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# Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program: Toward a Critical Framework of Community Peacebuilding; Individual and Community Transformation Through Service and Discourse

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**JUNIOR YOUTH SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM:  
TOWARD A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK OF COMMUNITY  
PEACEBUILDING;  
INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION THROUGH  
SERVICE AND DISCOURSE**

**Benjamin Valentine Leiker**

**PIM 68**

**A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Conflict Transformation at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.**

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**Advisor: Dr. John Ungerleider**

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Authors Signature \_\_\_\_\_

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**Figure 2** on page 39: *Diamond of Structuration of Unity and Empowerment; Mutually Constitutive Relationships that Manifest Individual and Collective Potential*

(Influenced by Galtung's Triangle of Violence and Jabri's (1996) mutuality constitutive relationships between individual agency, social structures, and discursive practices)

## List of Abbreviations

### Resources:

IAV: Institute for American Values

UJH: Universal House of Justice

RI: Ruhi Institute

U1: Unit 1

U2: Unit 2

U3: Unit 3

### Acronyms:

JYSEP: Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

MCBI: Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute

JYG: Junior Youth Group

JY: Junior Youth (youth ages 11-15)

## ABSTRACT

In the form of a case study of the training and implementation of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP) by the Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute (MCBI), this study contributes to the development of critical youth empowerment which emphasizes community building and sociopolitical transformation rooted in a worldview that recognizes the oneness of humanity. The underlying philosophy upon which the JYSEP organizes its structure, action, reflection, and materials is the idea that our view of reality, human nature, human relationships, and purpose of life shape mold individuals' and humanity's state of being. This study, therefore, sought to explore: 1) how conceptions of human nature and the capacity of 11 to 15 year olds impact the structure and implementation of a junior youth empowerment program, 2) how developing a culture of learning based in individual and collective acts of service contributes to an evolving process of community building, and 3) how an understanding of the interconnecting relationships of individual action, social discourse, and social structures may give rise, through the JYSEP, to an action-based process aiming to systematize a framework of learning, unifying discourse processes, and social spaces that create, legitimate, and perpetuate the forces of unity, justice and collective advancement.

Through the lenses of the content and pedagogy of the JYSEP training and education materials, models of experiential- and service-learning, Jabri's critical analysis and structuration theory, and insights from other youth empowerment researchers and practitioners, this study had significant findings for not only youth empowerment programs but for all those engaging in efforts to transform society as well. What this study offers, therefore, through an ontological inquiry and epistemological analysis is one example of how the implications of the conception of the nobility of human nature, the real possibility of the unity of humanity, and the insight into the inherent and necessary capacities that youth possess for the advancement of the human family - dynamic and regenerative capacities to overcome the individualistic, unjust, materialistic, and divisive forces of society - shape a unique grassroots framework of service and learning for collective conflict transformation and social change.

## **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, many youth development approaches have gradually moved from preventative efforts to contain or rehabilitate “at-risk” youth toward capacity building, community participation, and, more recently, youth empowerment (Jennings, 2006). Empowerment has been characterized by some as consisting of a ladder with two endpoints, focusing on the changing of the individual and the community (Rocha, 1997). But in this “bipolar continuum” there are key aspects of empowerment that are missing and thus it fails to address the interconnection between individual and community. Jennings (2006) suggests that several missing dimensions include the underpinning philosophies and visions of the programs, conceptualizations of power and sociopolitical dynamics, and the actions taken by collective groups to respond critically to the needs of the community. This paper will contribute to the inclusion of these dimensions by furthering the discussion of empowerment as a critical process which focuses on the interconnection of individual and collective capacity building for social change.

Much of the evolution in empowerment research has come through both theoretical and practical insights which are tied closely to understandings of the complexity and interwoven nature of the many levels of social reality - specifically the underlying interrelations between adults and youth, individual and collective empowerment, and sociopolitical structures and processes. In this context, empowerment has been defined as a “multi-level construct consisting of practical approaches and applications, social action processes, and individual and collective outcomes” (Jennings, 2006). When individuals, families, organizations, and communities are gaining “control and mastery of their lives, in order to improve equity and quality of life”, a social action process of empowerment is attained (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000; Jennings, 2006). In moving towards a critical social empowerment, Ray (1992) and Jennings (2006) have



conceptualized it as involving “multi-level processes through which individuals and communities become emancipated from conscious or unconscious constraints and engage in negotiated actions to build community life” (p. 46). Included in these processes, is “critical reflection, reflective action, and social change at individual and collective levels” which enable youth to analyze and respond to the sociopolitical processes, values and practices that “underpin and create community problems” so that they can “determine how to live productively within those social spaces, or better yet, how to change them for the benefit of all” (p. 50) thereby becoming agents for altering the status quo (Jennings et al., 1996, Freire, 1970). The relationships between individuals, both youth and adults, institutions and community then begin an action-reflection process of ongoing assessment, action, and change. Empowerment, therefore, is not directed solely at the level of the individual because the individual is only empowered to the extent that the environment and social structures enable the development of capacities to create change towards more just, unified, and equal values, processes, and structures.

To further contribute to the development of youth empowerment at its multifarious levels, this paper explores an emerging conceptual framework for critical community-based empowerment for peacebuilding in the example of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP). The Program provides a lens for this exploration and conceptualization of youth empowerment and key ontological and epistemological themes relevant to conflict transformation, community-building, and social change. The JYSEP is implemented on a global scale in nearly every country by regional training institutes to empower junior youth (ages 11-15) to navigate this crucial stage of their lives. They take charge of their existence by channeling their emerging capacities and energies towards the service of their communities and developing skills that will characterize their adult lives as builders of unity and champions of justice.

The program is an inseparable part of the nascent stages of an evolving, cohesive, systematic educational process to train, empower, and build capacity for individuals of all ages to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute (MCBI), a non-profit organization located in West Palm Beach, Florida is responsible for coordinating the empowerment of all age ranges in these community building efforts in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Offering reading circles and spiritual education classes for children, parenting courses, study circles for adults, and the JYSEP provides training and practice opportunities for every community member to develop as a new social actor directing their energies towards the promoting of the well-being of their own community.

MCBI trains mentors (animators)<sup>i</sup> to establish empowerment groups of 10 or more junior youth (JY) in receptive neighborhoods. Meeting at least once a week and establishing mutual friendships, the animators assist the JY in planning, implementing and reflecting upon their own service projects and studying materials which help them develop a moral framework for decision-making, abilities to express their ideas, and develop necessary qualities to effectively face the forces of society and effectively participate in the affairs of their community. In this emancipatory environment, the JYs are able to freely ask questions, seek answers about the world, and share their challenges and concerns amidst a group of peers.

