What Is the Purpose of Youth Empowerment?

The Bahá'í community of Canada is a religious community dedicated to promoting the betterment of society. Working with thousands of youth of all ages and backgrounds to develop their talents and capacities is a central feature of our contribution to this aim. Our experience is yielding insights into the process of youth empowerment, and this paper represents an initial effort to discuss some of these insights as a contribution to the broader discourse on the role of youth in society.

Introduction

This paper is an initial attempt to distill insights from the Bahá'í community's experience working with youth and to introduce these insights into a broader policy discourse on youth empowerment. In Canada, our community is working regularly with several thousand children and youth from diverse religious, racial and class backgrounds in community programs that seek to promote their intellectual and spiritual development. In this paper, we reflect on fundamental concepts and assumptions that underlie the youth empowerment efforts of the Bahá'í community. We then explore how these insights can inform the public discourse on youth empowerment, particularly as they relate to the development of policy. The views shared here are preliminary and a product of initial critical reflection rather than scholarly research.

The Bahá'í Faith is a world religion the aim of which is the advancement of spiritual and material civilization. Its central message is that all religions share a common divine source and that humanity is one human family. The Bahá'í community strives to apply its teachings to promote the betterment of society.

The Bahá'í Community of Canada
La communauté bahá'íe du Canada

The role of youth in social transformation

The Bahá'í teachings describe the period of youth as "the choicest time of life," which is characterized by preparation for a future of active service to humanity. During this period, a young person's mind is most active in searching for truth, and important values that will guide the person's future behaviour are assumed. The qualities that characterize this period, such as adaptability, vitality, and enthusiasm, equip youth to act for the betterment of society. Indeed, the extent to which youth are prepared to work for the common good bears directly on future social progress. This view of youth contrasts with a more prevalent perspective that they are a static demographic that requires entertainment and pacification. Youth is not simply a social category; it is phase of life through which everyone passes, presenting unique opportunities for the individual to contribute to social transformation.

We view the process of social transformation as associated with the inter-related efforts of three protagonists: the individual, the community, and the institutions of society. The advancement of each is connected with the others. Youth are frequently viewed as opposed to the society in which they are raised, and the institutions that serve them. Describing youth simply in terms of their material habits as consumers of goods and services, or as a frivolous population in search of the latest source of entertainment, reflects more directly on the character of the society around them than on their own true nature. Youth are subjected to powerful social forces that threaten to rob them of their potential to contribute to the advancement of their communities. Indeed, the low expectations set for youth frequently become self-fulfilling prophecies.

In our experience, however, young people are also motivated by deeper interests. They often long to play a meaningful role in society, and to make a contribution to the world around them. They have a thirst for knowledge, a desire for true friendship, and an attraction to beauty. These sources of motivation are often untapped by youth-serving agencies, which frequently appeal to more transitory motivations. Our experience suggests that when young people experience the joy of friendship, collective learning, and service to others, their commitment to processes of social change is strengthened. Youth are not

"problems" that need to be solved. They are trustees of the community and its institutions; in the future, they will assume responsibility for the affairs of society, and should therefore be regarded a group that deserves special care and attention.

Conceptualizing the role of religion in society

At the outset of this discussion we feel it is important to be explicit about our use of certain terms and concepts that are central to our analysis, the first of which is religion. We describe religion as a system of knowledge and practice, a definition that is not intended to be exhaustive, but which gives us insight into the relationship between religion, science and society. Religion provides insight into spiritual and social reality, and overlaps with a second, complementary system of knowledge and practice, known as science — which has its own methods and instruments for generating knowledge.

Religion can play a complementary role to science by clarifying underlying assumptions about human nature, human purpose, and social development. The teachings and experiences of religious communities shed light on contemporary challenges; their insights develop in conversation with others, and as they try to apply them in practice.

This approach to knowledge is reflected in our work with youth. We believe that we need to consider the role of religion in the moral empowerment of young people beyond traditional conceptions of rigid doctrinal instruction or watered-down character education. In doing so, we seek to bring insights from religion to bear on the education and empowerment of young people, so that they can advance intellectually, spiritually, socially and economically. The educational task of religion is seen not as initiating youth into a particular denomination, but as empowering them to contribute to the advancement of society.

Elements of a conceptual framework for youth empowerment

Efforts of the Bahá'í community to contribute to the empowerment of young people are guided by an evolving conceptual framework that views youth not as

mere recipients of services, but as protagonists of change in their own right — with the capacity to make a vital contribution to the fortunes of humanity. Our understanding of human nature and human purpose is central to our conceptual framework and imbue our actions to promote youth empowerment.

