reach by seeking to debase the standard. Michael Sandel's analysis of meritocratic thinking further illuminates this dynamic: he shows how the modern rhetoric of "rising" and "succeeding" generates not only hubris among the successful but a corrosive resentment among those who feel left behind—a resentment that has become a powerful force in contemporary politics.

Striving for intellectual and spiritual excellence, which is at the heart of Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts, surely demands that we set certain standards before our eyes and work systematically to reach them. Not everyone will advance at the same pace in this regard, and therefore certain inequalities in attainment will persist. Those who do advance more quickly are presented with the challenge of avoiding a sense of superiority, which is *always* unwarranted and pernicious according to Bahá'í teachings. A strong sense of equality—grounded in the idea that we are all created from the same dust—helps prevent a sense of superiority from taking root. Those who advance more slowly, on the other hand, if gripped by ego and comparison, risk falling into jealousy and entitlement-based resentment justified by "equality."

It is worth spelling out more explicitly how and why feelings of resentment are particularly undesirable in the educational context, especially for the individual holding such feelings.

distinct degrees of capability and advancement" (*Promulgation* 85).

Educational theorists have pointed out that the false notion that everyone is equal in talent and capacity can distort young peoples' self-perception (Jonas and Yacek). Students inevitably recognize differences in attainment, and when they notice that some are more capable than they are in some respect, they may begin to feel alienation, jealousy, and resentment, instead of striving to learn from their friends. These feelings limit an individual's ability to strive for excellence. Feelings of resentment and entitlement fostered within educational settings may have broader societal consequences as well. They can, for example, be ruthlessly exploited by certain populists. There are many examples of politicians who do not genuinely care about the well-being of the many, but who nevertheless co-opt the language of equality to stoke anger and resentment towards "the establishment." They thus seize political power, but they also numb the aspiration for excellence among their supporters, instead reinforcing the consoling notion that they are just as good as everyone else. In the final analysis, resentment is "an enervating psychological state; it makes individuals weaker by channeling their psychological energy into bitterness, hostility and anger" (Jonas and Yacek 154).

Closely linked to resentment is the concept of "entitlement," which has itself become politically loaded. It seems to be used occasionally by the complacent rich as a way of critiquing the poor, who are perceived as lazy and feeling unjustifiably "entitled." Conversely, the rich are also thought of as feeling entitled, being used to having their will done without any obstacles hampering their efforts. The charge of entitlement has therefore become a kind of weapon used in political conflict. The truth is that one can feel entitled no matter how poor or wealthy one is. The Universal House of Justice explains that the "seductive messages" of materialism "fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest" (1 March 2017).

Thus, while teaching students about equality is a praiseworthy aim, we should be careful how we go about doing so. The emphasis in social justice education tends to be on the idea that everyone *is* equal and therefore deserves to *be* equal—to be treated equitably. Our individualistic culture, however, easily warps this superficially praiseworthy affirmation into a sense of entitlement—that *I*, deserving to be equal, should receive *my* fair share; that is, in a just world, I would always receive what I see others having. That we live in an unjust society founded on a host of inequalities means that we often do not receive our fair share, even if we are legitimately entitled to receive it. We cannot afford complacency in the face of injustice, yet we should be careful that education does not develop in individuals a sense of entitlement, or that, even worse, we become resentful of others. Saturated as we are in a culture of materialism, entitlement can generate jealousy, competition, and an insatiable thirst for more wealth and

attention *in order to* be equal to those we see as materially better off than us.