The JYSEP, while paralleling elements of critical youth empowerment (Jennings et al. 2005), also offers unique and practical insights into potential implications and applications of assumptions about human nature, the potential of youth, and the oneness of humanity as a principle

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<sup>i</sup> The term animator is used to convey the role and function of the older person who seeks to be a true friend, wise advisor, and mentor for the junior youth. An animator is someone who seeks to build a respectful and loving relationship with them and believes strongly in their capacity and integrity. They see the fire of capacity and energy in the youth and serve to fan the flame so the junior youth group develops in their development and service.

of social and material organization. Within this context, the framework seeks to develop critical thinking and reflection for understanding of the causes of conflict and processes that may reshape those causes for the purpose of collective advancement and a transformation of the human condition. Three overarching discussions precipitate from this objective and create the sections of this paper. These discussions will be based in the framework of the evolving model of the JYSEP:

Firstly, the pervasive effect of unexamined assumptions in shaping the perceptions, structure, and actions of our efforts to impact our reality requires analysis - epistemological and ontological in nature - to better understand the world we have created, our relationship with it, and, thus, to inform our ongoing efforts to change it. This first discussion, therefore, seeks - through the example of the JYSEP and current research and thought about youth empowerment - to assess how assumptions about human nature, spirituality, the principle of the oneness of humanity, as well as the capacity and character of junior youth (JY) and youth may impact efforts in social transformation. The nature of these insights emphasizes the importance of processes learning and service which ensure a continual examination of assumptions about ourselves, our youth, and reality in the context of action and discourse for collective advancement. As these assumptions are better understood, it becomes increasingly clear what kinds of structures, discourses, processes, values, skills, and norms will contribute to conflict transformation, community building, and the creation of a unified and just environment conducive to the expression of true human capacities in shared action.

Secondly, out of this conversation stems an exploration into the significance of developing a culture of learning through service. Developing this culture involves setting processes in motion that both: 1) evolve through study, experience, reflection, and consultation, and 2) harmonize individual/collective transformation and discursive practices for the advancement of a neighborhood in its community life, discursive practices, and collective action. Experiential learning, service-learning,

and critical social praxis as conceptualized by Kolb (1975), Sigmon (1994), and Freire (1970) respectively, and contemporary empowerment efforts shed light on interrelated dimensions of meaningful participation, equitable power-sharing, dialogue, critical reflection, and learning through action in social change.

Lastly, is an analysis - utilizing structuration theory from Vivienne Jabri (1996) - of how insight gained from an understanding of the interconnection of individual action, social discourse, and social structures may give rise, through the JYSEP, to a process that builds: human resources; collaborative relationships; inclusive and just discourses, identities, and social structures; and a moral framework for action and learning. These key elements contribute to the purpose of reproducing evolving social dynamics conducive to the advancement of neighborhoods.

Due to the limited scope of this paper and the complex nature of true and lasting social transformation, the aim is not to seek a comprehensive outline for an ontological conception of human nature and adolescence, the full significance and impact of service, a complete philosophical pedagogy of social emancipation and transformation, or the intricacies of the dynamics which create and perpetuate social systems. Rather, it is hoped that this paper may contribute to ongoing discourses concerning some of the many factors of the nature of social transformation, community building, and global prosperity as gleaned through the framework and evolving implementation of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program.

[ Descriptions to familiarize the reader with the basic structure, vision, action and terminology of the JYSEP is found in Appendices A, B and C. For ease of understanding, the reader is strongly encouraged to become familiar with these documents first.]

# 1 Conceptualizing Human Nature and the Capacity of Junior Youth: Shaping the Structure and Action of Critical Spiritual Empowerment

Little by little, wean yourself.  
This is the gist of what I have to say.

From an embryo, whose nourishment comes in the blood,  
move to an infant drinking milk,  
to a child on solid food,  
to a searcher after wisdom,  
to a hunter for more invisible game.

Think how it is to have a conversation with an embryo.  
You might say, 'The world outside is vast and intricate.  
There are wheatfields and mountain passes,  
and orchards in bloom.

At night there are millions of galaxies, and in sunlight  
the beauty of friends dancing at a wedding.'  
You ask the embryo why he, or she, stays cooped up  
in the dark with eyes closed.

Listen to the answer.

*There is no 'other world.'  
I only know what I've experienced.  
You must be hallucinating.*

-Rumi (2004)

This paper seeks - through the purpose and example of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program - to explore and assess how assumptions about human nature, spirituality, the principle of the oneness of humanity, and the capacity and character of junior youth and youth may impact efforts in social transformation. More specifically, the prescriptive character of conflict transformation and peacebuilding requires careful assessment of assumptions about human nature in regards to the question of inherent self-interest and innateness of conflict.

The assumptions we have about our reality shape our attitudes, behaviors, and actions with each other, as well as the social structures and institutions we create to organize society - all of which go on to further form that reality. In the endeavors of conflict transformation and social justice, critical reflection on these assumptions and perceptions of human nature and reality become particularly significant, as they are fields that are actively seeking to impact our social reality. Ongoing examination of assumptions, purposes, and animating principles - both conscious and unconscious - that shape how we gain knowledge about our reality and the nature of our being, reveals learning which can be used to reshape ourselves and our reality to more accurately reflect an evolving understanding of our purpose and

identity as human beings. Without addressing such deep rooted assumptions we are left to blindly repeat the status quo. For if one's purpose is to ensure their own survival and comfort, then their attitudes, behaviors, and actions will likely differ from one who seeks give their energies to benefit the lives of others and who sees their own personal development as an outcome of such service.

Freire (1970) argued that empowerment is hard to come by without critical awareness of the visible and invisible structures and processes that make up social institutions or practices, and our own role and actions within these institutions or practices (Jennings, et al. 2006, p. 47). Inherent to being in charge of ourselves and our own reality, therefore, we must seek to understand not only the reality before us but also of what we may not already be aware and understand. This humble approach - knowing there is more to our reality than what may be initially apparent - is one which empowers us in a society that opposingly emphasizes instant gratification, comfort, passivity, entertainment, and even material wealth. Expanding individual and collective awareness of the intellectual, social, psychological, and spiritual forces which are not always so easily seen or understood, is a central aspect of empowerment in the global context we live in. This discussion therefore is important in the light of the nature of the stage of junior youth - a crucial period of time involving the exploration of self-identity in relation to peers, adults, and their social reality.