Human nature and purpose

According to the Bahá'í Writings, human beings are created noble, with the latent capacity to reflect spiritual qualities and attributes. As social beings, this latent capacity is developed through interactions with other people. This perspective leads us to articulate a two-fold human purpose: 1) to nurture one's own spiritual and intellectual growth, and 2) to contribute to the progress of society. Service to others unites these two dimensions of human purpose. We develop qualities, attitudes and skills through active, selfless service to others. Indeed, spiritual development requires action, for it is only through striving to enact qualities such as patience, trustworthiness, honour, and love that we are able to truly understand them.

This understanding of human nature and human purpose informs our efforts to contribute to the empowerment of young people. When we speak of empowerment, we mean something more than individual initiative or leadership. We understand empowerment to be related to a process of learning about oneself and one's ability to contribute to society. It relates to developing a sense of moral purpose. Gaining knowledge of one's true nature and innate capacities leads to the empowerment of the individual.

To release the potential latent in young people, a number of capacities must be developed in them to withstand the social forces that would disperse their thoughts and actions away from their noble purpose. While a full discussion of these capacities is beyond the scope of this paper, we introduce here three aims of Bahá'í-inspired youth empowerment programs: 1) developing spiritual perception; 2) enhancing the power of expression; and 3) building a sound moral structure. We have found through experience that nurturing these capacities empowers youth to develop as individuals and to contribute to the advancement of their communities.

Power of expression

While the idea that self-expression is integral to empowerment is not new, it is relevant to reflect more deeply on the development of language, and the purpose and content of expression. The following story about a young woman in a Toronto neighbourhood highlights the importance of the power of expression to the assumption of responsibility for one's own decisions and actions:

We were in the park after the group and one of the girls mentioned that Latoya, who is in Grade 6, has a "boyfriend." Latoya seemed embarrassed about this when it was brought up and I asked her if it was important to her to have a boyfriend. She said that she never used to want to have one, but that her friends had told her she had to have one, so she started "going out" with a boy in her class named David, who she used to be friends with, because he is funny and they are both on the track team in school. I asked, what is the difference between being friends with David, and "going out" with him? She said, "You know, there isn't really a difference, but from all of the movies and TV shows it tells us that there is supposed to be, 'cause you can't just be friends with a boy, you have to be his girlfriend if you like each other."

She then went on to say that one thing that bothered her is that she used to have a lot of friends who were boys, but now her boyfriend has told her that she can't have any friends who are boys, and in response she has said that he can't have any friends who are girls. I asked, why does this bother you? She struggled to articulate why, and eventually just shrugged and said she didn't know.

I suggested that maybe it was difficult to answer because that idea didn't fit in with the kind of friendship we were trying to learn about. We reflected on the quote we had read that day about friendship: "Let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path." How could we be friends with everyone who crossed our path of we excluded everyone who happened to be a boy? She said, "No, we wouldn't be able to be friends with everyone like we are supposed to be." Then we thought about our youth group —

> would we be able to learn together to serve the community if we weren't a group of friends? Latoya thought about this for a little while and then said, "I'm going to tell David that it's important for us to be friends with everyone, boys and girls, because otherwise we'll never improve our community."

This account illustrates two dimensions of the power of expression that become apparent from our experience. Often youth have important ideas and thoughts about what they see around them, but either struggle to articulate what they feel, or do not find receptive environments in which to explore their doubts and questions about what is perceived as normal. In this case, the young woman questions a model of exclusive and dominance-based relationships between men and women that is inculcated at an early age, but when she falters to express what is at the root of her discomfort, she feels compelled to conform to the pressure of her peers and the model being propagated in the media.

Second, it is through insights from religious teachings that light is shed on the dilemma that the young woman is facing. By reframing the concepts of "friendship" and "relationship" within the context of expressing loving-kindness for all, this young woman feels confident to redefine the way that relationships are being conducted in society and among her friends. Spiritual insights from religion can infuse power into human speech and endow the mind with understanding — which in turn empower young people to contribute to the transformation of their communities.

<u>Developing spiritual perception</u>

When introducing the concept of spiritual perception, we have found that it is not uncommon for youth to be initially uncertain about what this term means. In a world bombarded by images and sound bites, perception is often defined by what is tangible — that which we can touch, taste, hear or see. However, to read one's social reality, we are challenged to look beyond our physical and material reality, and to examine those spiritual dimensions of justice, truthfulness, love and trustworthiness that are vital to the kind of communities we hope to build.

In one experience, a group of youth acknowledged that they didn't understand what spiritual perception meant, and were even confused by the word spiritual. An older youth asked one of them to think about someone she admired, and she named a good friend. "What is it that you admire about her?" he asked. She mentioned that the friend was always kind to everyone, and that she could trust her to keep her word. He asked how she knew this, was it that the young woman had the word "kindness" written on her forehead? "No!" she replied, and she said it could be seen in the way she related to others, through her words and actions. "You are in fact using spiritual perception," the older youth told her, "because it takes your inner eye to recognize spiritual qualities that you and others possess." For a group of youth to consider the qualities and attitudes that must come to characterize their own actions as well as those of their community as a whole, it is necessary to be able to perceive these characteristics, in order to express and enact them.