Another register in which the passion for equality is expressed relates to the relationships between individuals: it is the insistence on equal and reciprocal respect or fair treatment. We should respect and treat others fairly and they should do the same for us. While helping students appreciate the norm of reciprocity is certainly a praiseworthy aim, a subtle form of self-interest can cause us to interpret it in a conditional sense: "*If* I am treated fairly, *then* I will reciprocate." Someone who understands reciprocity conditionally might, at most, begin by treating others fairly, but if this treatment is not reciprocated, become resentful and pull out of the reciprocal agreement since the other party is not playing by the rules. Political theorists have described this as the "problem of assurance." It exacerbates the possibility of breakdowns in public reason and can precipitate "an escalation of antagonism and a cycle of confrontation" (Chan 98–99). Reciprocity by itself, then, is not necessarily enough.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests that, in order to protect reciprocity from degenerating into self-interested calculation, we need to have recourse to love, with its "logic of superabundance," to complement the logic of equivalence (equality) associated with reciprocity. Love helps us interpret the norm of reciprocity in the true spirit of justice, therefore promoting real cooperation and solidarity, and not the mere "equilibrium of rival interests" (36). Nel Noddings, working from a care ethics perspective, makes a complementary point: she argues that the relational ethic of care precedes and enables justice, since we must first be attentive to and concerned for the other before questions of fair distribution can even arise. The capacity to love allows us to transcend self-interest and continue treating others fairly even if we are not receiving fair treatment; it protects our hearts from the bitterness of resentment. Indeed, one of the premises from which Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts proceed is that the proper standard for ethical behavior is to *prefer others to ourselves*. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself" (*Tablets* 71). This exhortation is in some ways not intuitively egalitarian at all, but, if taken to heart, Bahá'ís believe it would create a far more just society. Preferring others to ourselves may be thought of as an expression of love's logic of "superabundance," going beyond equality. Love unlocks the powers of forbearance and forgiveness, and one of its highest expressions in this regard is the love of one's enemies. The preference of others before oneself, moving beyond reciprocity, helps orient those with means and social benefits to seek ways to willingly give of their own substance to others around them; to educate themselves about others to whom preference must be given; and to dedicate themselves to the service of others.

There is a tendency in contemporary society to think of love and justice as

placing incompatible demands on us. To retain clarity, Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts need to be able to articulate the coherence between these two important moral imperatives. Love and justice, in this view, are not competing forces but complementary dimensions of a single moral reality.

Identity

Marginalized groups and populations in many societies, moved by a passion for equality and the modern sense of justice, have often become involved in struggles aimed at achieving full recognition as true equals—a recognition that must respect specific identities. As a result, the concept of "identity" has come to play a central role in conversations within social justice education. While some progress has been made in the direction of the elimination of prejudice in this way, many of the strategies employed have fallen short of transforming the conditions that generate injustice in the first place.[14] This is in part because these movements sometimes, intentionally or inadvertently, affirm a notion of human identity that falls short of the recognition of the oneness of humanity, of key importance for Bahá'ís.

Before developing this argument, it is important to acknowledge why identity-based movements have been considered necessary and, in many respects, have been necessary. When one's identity is systematically denigrated, erased, or rendered invisible—as has been the case for countless groups throughout history—the assertion of that identity can be an act of resistance and an important step toward justice. Literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has described this as "strategic essentialism": the temporary adoption of a unified identity position for political purposes, even when one recognizes that the identity in question is more complex and contested than it appears.

However, the question for our purposes is not whether such assertions are understandable or justified in their historical context, but whether, as a long-term educational strategy, the reinforcement of separable group identities can ultimately deliver the transformation that justice demands.

Scholars have suggested that one historical source of this "limited" notion of human identity is the way in which racial, tribal, linguistic, and regional divisions in Western Europe were (re)constructed as separate, even antagonistic "communities of natural identity" (Greenfeld 113; Robinson 10;

14 Scholars explore this topic through various angles. Glen Coulthard, for example, argues that while the politics of recognition "may alter the intensity of some of the effects of colonial-capitalist exploitation and domination, it does little to address their generative structures, in this case a capitalist economy constituted by racial and gender hierarchies and the colonial state." He further writes that when there is too much focus on recognition of identities, "colonialism's deep-seated structural features" can remain unquestioned (35).

Topinka 7). This "artifactual carving up of human differences into distinct groups," each of which was assigned "innate and ontological characteristics," was often accompanied by a system in which these groups were "ranked hierarchically," leading to "othering, denigration, stigmatization and . . . vulnerability" (Gordon 310). Human differences were resolved into "separability" (da Silva).