### **The Crucial Window of Transition for Junior Youth**

The character of the transition and emergence of new powers that junior youth (JY) undergo in relationship to their social environment is particularly significant in this context as they are developing elements of their identity and conceptions of reality that will characterize them throughout their entire lives. To the extent that junior youth are rationally responding to the environment given to them by parents and adults, they are like a mirror reflecting the state of society in their attitudes and behaviors. For example, the rebelliousness and apathy often associated with adolescence can often stem directly from the contradictions they perceive in their social environment, their dissatisfaction and desire to change the causes of these problems, their assumption that they are powerless to make changes, and the ways in which they are perceived by peers and adults. Though still in transition from childhood with emerging talents, they often lack the necessary skills to effectively communicate in words, actions, and behaviors what they observe and imagine because of insufficient support, encouragement, resources, etc.

In contrast to the world they inherit, an empowering environment should aid JY in articulating the contradictions they see; developing a high and evolving purpose; and provide for them a framework for decision-making, learning, and action that allows them to safely challenge the assumptions about themselves and their social reality, human nature, and the causes of conflict. Such a program would allow for a continual deepening of the conceptions of who they are and their relationship to their social environment that may contribute to the transformation envisioned.

The assumption of the JYSEP is that inherent in humanity - and in this case, junior youth - is the spiritual capacity for selfless service, transcending and influencing the forces of society that contribute to conflict and disunity, translating virtues into deeds and behaviors, elevating discourse, assessing the impacts of societal forces, championing justice, and building unity. These distinct universal potentialities directly contrast the materialistic assumptions about the makeup of humans as being inherently conflictual and selfish. Thus, practical spirituality and the implications of the concept of the oneness of humanity shape learning, structure, purpose, and action for social change and conflict transformation in the JYSEP. Inherent to this discussion is a philosophical exploration that deals with epistemological and ontological themes, which Vivienne Jabri (1996) emphasizes to be lacking in peace and conflict research. The consideration of these themes, she suggests, can reconcile challenges within the field of conflict research due to the domination of positivist orientations. The intention, then, is to contribute to the conceptual and theoretical discussion and explore some of the practical implications and applications of the assumption of a noble human nature in the empowerment of youth and junior youth.

### **Prescriptive Character of Conflict Transformation and Empowerment**

Jabri (1996) states that the field of “conflict and peace studies has a normative orientation based on a concern to alleviate the dysfunctional aspects of violent conflict”. Similarly, Nicholson (as cited in Jabri, 1996) suggests that peace research consists of “social engineering” and is a “prescription for achieving specified goals in the light of propositions discovered by the social scientists” (p. 11). Seeking to create change has inherent assumptions about the imagined reality we seek to create. The potential intended outcomes and impacts of a field which seeks creative strategies to transform the causes of conflict demonstrate the normative quality in the struggle to achieve specific goals. This highlights the delicate nature of the endeavor to transform society. Beyond the unintended consequences that stem from

the nature of interacting with the complexities of social reality, the ways we imagine the world we are trying to create and envision the causes of the forces that impede human progress greatly inform the strategies and methodologies used to accomplish goals to, in the words of Nardin (as cited in Jabri, 1996), “ameliorate the human condition” (p. 12). According to Lederach (2005), in the context of conflict transformation,

the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence (p. 5).

To garner the natural imagination found in youth by involving them in conversations about the world we wish to live in will assist everyone in this creative process. As will be explored later, comfort with ambiguity and seeking creativity in transcending dichotomistic thinking by seeking ongoing learning without expecting to reach static methods or solutions are key elements of ensuring a dynamic process of learning and action.

Inherent in the aims and purpose of critical youth empowerment according to Jennings and Green (1993) is the need to “support and foster youth contributions to positive community development and sociopolitical change, resulting in youth who are critical citizens, actively participating in the day-to-day building of stronger, more equitable communities” (Jennings et al. (2006), p. 40). Creating change thus being innate to the very process, purpose, and context of empowerment further emphasizes the significance of understanding what that change consists of and the implications of themes like social justice and “emancipatory processes.” What these goals really mean in practice has not been adequately explored, and one may argue that they can never be fully exhausted as we labor for a unified world beyond the grasp of our imagination.

### **Importance of Conceptualizing Human Nature**

What is being put forward is not a linear solution, formula, conclusion, or comprehensive analysis of philosophical arguments on the theme of human nature, but rather a contribution towards an ongoing conversation about how our conceptions of human nature shape our social reality in the context of the JYSEP. Jabri (1996) articulates how dominant assumptions about the innateness of conflict in humans has affected the analysis of the causes of conflict. In *Discourses on Violence*, she describes how



Western political thought on war and the causes of violence are constructed positions that the “naturalists” Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes have helped permeate throughout Western civilization. Namely, that “violent conflict emerges from characteristics inherent to the essence [and natural tendencies, biological drives, and instinctual aggression] of ‘man’” (p. 29). The thoughts of these philosophers have not only pervaded academic and social discourse, but still influence modern “daily” behaviors, assumptions, and attitudes which shape, legitimize, and perpetuate the social environment and its structures. In this sense, such a deep influence can function as self-fulfilling prophecies when it remains untested in action or without continual reassessment of the real outcomes of such belief.

### **Historical Assumptions of a Selfish and Conflictual Human Nature**

Jabri (1996) asserts that Thomas Hobbes’ assumptions “hold paradigmatic status in the field of international relations in that they form the foundation upon which contemporary realism, as the dominant discourse in international relations, is built” (p. 35). He claims that the rational human resorts to violence for the purpose of “survival in a world where all seek to dominate” and “since not all have such a capacity to dominate, conflicts arise whose outcome is determined by war” (p. 34). If the desire of power and the fear of a loss of power are the essential causes of conflict, then the behaviors, attitudes, and actions which follow from these fears and desires are wholly justified. Thus, if war and violent conflict are assumed to emerge out of the breakdown of society - the governing and contractual order - then the only remaining cause is inherent in the character of humanity. Humanity then, when left on its own “rational” devices and tendencies to fight for self-preservation has a universal inclination towards conflict to maintain power and only a rational authority that fights for self-preservation based on contract or force can reconcile the relations of the population.

Similarly, Machiavelli (as cited in Jabri, 1996) sees “self-preservation and the fulfillment of a desire for political power” to be intrinsic parts of what it means to be human (p. 32). Though many examples can be given of this throughout history in individuals and collectives, there are also examples of sacrifice, selflessness, generosity, and collaboration demonstrated as well. The decision about which is expressive of true human nature can be debatable, but to define those qualities into the essence of humanity implies an inability to overcome those forces and tendencies. These ideas, as put forward by Machiavelli, still shape much of the general consciousness of Western culture.