While it is common to refer to such qualities as aspects of "character," "virtues," or features of one's "personality," the concept of spiritual perception allows us to understand that these qualities are actually part of a spiritual reality that penetrates our individual and collective lives. They are qualities we seek to cultivate within ourselves, and within our communities. The qualities of love, justice, and generosity are part of our reality, and youth need to acquire a language and "inner sight" in order to comprehend, analyze and develop them. As this ability to perceive spiritual reality develops, the labels we acquire from prevailing discourses (e.g. about "troubled neighbourhoods" or "bad apples") are replaced by other language that reflects the true reality and potential of an individual or place.

Building a sound moral structure

Closely related to the power of expression is the moral structure that governs one's thoughts and behaviour. In making moral choices in the range of environments in which youth find themselves, they need more than a set of rules. Moral structures have to be built over time, to connect spiritual concepts, patterns of behavior, and the knowledge of consequences, motivated by a strong social purpose.

Young people often find themselves in new environments and experiences, where they are left to determine their own course of action, using their own moral reasoning without guidance from parents or mentors. In these situations, young people need to be able to recognize the moral issues underlying what they say and do, and to examine the consequences of their decisions before deciding on a course of action. Thus, it is apparent that young people need more than a list of "rights and wrongs" to guide their action; they need a moral framework that helps them decide upon the right course of action in different contexts.

An example can be seen in how one youth responded to a group of her peers who commonly used the phrase "YOLO" — standing for "you only live once" — to justify compromising certain beliefs and values for the pleasure of the experience. After thinking deeply about the kinds of attitudes she saw underlying these statements, she responded on Facebook that to her, YOLO doesn't give her permission to do things or act in ways that go against what she believes in. Rather, when she thinks that "she only lives once," it makes her realize that she only has one life in which to grow up to become who she wants to be, and to make a difference in the lives of others, and that this chance should not be wasted.

These reflections and anecdotes present a brief description of certain concepts that are central to our community's efforts to contribute to the empowerment of youth. At this early stage in our experience, we are already witnessing the great capacity that young people have to contribute to the spiritual and material transformation of their communities.

Reading the discourse on youth empowerment

We live in a time when there is widespread anxiety about the future of youth in society. In part, this is a perennial concern in any society. Since the time of youth is also frequently one of self-exploration, the pursuit of ideals, and questioning the status quo, younger generations can appear to be recklessly venturing outside the safety of the social and economic structures carefully maintained by adults. During a time of high unemployment, unparalleled consumerism, and rapid social change, these familiar concerns are intensified.

This anxiety about youth is readily apparent in policies that guide government-led efforts to meet the unique needs of young people. In 2008, the Toronto United Way conducted an analysis of youth policies across Canada, with the aim of making sense of very different theoretical approaches to working with youth. In the report's introduction, the authors express concern over "the growth of an increasingly complex and fragmented youth sector characterized by incoherence in services, policies, and funding sources."[1] The divergent theories of youth empowerment offer us a perspective on how our society views the empowerment of young people. By looking at some of the main approaches adopted by youth-serving agencies, we can also reflect on their helpful contributions, their limitations, and how elements of the framework described above can help advance a more coherent and integrated understanding of the role of youth in society.

Youth engagement approach

The first theoretical approach is characterized as the "youth engagement approach," which identifies empowerment with access to decision-making processes. It suggests that youth should be involved in the design and implementation of programs affecting them, thereby "sharing power" with adults. This is especially important, according to this approach, with regard to racialized, newcomer, disabled, or otherwise marginalized youth whose views may not be well known to those designing policies to assist them. We can also see this approach in policy documents that ascribe the causes of gun violence to the failure of youth programs to reach the most vulnerable, and identify a need to engage these youth in "leadership development programs."

While we recognize that the participation of youth in the life of society is essential, their role in decision-making processes cannot solely be a matter of giving them "access to power." To contribute effectively to decision-making processes, youth need to develop the capacity to read their social reality and perceive the operation of various constructive and destructive forces within a

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[1] Toronto United Way. 2008. "Youth Policy: What Works and What Doesn't?, A Review of Youth Policy Models From Canada and Other Jurisdictions,"
http://www.unitedwaytoronto.com/downloads/whatWeDo/reports/YouthPolicy-WhatWorks-fullreport.pdf

given social space. Thus, when considering youth engagement, we are not only concerned with promoting the participation of youth in decision-making processes, but also with simultaneously helping them to develop moral and intellectual abilities that enable them to analyze, plan, act and reflect on the advancement of their communities.