Even if they are not ranked hierarchically, however, these distinct groupings of humanity, which generate distinct identities of a collective nature, can be problematic, depending on how they are conceptualized. Collective identities provide individuals who identify with them with "notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves" (Appiah 195). Today, many groups seek educational means to instill a collective identity into their members. This can be experienced as empowering, but if the collective identity in question is seen as "separable" from, or in competition with, other identities, we not only risk producing (or re-producing) conditions for subjugation, we also risk contributing to the conditions that call students to turn away from their interconnectedness with others (Stein et al. 2). Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality offers a partial corrective here, showing that identities are not discrete and separable categories but are constituted through their intersections. Her analysis reveals that treating identity groups as monolithic can obscure the experiences of those who sit at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Intersectionality is, in this light, a concept that challenges the notion of entirely separable identities from within the social justice tradition.

Kwame Anthony Appiah illustrates some of the risks of identity-based education with an educational thought experiment:

> For consider what might happen if we adopted a policy in which the public schools set out to teach children according to their identities and subcultures; that not only taught *about* collective identities but set out to reinforce and transmit them. If carried to its ultimate, this policy would require segregation into cultural and religious groups either within or between public schools, in ways that would be plainly unconstitutional in the United States since the *Brown* decision. For if we did have unsegregated classes teaching Jewish history, and African-American history, and Anglo history and Hispanic history and Chinese history in our schools, by what right would we forbid children from going to the "wrong" classes? Finally, too many of us have multiple identities—we would have to be in too many classrooms at once. (15)

What is needed, it seems, is an understanding of the profound connections that exist between unity and diversity. The Bahá'í teachings suggest

that diversity is a source of richness. The Bahá'í Faith "does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world." Rather, it "calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race" (Shoghi Effendi 41–42).

This "wider loyalty" need not lead, then, to the abandonment of our collective identities. The political scientist Shahrzad Sabet explains the value of these identities: "Shared identities, furthermore, bind us together in social and moral enterprises, providing a basis for community, collective action, and mutual support. At a more personal and subjective level, our particular experiences and perspectives constitute important parts of our self-concept as human beings: they legitimately yearn for recognition, inclusion, and expression."

It is only when these shared or collective identities end up drawing ontological lines of separation between groups that the principle of the oneness of humanity—so central to Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts—is threatened. The Universal House of Justice states the following regarding humanity's crisis of identity and the concept of oneness:

> Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of "us" and "them" define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists. Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity. In this perspective, the diversity that characterizes the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. (18 January 2019)

Focusing students' attention solely on what makes up their material identity, or encouraging a singular fixation on the traditions and models within their own culture, may risk closing them off from other standards of excellence, including moral exemplars from other cultures.[15] In other words, it can become increasingly difficult to relate to something or someone that is not associated with one's narrow identity-group. Furthermore, for Bahá'ís,

15 Bahá'ís will also note that this approach may limit the extent to which young people can relate to the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

this kind of narrow attention to contextually-bound material identities could also obscure the recognition of one's eternal, spiritual identity.

Human diversity, in the Bahá'í writings, is always placed in the broader context of our fundamental oneness, recognition of which is what allows a proper and full appreciation of our diversity. An unshakeable conviction in the oneness of humanity is ultimately what will empower students to love all the diverse peoples of the earth and collectively work towards the creation of a more just civilization.[16] This is not an abstract universalism that erases difference—the charge that critics of universalism often, and sometimes rightly, level against it. Rather, it is a vision in which the universal and the particular are understood to be mutually constitutive: it is precisely by embracing a genuine sense of shared humanity that the full richness of our diversity can be appreciated and protected.