Jabri (1996), explains the cause of conflict differently. It is a “social phenomena emerging through, and constitutive of, social practices which have, through time and across space, rendered war an institutional form that is largely seen as an inevitable and at times acceptable form of human conduct” (p. 3). Insight into the nature of humans, therefore, can be gained through understanding of the mutual relationship and interaction between the individual and their social reality. The JYSEP seeks to generate knowledge of this mutual relationship through service, reflection, and the “emancipatory interest” of discourse to transform our social reality and enable communities to advance toward unity, justice, and the ability to realize their collective potential.

### **Assumption of Noble Human Nature and its Impact**

The previous assumptions about who we are as a people have historically shaped many of the world’s attempts to heal the ills that hinder the advancement of civilization by ascribing to us a nature that is unable to transcend the limitations and causes of those plagues of disunity, prejudice, and injustice. The child of humanity has grown up being told it cannot rise above an inherent selfishness, and that the very purpose of existence is the gratification of self, and yet there seems to be perplexity as to why this child has been unable to bring itself out of the depths of the crippling challenges it faces. Arbab (2000) suggests that “the instinctive rejection of noble aspirations in the name of realism has become habitual with approaches to social issues that have failed both to uplift and to acknowledge their impotence” (p. 156). With such social complexity, the widely accepted views and unquestioned assumptions about human nature are “confusing and self-contradictory,” as Arbab (2000) states,

On the one hand, we dream of, and labour for, a world of peace and prosperity; on the other, what passes for scientific theory depicts us as slaves to self-interest, incapable of rising to the heights of nobility we must achieve to meet our challenges. We work, then, for objectives lying forever beyond our selfish means. It is such contradictions that have led to the paralysis of will that today pervades all strata of society. (p.156)

What can be gleaned from human history - and the assumptions already articulated in the purpose and implementation of the JYSEP - is that the human being has a “dual nature”. One in which is seen the traits attributable to the individual and collective survival necessary for the animal kingdom and another which is expressed in human beings’ unique abilities to both satisfy moderately their material needs and to control those material needs and selfish impulses so that we are not dominated by them, but learn to express a higher nature (Arbab, 2000, p.157). He continues: without designating those characteristics

which we have in common with the animal kingdom as good or bad, it is important to recognize that the needs of animal existence are not enough to construct or determine the evolution of human development and capacity. How could the capacities of animals for survival lead us to a world of exploring vast potential for learning, organizing, creating, and advancement? If human beings did not possess the ability to influence their social environment and rise above powerful social forces, then they would be merely blind and impotent products of their environment. Instead,

The primary force propelling this, now conscious, evolutionary process is knowledge, a knowledge that is created and constantly recreated on the basis of a sound understanding of one's self, of those promptings that lead to abasement and of those that lead to dignity and honor... We discover in ourselves the powers of nobility, freedom, and oneness and learn to apply these powers in building an ever-advancing civilization. (Arbab, 2000, p.157)

For what else but a conception of the inherent nobility of human nature - which so directly contrasts the current "unbridled individualism" and selfishness that pervades society - could "equip humanity to respond to the demands of this crucial historical moment"? (Arbab, 2000, p. 157). Thus, when the word "spiritual" is being used, it refers directly to this distinctly human capacity to develop and translate into action ever-evolving knowledge and qualities that are transcendent above the material, animalistic, and negative forces in the world and drawing upon these less visible forces and capacities on which such transformative effects hinge. This process thereby gives individual and collective expression to the principles of the oneness of reality and reveals qualities with vast implications such as: nobility of all humans, hope in the face of despair, selfless motivation for service to humanity, detachment from material things and difficulties, confirmation in efforts, excellence in all things, etc - all themes found in the JY materials.

### **Human Nature, the Oneness of Reality, and the Oneness of Humanity**

Clearly the scope of this topic of human nature is vast and goes beyond the bounds of this paper, but a consideration of these epistemological themes is important when exploring the nature and potential of the human being. If we looked at an infant and decided that - based on its current function and circumstances - it would forever be dependent, greedy, and immobile then we would likely not feed, encourage, nurture, or teach the child to grow up to be a capable and noble being despite it showing us very little to make us think otherwise. Likewise, humanity is still in a process of maturing and we cannot adequately determine or envision the true and fullest capacity latent within the individual human being or

the whole of humanity solely by looking at its history of conflict, injustice, war, greed, and abuse of power. For if we considered the great accomplishments of unity, justice, selflessness, and equality, we may see glimpses of that higher nature which has contributed to any advances humanity has experienced. What we expect, set our sights on, and more importantly, what becomes a part of our discourse, social structures, and actions, shapes our conception of reality and that which is possible in the sphere of human destiny. Thus, those expectations and conceptions either constrain or empower us on the evolutionary path of developing our language, volition, structures, and vision of our purpose. In this endeavor to consciously create an unprecedented global community that is just, unified, and peaceful is one which cannot be fully envisioned based on the current social system and environment that is molding individual potential and action.

To be clear, however, the principles which form the foundation of the Program are not a call merely for optimism, positive thinking, or hope that humanity can overcome its challenges. Nor is an attempt to convince ourselves of our own goodness so that we may become good. Instead, by exploring through the service-learning process, the discovery of the workings of reality and true human (intellectual and spiritual) capacity may generate knowledge that can be disseminated to increasing numbers who can likewise contribute to this ongoing process of advancement and transformation. Engaging in this process will help create such a framework and purpose in one's life that decisions, actions, and understanding of the nature of life's challenges will be carried out to ensure its fulfillment but also for the benefit of others. Created for the purpose of the unity and advancement of humanity, our fullest potential is then discovered in the context of the relationships built through service as individuals, families, communities, nations, and a global civilization. As articulated by Shoghi Effendi (1991),

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind...is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater... **Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential *relationships* that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an *institution* adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the *structure* of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.** It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds—creeds that have had their day and which must...give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the

demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units. (Emphasis added) (pp. 42-43)

### **Unity as the Creative Force Underlying Reality**

It is suggested in a document prepared under supervision of the head administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith<sup>ii</sup>, the Universal House of Justice [UHJ] (2001), that at the simplest level, two fundamental conditions must exist for unity to pertain among human beings:

Those involved must first of all be in some agreement about the nature of reality as it affects their relationships with one another and with the phenomenal world. They must, secondly, give assent to some recognized and authoritative means by which decisions will be taken that affect their association with one another and that determine their collective goals. (UHJ, p. 41)

For those working towards the prosperity of humankind, the creation, establishment, and development of such a level of unity is a profound, complex, and evolving task that will be refined through the ever-widening diversity of experiences, reflection, and learning. For groups of any size, however, to pursue a unity that is aligned with the two above mentioned foundations in these early stages of a global society requires processes of exploration to be set in motion in both discourse and social action.