Population health approach

A second theoretical framework is the "population health approach," which emphasizes the need to address the social determinants of health — namely, the adverse and long-lasting health effects of social and economic inequalities on youth. The premise of this approach is that the health disparities caused by poverty can be offset by early intervention with youth through social supports. Whereas the first approach emphasizes participation, this one stresses the achievement of positive health outcomes.

This approach draws our attention to the physical effects of material deprivation and inequality, and the importance of addressing the basic needs of youth through social programs. However, it tends to limit the requirements of this population to a set of basic needs that can be met through intervention. If we view youth as a population that has the capacity to identify its own needs and aspirations and to work toward their achievement, then we would need to give credence to and opportunity for them to formulate and articulate their true potential. Such an approach would perceive the intimate relationship between a community's vitality and a strong sense of purpose that connects a young person's personal (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) development with the promotion of the well-being of others.

Risk-prevention approach

A third theoretical approach is the "risk-prevention" approach. The premise behind this approach is that marginalized youth are more susceptible to the dangers and threats presented by drugs, alcohol, crime, violent gangs, and other "risks." Through an emphasis on building up resilience in young people and their families, the risk-prevention approach aims to mitigate the effect of these risk factors on the youth population. This approach is also related to the emerging

discourse around self-regulation, which emphasizes individuals' ability to exert control over their lower impulses, and assists youth to manage or cope with adversity and stress.

The risk-prevention approach highlights the many destructive forces acting upon youth, and the importance of building capacity among young people to reflect critically and constructively on social forces. While this approach emphasizes constructive ideas about resilience and self-regulation, it focuses on helping youth to transcend their social condition without assisting them to transform it. This approach recognizes that young people have the capacity to discern the nature of the social forces operating on them and to evaluate them critically, yet stops short of stating that they have the capacity to transform those social forces. Instead of insulating youth from society or seeking a way to avoid destructive forces, we can help young people to take responsibility for their own advancement and the advancement of their communities by aiding them to develop the cognitive tools to make sound decisions. To this end, the capacity for managing risks, reducing self-harming behaviour, and regulating emotional responses are enhanced by an ability to evaluate one's situation and apply relevant moral and ethical principles in one's individual and collective life.

Asset-based approach

The final theoretical approach employed in the formulation of youth policies is the "asset-based approach," which emphasizes the strengths of youth and their position and role in society. This approach is distinct from the others insofar as it suggests that youth are not a "problem" waiting for a "solution." In the words of "Stepping Up" — the youth policy framework adopted by the government of Ontario — "The social, emotional, physical and cognitive competencies, along with the individual "self" or "spirit" that young people develop during the stages of adolescence and early adulthood prepare them for future wellbeing. We need to nurture these assets to ensure our collective success in the future."[2] This approach typically views youth in the context of community change and sees their development as a reciprocal relationship.

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[2] Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services. 2013. "Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed," see: http://www.children.gov.on.ca/.

In society at large, the period of youth is often portrayed as a time of rebelliousness and frivolity. It is assumed that very little can be expected from young people since "teenagers" are incapable of shouldering meaningful responsibilities. The asset-based approach helpfully rejects this inaccurate and debilitating paradigm. However, we need to complement a view of youth "assets" with an understanding of human nature and purpose that is fundamentally noble in character. Every young person has latent potential for meaningful contribution, which may not appear to others within a defined set of "assets." Our ability to see in youth the capacity to manifest attributes of their spiritual nature, such as kindness, patience and trustworthiness, developed through conscious reflection and service to others, widens the type of contributions to society we can expect from the younger generation. Especially when they are in safe environments characterized by friendship and mutual support, young people discover and develop new capacities that may otherwise have been hidden from view.

Closing reflections on human nature, human purpose and youth empowerment

In reflecting on the theoretical perspectives considered above, a spectrum of approaches to youth empowerment becomes apparent, each animated by a different conception of the role of youth in society. At one end of this spectrum, we see a perception of young people primarily as recipients of goods and services. These might include material assistance, programs that detach them from their social environment, or technical training that provides a way out of poverty. Moving along that spectrum, we witness a more active view of youth as participants in a process of change, in which they are engaged in decision-making, and are seen as resources and assets to their communities. Even further along this spectrum, we witness a perspective of young people as protagonists of transformation, in which their capacity is developed in the field of action and service — where they are innovators of new community dynamics and systems, and contribute moral leadership in the advancement of society.

We recognize that youth are diverse in terms of their circumstances and opportunities to act as protagonists in their own transformation and that of their communities, and agree that programs that address basic needs are valuable for

a wide range of beneficiaries. Indeed, developing technical skills, fostering resilience in adverse conditions, and ensuring that one's own basic human needs are adequately met are essential and praiseworthy aspirations. However, divorced from a broader vision of the contribution that young people can make to society, the results of empowerment efforts will remain limited. In this regard, we all have a great deal to learn.

The Bahá'í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá'í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

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