The Bahá'í Community's Educational Processes

The experience of the Bahá'í community over the past few decades is a rich source of insight into the question of how to empower young people to overcome injustice. Like all communities, the Bahá'í community's efforts to translate its principles into practice remain a work in progress, shaped by many of the same currents described above. What it can offer, however, is a framework—rooted in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh—that addresses the confusions we have been examining. The Universal House of Justice states:

> It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans[17] seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized. (28 December 2010)

16 For a concrete and incisive exploration of how this dynamic might be considered in relation to the elimination of racial prejudice in America, we recommend a recent article by Paul Lample, "Exploring a Framework for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America" in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 35 no. 1-2 (also published as a book titled, *In Pursuit of a More Superb Mission*).

17 The global Bahá'í community coordinates its efforts to systematically learn about the application of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh to the betterment of the world through a shared framework for thought and action which evolves based on experience, is coordinated by a network of diverse institutions, and is shepherded by the Universal House of Justice—the community's governing head.

For Bahá'ís, the conviction that this process has the "potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another" is central to our understanding of the transformative power of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Realizing this potential, however, depends on the quality of effort that the worldwide community and its collaborators bring to it—and the Bahá'í community is the first to recognize that its practice has not yet caught up with the standard set by this vision. We invite the reader to consider how the themes we have examined in this paper can serve as a lens for understanding how this process addresses some of the confusions that can beset educational efforts aimed at justice.

Reconceiving authority

Central to this process is a reconceptualization of authority in the context of education. Those who serve as tutors in the Bahá'í community's study circles are called to be neither authority-free facilitators nor authoritarian dispensers of knowledge. Their authority is grounded in service and in a commitment to the spiritual and intellectual development of each participant—an authority rooted in love and experience walking the path of service. The tutor's role is to create an environment in which individuals "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" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010). The community's experience of living up to this standard is, naturally, still developing; but the framework itself calls for authority exercised as an expression of love, with the expectation that those entering the process may rapidly advance and even surpass the knowledge and experience of their tutors. At earlier stages of development, children and younger youth are encouraged by their educators in Bahá'í-inspired educational settings to grow in this direction. Bahá'ís draw inspiration from quotes that encourage them to see that "every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 72). Clearly, teacher and student are not "equal" in knowledge, neither do they stand in a unidirectional relationship where the teacher "fills" the students.

Navigating equality and excellence

The educational materials being used by the Bahá'í community avoid either of the extremes we have described: the levelling impulse that shuns excellence, and the meritocratic hubris that breeds resentment. All participants are treated with equal dignity and are equally encouraged to strive for excellence. The worldwide reach of these educational processes and the flow of insights among peoples from vastly different circumstances attest to the power of this approach, even as the community continues to learn how to realize this vision more fully in practice. The

standard toward which participants are encouraged to strive is not comparison with other individuals or groups but the unfoldment of one's own potential through service, oriented by the standards set by the teachings. This emphasis on striving for excellence without comparison to others, combined with the principle of preferring others to oneself, aims to create an environment in which equality and excellence can reinforce rather than undermine one another. Humble service, in this emerging pattern, helps each find joy in the accomplishments of others.

Approaching identity through spiritual oneness

Perhaps the most distinctive element that Bahá'í-inspired education brings to the broader conversation about social justice is its emphasis on the spiritual dimension of human identity. The educational materials used by the community invite participants to explore the idea that their true identity is spiritual; that every human being has been created noble; and that the very purpose of our lives is to nurture the development of the powers of our higher nature and to contribute to the building of a new civilization. That these ideas are being studied by people from all races, nationalities, religions, and castes, and that in the context of such conversations, participants are developing loving bonds of friendship as they strengthen their commitment to social change, is a development of profound significance.

At the level of methods and approaches, Bahá'ís are striving to avoid, on the one hand, cultural relativism, in which the conceptions, social structures, and practices of every culture are considered sacrosanct, and, on the other, any form of cultural imperialism, which would simply impose the idiosyncratic conceptions and practices of one culture onto another. Starting from the premise of our common spiritual identity, certain activities are carried out that respond to this identity, including efforts to spiritually educate young people. In this context, no one group should dictate to another who or what they are. Each is meant to draw from the knowledge systems of science and religion in order to gain insight into their true nature and the meaning of true prosperity for their community, and to engage in a learning process that aims to translate this evolving understanding into practice. Irrespective of race, gender, class, or religious background, all are seen as having the right and responsibility to contribute to this community-building process.