These requisites highlight the magnitude of creating a global unified movement of junior youth engaging in this process of developing a common language to describe their social reality based on their own local efforts to serve the betterment of their neighborhoods and build a unified community life. As the junior youth - through the assistance of the educational materials and the friendship and guidance of the animator - grow to share an agreement about the nature of their reality and social environment “as it affects their relationships with one another”, so, too, will their skills in building unity grow and likely come to characterize their lifelong efforts to transform society. Unity, however, is not just a goal to achieve for the sake of it having a positive effect or because it helps groups get along. Rather, it is an essential force and primary influence for creation and transformation:

Unity is not, that is, merely a condition resulting from a sense of mutual goodwill and common purpose, however profound and sincerely held such sentiments may be, any more than an organism is a product of some fortuitous and amorphous association of various elements. Unity is a phenomenon of creative power, whose existence becomes apparent through the effects that collective action produces and whose absence is betrayed by the impotence of such efforts. However, handicapped it often has been by ignorance and perversity, this force has been the primary influence driving the advancement of civilization, generating legal codes, social and political institutions, artistic works, technological

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<sup>ii</sup> See Appendix D for a brief outline of the Bahá'í Faith.

achievements without end, moral breakthroughs, material prosperity, and long periods of public peace whose afterglow live in the memories of subsequent generations as imagined “golden ages.” (UHJ, 2001, p. 41)

In this way, unity takes on many deep implications for both our individual and collective lives and the conceptions of reality that form the foundation for action. Progress cannot occur unless and until unity, at its varying degrees of practice, is created. Conversation, consultation, reflection and actions are then carried out for the purpose of exploring what this conception of unity may look like when translated into the JYG’s social reality, the individual’s daily life, and the conversations with those whom the group interacts.

### **The Interrelation of Nobility of Humanity, Empowerment, and Universal Participation**

The noble nature of humanity, true empowerment, and the concept of universal participation are inseparable in the context of social transformation. Nobility of human nature has implications of rising to a consciousness based in understanding oneself in the context of a global community - that one’s needs do not necessarily trump those of many others, and that these decisions can be made in the face of great challenges for the purpose of greater unity. This is converse to thoughts of humans being inherently greedy and the inevitability of conflict, and, therefore, a difficult concept to grasp and practice. To truly come to a point of knowing in the inherent nobility of humanity is absolutely essential for the empowerment of all people, particularly JY. Universal participation is no pious appeal in order to have larger numbers of people to engage, but it is strong knowledge in the true nobility of every individual being to fully contribute to the advancement of society. For any individuals to be excluded is to assume their innate incapacity to participate or have anything worthwhile to offer. For some to offer their ideas and others to remain silent - whether it is due to outright oppression, structural inequality, or personality traits - is the very thing which prevents progress. Everything that hinders understanding of this inherent nobility and the participation of every single individual, is to impede empowerment and progress towards a unified world ridding itself of those obstacles. Therefore, it can be seen how paternalism, prejudice, power-imbalances, are attitudes, behaviors, conditions which actively deny and prevent the nobility of humanity to be expressed and universal participation from being practiced.

Paternalism is such a denial of the nobility of humanity and prevents universal participation because it is the elevating of one or more individuals over others, which prevents equal opportunities for

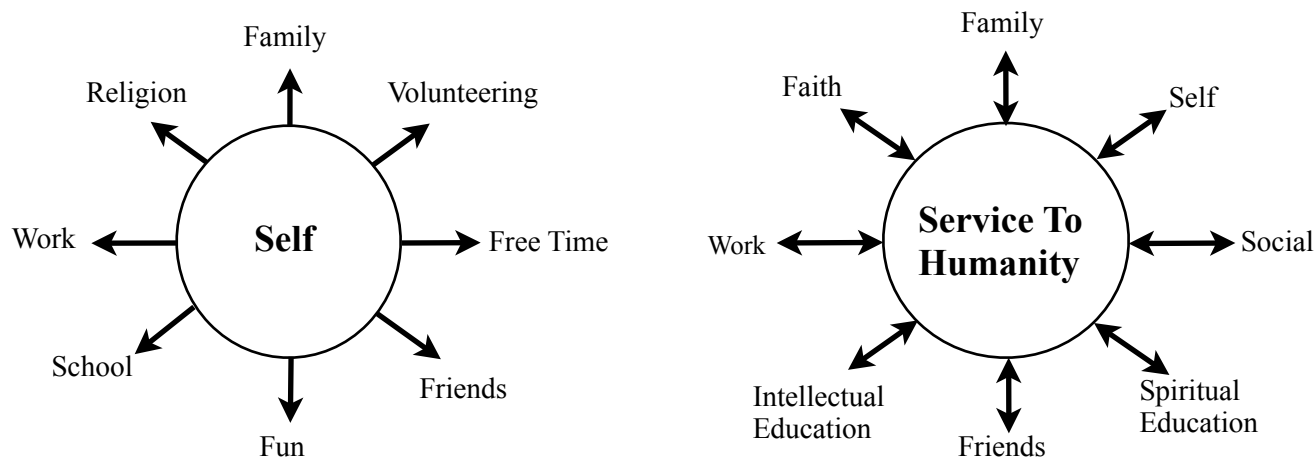
contribution towards the advancement of society. In this way, a simple concept of paternalism - which is understood to be a negative aspect of power-sharing in a youth empowerment program - gains greater complexity and meaning in a broad and ontological context. Instead of being merely a bad behavior to avoid so as to support the young without dominating, or balancing “overt and covert control” (Jennings et al. 2006, p.45) over youth, paternalism must be seen in more complex way. Just as Freire (1970) emphasized the need to be aware of the visible and invisible processes that make up our social practices in order to assess the structures and values which we hope to alter, so too must we see paternalism and similar behaviors as practices that are in direct opposition to human nature and universal participation.