It is possible, naturally, for one to be wholeheartedly engaged in this process and still unintentionally undermine its efficacy or fail to realize its potential for eliminating injustice. As the Universal House of Justice mentions in its Riḍván 2010 message:

> 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.

This process, then, is not a kind of formula. Even though it aims at a more just society (among other things), it can be implemented by individuals and groups in a way that does not move us in this direction. It depends (again among other things) on a vision of personal and collective transformation, held by all those involved, which itself is continuously clarified and elaborated as experience is gained. Indeed, many of the very confusions we have described in this paper—the distrust of authority, the slide from equality into entitlement, the fragmentation of identity—can and do manifest within the Bahá'í community's activities, precisely because Bahá'ís are not immune to the broader moral and intellectual currents of the societies in which they live. The acknowledgement that Bahá'í-inspired educational processes are not perfect, but perfecting, is not a rhetorical concession but a recognition that the community is itself learning.

Conclusion

The radical distrust of authority and power can obscure the responsibilities of educators and the ways teachers can empower their students. If we transmit to students this same radical distrust of authority, we can foster in them suspicion, which can crush the will to act and may interfere with their ability to work for justice. Just as there are both legitimate and illegitimate expressions of authority, there are also different kinds of freedom, which the modern struggle for justice tends to elide. Finally, the narrow conception of power that animates this struggle sometimes leads to cynicism about social change, which likewise obscures possibilities.

Regarding equality and egalitarianism, while we should naturally reinforce efforts to establish equality between people and to, for example, eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty, we should be careful lest our passion for equality is distorted by our culture of individualism and materialism, letting it slide into entitlement and resentment. These attitudes can prevent us from drawing on each other's strengths to create an environment in which all can flourish. Finally, while equal (and not identical) treatment is certainly desirable, we should be wary of the self-interested interpretations of this norm; to spiritually educate young people, we need to emphasize the logic

of love, which motivates us to *prefer* others to ourselves.

If we are able to empower young people to prefer others before themselves and to acknowledge and honor the inherent connection that exists with others, we can begin to dissolve the barriers to acknowledging our oneness and our true spiritual identity. Rather than resolving uniqueness and difference into separation and affirming it as the focus of our material identity, education based on the oneness of humanity can help students to recognize that a focus on their spiritual identity holds the potential to reveal powers latent within them; powers that will allow them to work towards justice alongside a notion of difference and diversity that acknowledges humanity's inherent oneness.

Running through this analysis is an argument that love—far from being a merely private sentiment—is a force that can help resolve some of the confusions we have identified. Love provides a context for the constructive exercise of authority, the antidote to resentment in our pursuit of equality, and a force that draws diverse peoples into a genuine oneness. Without love, justice degenerates into suspicion, reciprocity into calculation, and diversity into fragmentation. With love, authority finds expression in service, equality becomes the aspiration for mutual flourishing, and identity becomes an expression of our interconnectedness. The coherence of love and justice is, we suggest, an insight that Bahá'í-inspired education can offer to strengthen the broader discourse on social justice—one that resonates with the deepest intuitions of educators like bell hooks and philosophers like Ricoeur—and one that deserves greater attention in educational thought and practice.

There are no doubt other dimensions of the modern struggle for justice, some of which we can benefit from and others of which we should be wary as we continue to learn about educational endeavors aimed at empowering young people to become champions of justice. To reiterate what was mentioned at the outset of the paper, there is no theory or movement in society that offers a shortcut to meaningful change. Thus, we need to constantly refine our ability to weigh prevalent approaches and ideas—and, for Bahá'ís, to weigh them in light of the teachings of the Faith.

Pursuing justice without falling into any of these traps is no easy feat. It requires a new kind of maturity, one that enlists the transformative power of love towards the ends of justice:

> Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social

systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity's age of maturity. (Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020)

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