### **Animator Training Materials: Addressing the Practical Implications of the Oneness of Reality**

The implications of unity are indeed vast and permeate all levels of reality, some of which may be briefly highlighted in an ongoing theme of discussion in the training of animators and junior youth groups; namely, the concept of the oneness of humanity. The Ruhi Institute’s [RI] (2009) training materials, titled *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*, which are in pre-publication stages address how individuals tend to compartmentalize aspects of reality and their lives in order to understand it: “Reality - physical, social, or spiritual - is too vast to be understood in its entirety” and so “it is not unreasonable, then, to break it up”. But it may lead to “unnecessary contradictions” and “difficulties” when this fragmentation is made “without taking into account the wholeness of reality.” Examples of this are “when conflicts arise among people of different races, colors, nationalities, and religions” because the division of humanity “along racial, ethnic, and national lines” are “a product of the human mind and the result of historical circumstance.” (RI, Unit 1, p. 14)

Imaginary dichotomies may arise in other forms in our daily lives as well. In the particularly relevant circumstances of junior youth’s lives during their intense search to establish their identity in the midst of a period of transition out of childhood, they are confronted with existence of “work, leisure, family life, spiritual life, physical health, intellectual pursuits, individual development, collective progress” which can seem overwhelming, and making decisions and prioritizing responsibilities can seem impossible. (RI, U1, p.14) But if we can grow in our awareness of the “interconnectedness of the many aspects of our lives” we can see how aspects that seem disparate or conflicting can actually reinforce each other. Rather than dividing family and work, or education and service, or intellectual

development and development of spiritual qualities, or material life and spiritual life, these can be complimentary and integrated aspects of life. (U1, p.14) Learning how these interconnections can be applied in one's life cannot be laid out as a list of do's and don'ts or rules to follow, but engaging in a process of discovery through study, dialogue, reflection, and service gives rise to an evolving path of practically applying new insights into everyday community life.



**Figure 2:** *Fragmented, Compartmentalized, Self-orientation versus Integrated, Unified, Service Orientation.* This figure demonstrates how an inward/self worldview is fragmented by pulling outward towards many compartmentalized aspects of life, where time and energy are divided separately to satisfy the many seemingly disparate components. An outward-looking purpose and worldview of service to humanity integrates the many aspects where all are carried out for the single purpose of service to carry forward an ever-advancing humanity. Whether it is self-reflection, educational endeavors, work, or free time with friends, this service-based framework informs decision-making.

This conception of the interconnectedness of reality is spiritual in nature, in that its implications for individual and collective human behavior draw out latent abilities in individuals and groups that transcend the materialistic divisions derived solely from an empiricist or rationalist worldview. In other words, to put the interests of others before one's own reflects the spiritual qualities of justice, service, and selflessness necessary for the growth and wellbeing of the whole, insofar as a unified collection of individuals has emergent properties that cannot be found in its individual parts.<sup>iii</sup> To place priority of one cell over an entire organism, for example, may be a denial of the interconnectedness of the whole system necessary for that one cell to exist. The JYSEP enables JY to engage with this topic of the interconnectedness of reality and the oneness of humanity by exploring its implications in group

<sup>iii</sup> When individual components in an environment come together to create distinct, collective and interactive properties and functions, the results are called emergent properties. These emergent properties do not and cannot manifest themselves unless an organism is looked at in its entirety. (Emergent Properties of Biological Systems, 2011).



dialogue, in individual efforts to translate it into the practice of daily life, and in collective service projects conducive to neighborhood unity.

An example from one JYG - which demonstrates many other concepts and aspects that have already been discussed beyond just the interconnectedness of the aspects of our lives - involves a group of 20 or so JY in one neighborhood. In a discussion that naturally led out of the JY materials, some of the JY mentioned that their families were not able to go to the doctor because they lacked health insurance. Through further discussion, all of the JY expressed the same and concluded that their entire neighborhood was without healthcare. As they had been meeting as a group for an extended time, many of their conversations focused on service and their group's purpose was to work for the betterment of their entire community. So, through consultation, the creative idea of calling local doctors and nurses to invite them to offer any extra time they may have led to a list of many donated hours. From this list came an organized schedule of enough time for these healthcare practitioners to form a free clinic for the surrounding area - the location of which was also organized by the JYG. Conversations centered on the needs, interconnection of the community, and led to an impact beyond their own group and yet revealed to them the creative potential of group unity. Though this may not be a project that solves the deep structural causes of the inequalities they face, it is quite a step for young people to carry out and a great opportunity for critical reflection. Likewise, this not only sparked further enthusiasm but attracted others of all ages to a common purpose for the community; service in whatever form needed.

### **Structure, Pedagogy, and Implementation of Materials for JY**

In upholding and putting into practice some of the fundamental principles of the program - namely, the independent investigation of truth and the oneness of reality and humanity - the material of the Ruhi Institute (2009) for JY and animators refrains from presenting these themes in dogmatic and rigid fashions. Particularly for the JY materials, the use of stories, metaphors, conversations of other JYGs, questions that lead to discussion of implications, and relating these materials to the JYGs service projects allow for exploration of understanding, implications, and applications of these concepts in their daily lives. These tools assist the JY in the exploration of themselves and their social environment and give them opportunities to freely express their concerns, emotions, and ideas. (U3, p.3) In this space, they have a laboratory within their own community to discuss these spiritual themes and the manner in

which they can be translated into action. Though the JYG participants - let alone anyone in the world - may not know what these principles look like in perfect practice, progress will be made so long as there are efforts to understand them through action, reflection, consultation, and application. Yet these fundamentals are not seen merely as ideals to follow, but rather as essential requisites necessary for the progress and success of any efforts to serve humanity and to discover their true capacity in discourse and action, and to build unity.

In the training material for animators, as will be explored later, participants delve into envisioning who we want youth to be as guided by discussion derived from the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, the characteristics of JY unique to that age group, and broad considerations for starting and maintaining a JYG and the implementation of the JY materials. Due to the implementation of the JYSEP in innumerable cultures around the world, the focus is less on an established methodology, and more on the vision and nature of youth and empowerment so the animators may learn through practice and experience as it relates to their own social reality. The stronger the vision of the animators, the greater their reservoir of creativity for manifesting the vision in action.

### **Developing Language and a Moral Framework**

In this context of a practical spirituality and the continual broadening of our conception of reality to recognize the interconnectedness of the universe amidst the human-made divisions, the JYSEP training material for animators and the material used for the JYGs seeks to develop the spiritual capacity of individuals and neighborhoods for the purpose of empowering young people to take charge of their own intellectual and material development. The materials are not seen as workbooks to complete but rather as tools and records of conversation that help develop a moral language and framework and spur individuals on to a process of learning and action in working alongside others to contribute to their neighborhood and building of community life. This is reminiscent of Piaget's critique (1965) concerning the tendency of the educational system:

[If] the child is called upon to receive from outside the already perfected products of adult knowledge and morality; the educational relationship consists of pressure on the one side and receptiveness on the other. From such a point of view even the most individual kinds of task performed by students (writing an essay...solving a problem) partake less of the genuine activity of spontaneous and individual research than of the imposed exercise or the act of copying an external model; **the student's inmost morality remains fundamentally directed toward obedience rather than autonomy.** Whereas, on the other hand, to the degree in which childhood is thought of as endowed with its own genuine form of activity,

and the development of mind as being included within that activity's dynamic, the relation between the subjects to be educated and society becomes reciprocal: **the child no longer tends to approach the state of adulthood by receiving reason and the rules of right action ready-made, but by achieving them with his own effort and personal experience; in return, society expects more of its new generations than more imitation; it expects enrichment.** (Emphasis added) (pp. 695-696)

In another place, Piaget has said, "Education, for most people, means trying to lead the child to resemble the typical adult of his society...But, for me...education means making creators...You have to make inventors, innovators - not conformists" (Bringuier, 1980, p. 132). For education to be merely the perpetuation of the status quo, the assumption would be that the state of the world should remain unchanged in its violence, conflict, prejudice, discourse, structure, values, etc. Clearly then, education must take on qualities that are conducive to creating a fundamental change within our social reality and the systems that perpetuate it. Some of these characteristics may consist of a deep understanding of the creation, functioning, and perpetuation of the status quo, alongside seeking means whereby a new social fabric may be woven within our own consciousnesses, behaviors, and the ways in which we organize society. This is the praxis element of the pedagogical approach of the JYSEP, which will be further explored in the second discussion concerning service.<sup>iv</sup>

Raising up human resources who can draw upon their skills, natural talents, and frameworks for decision-making and action ties together those working for this common purpose and thus creates a welcoming space for increasing numbers to join in the creative process trying to translate these spiritual ideals into practice in their tangible daily life. It is no easy task to interact with the status quo and the hegemonic forces which unconsciously seek to perpetuate those "unseen" dynamics and qualities. Clearly a challenging endeavor in which JY are choosing to participate, the skills to not only persist but thrive in the face of the many difficulties and forces working against their goals need to be explicitly explored and developed in the JYGs.

### **Avoiding Formulas to Assure Creativity, Empowerment, and Consultation**

Due to the scope of this paper, it will be impossible to effectively summarize the transformative training for animators that provides the opportunity to examine their conceptions of young people, empowerment, service, and social transformation. To share the concepts in writing is very different from

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<sup>iv</sup> Praxis is the "committed, focused action" that influences the environment (Smith, 2001), as opposed to solely the generation of knowledge for cognitive purposes. See page 24 of this document.

the process of discussion, discovery, training, and application to daily life. What may be desired in reading a paper concerning the implementation of this program is a methodology outlining specifically how a JYG is animated and how these concepts are conveyed, facilitated, and acted out. Due its early stages of development and application, its global scope, and the profound implications of its purpose, its implementation as a formula cannot be explicitly articulated without rendering the Program impotent. Furthermore, the steps of a methodology would be antithetical to empowerment itself: reducing the learning process to a static procedure or technique; hindering creative potential, the necessity of learning through action that ties efforts to “real needs on the ground”, and the applicability of it in the infinitely diverse settings and circumstances around the world.

Additionally, because this emerging and widespread program has many collaborators from diverse backgrounds who are pursuing unprecedented goals in the empowerment of young people, the process of learning and improving the use of the materials can be its only foundation and framework to ensure its growth, increasing quality, and effectiveness in achieving its vision of empowerment. To provide a catalyst and vehicle for community building and empowerment, the very nature of the program must be one that is always evolving according to real experience and needs, though not conforming to the dictates of the status quo. Rather, it must grow and evolve faster than the rapidly changing social reality. It is insufficient to put forth finite definitions as to what the oneness of humanity is, or how to practice perfect unity, or to know in practice what the interconnectedness of reality means. Instead, every one must discover on their own, and so only foundational elements can be put forth for exploration, consultation, and translating into action for further reflection and learning. How to do these things is unknown by everyone, but striving towards understanding what they mean through our efforts will help us get a glimpse into what it may look like. A great deal of individual and structural transformation is needed before advancing to towards established patterns, yet the flexibility demanded by the nature of transformation is what makes this program effective and unique.

Much of the success of the program, consequently, comes through the quality of the processes of learning for the many collaborators; whether JY, animators, coordinators, or community members. Particularly significant is the training of animators so that it spurs them onto a process of learning how to continually reflect and refine their efforts to achieve the goals of their JYGs and their greater community.

The growth and development of the program thus relies on the relationships built between the animators who grow to support each other as friends in an ongoing discursive process of deepening of the JYSEP's vision, the shared learning by experienced animators, and the creative action of the JYGs. Therefore, this section of the paper in particular, is just a cursory look at conceptualizing of youth and JY.

### **Conceptualizing Youth and Junior Youth**

How adolescence has been articulated both in society and academic research is widely conceived in very negative terms. Whether seeing them as fragile children who need to be protected from the negative forces of society, or Sigmund Freud's description of adolescence as a stage of temporary mental illness, or Anna Freud's suggestion that to be normal during the adolescent period is in itself abnormal - none of these conceptions which so freely inform mainstream programs and policies that impact the lives of JY can help assist youth to act as "agents of social change" (RI, 2009, U2, p. 11) and tap into their "willingness to contribute to the construction of a better society" (p. 18). Conversely, there are other philosophers and researchers in the minority who put forward other more positive conceptions. Seeing this stage of life inherently exhibiting qualities necessary for the advancement of humanity, Erik Erikson (1968) describes adolescence as "a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution, for youth can offer its loyalties and energies both to the conservation of that which continues to feel true and to the revolutionary correction of that which has lost its regenerative significance" (p. 134). In the Ruhi Institute (2009) training materials Turnbull (1983) is quoted, pointing out how this,

stage of life creates human beings who are like 'empty receptacles, fully formed though still growing, capable of receiving with all their being.' Convinced that education should take advantage of the intensity that various modes of perception can bring to every experience, he has noted that such intensity, 'together with integrity of being,' can make of human society 'a living, thriving, truly loving, joyously full and exuberant organism, rather than a cold, mechanical, empty theoretical concept. That is the magic of transformation and that is the potential of adolescence.' (pp. 17-18)

How we imagine who youth should be, the characteristics of JY, and the nature of their stage of transition shapes a vision of the human being we envision and what they will be able to do. Much of the training materials aims to raise the animators' vision of who JY should be through questions and discussions concerning the characteristics the animators in training would like the JY to possess after completing the empowerment program. The purpose is not to blindly elevate other's "beliefs" in the potential of JY or even of humanity based on vague ideals. Nor is it to go to the extreme of expecting JY

to mirror forth all of these amazing qualities of our highest and most creative imagination which would lead to frustration, hopelessness, broken expectations, and even resentment. Instead, the animators' growing perception of capacity in young people, and understanding of the forces and impact of the social system on this unique age group, may create more learning and action for the JY, animator, and whole JYG. The attitude animators are asked to adopt is not that there is a "total absence of impetuosity or rebelliousness in adolescent behavior" but rather that "whenever a group of junior youth develop undesirable behavior - beyond that which results naturally from the successive stages of crisis and victory characteristic of the process of normal growth - the causes of the phenomenon should be sought in the social environment" and "the conduct of adults". The materials continue by specifying that perhaps, "the glaring contradictions that young awakening minds discover in the lives of adults whom they had completely trusted before, or in the inability of adults to recognize the rationality of an individual who is trying to leave behind the habits of childhood" can often be the cause for the negative perspective of adolescence (RI, 2009. U1, p.12). This is another tangible recognition of the mutual interconnection between individual agency and social environment, which parallels Jabri's situating of discourse and conflict.

The Ruhi Institute (2009) asks animators-in-training several questions to help shape their understanding of the potential of JY. Should JY focus on having fun because they will soon have to face the serious matters and responsibilities? Should this time of preparation be one focused solely on their academic, vocational, or professional studies, only on service, or does preparation come through a realization of the interconnectedness of studies, work and service? Or do we want them to focus their energies on taking charge of their own development and preparation to become vibrant agents of social change, joyous upkeepers of selfless service, champions of justice, and builders of unity in the face of the forces of society? Would not engaging in such a systematic learning and preparation process be conducive to joy and spontaneity and engage their interests?

Considering first the extent to which we as animators envision JY possessing positive and passionate attitudes towards learning, strong willpower in the face of difficulties, and purity of purpose creates an opportunity for participants to develop a goal as an animator to respond to JY's needs and help them develop these significant capacities. Starting from a point of vision-building and contemplation of

the necessary skills for effectively facing the world reduces the habit to approach empowerment in a teacher-student relationship. Instead, it allows animators to creatively develop methods - based on their particular relationship with their JY - which simultaneously engage their interests and help them develop these capacities in their efforts to translate such ideals into action. More specifically, by studying and reflecting on some of the quotes from the Bahá'í Writings concerning the qualities that should “distinguish every generation of youth and the particular forces which much shape their lives” (RI, U1, p. 1), a high standard begins to emerge that is less attached to the current perceptions of the characteristics of youth. This program welcomes the participation of those who share a desire to envision and approach newly this age group of 11 to 14 year olds:

While global trends project an image of this age group as problematic, lost in the throes of tumultuous physical and emotional change, unresponsive and self-consumed, the Bahá'í community - in the language it employs and the approaches it adopts - is moving decidedly in the opposite direction, seeing in junior youth instead altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. (UHJ, Ridván Message 2010, paragraph 16)

Arriving at an understanding of the integrity and capacity of JY that so directly opposes prevalent approaches sets in motion processes for creating environments and discourses conducive to developing - through service - many skills, attitudes, and behaviors relevant to constructing a better world. As identified in the animator training materials (RI, 2009) some of these capacities are to: overcome prejudice, contribute to unity of thought, express profound ideas with clarity, promote justice, serve society selflessly, instill hope in others, overlook the faults of others, and many other abilities necessary to overcome the forces of ignorance and to spread the standard for fellowship. These skills are not only considered to be positive qualities for youth to “navigate this crucial stage of life”, but skills necessary for development in a generation of youth to enable them to work for the advancement of civilization. These concepts shape not only the worldview of animators themselves but the environment they create for the JYG, the goals and actions the group takes on, and it especially influences the self-conception of the JY and the attitude in which they pursue their purpose of community building and intellectual and moral excellence. The vision-expanding of JY serves to elevate individual's conceptions of overall human potential regardless of age.

Wallerstein (2005) and Jennings (2006) have pointed out that youth empowerment programs which are exclusively based in adult-youth relationships, the interactions are as co-learners and co-

creators of the environment. It is no coincidence that many of the approaches to discovering JY interested in participating in these efforts of individual and neighborhood transformation come from an animator's direct invitation to JY, the establishment of a friendship with those who are interested, and rallying their friends to meet and engage in "making the neighborhood better for everyone." Working shoulder-to-shoulder for a common cause, these friends who regularly spend time with each other to reflect and act, and therefore face challenges as they arise and learn from the failures that may result. It is in this environment that the animators (whether youth or adults) "monitor their own behaviors, presence, and activities in order to let youth experience the consequence of their own action" (Messias et al., 2005 according to Jennings et al., 2006). This is mirroring forth unity, justice, and creating such dynamics that may shape the environment outside them.

Whereas much of this conversation has focused on deepening our vision of youth and discovering their capacities to contribute to society, youth must also come to see the value and significance of the roles of adults. Zeldin et al. (2003) states that community development goes beyond solely serving the needs of youth by integrating them into responsible roles with shared power but also involves meeting the needs of the greater community. However, this concept may unintentionally create an imaginary divide between youth and adults which hinders the true unity of the community and the necessity of youth in the affairs and advancement of society. For example, seeing youth as intrinsic to local and global community progress to the point where the whole is constrained without their participation - instead of yet another isolated group in need of the assistance of those with power and the material means - allows for youth empowerment to not only empower the youth but an entire community. The point being made here is subtle: if the integration of youth into responsible roles with shared power is carried out as a way to merely stir things up or create effects in the community is an insufficient approach that is a fragmented approach to reality and will fail in the long term. Such an ad hoc approach - tacking on youth to transformational community efforts, whether as spokespeople or in attached committees - fails to recognize the significance of universal participation and the essential nature of youth and what they must be empowered to bring to such a social movement.

Recognizing the difficulty in putting this into practice, attempts to share power may come through more superficial acts. Checkoway (1998) explains that some organization may carry out safer methods of



appointing youth to task forces or committees because they “provide positive public relations and serve administrative ends” (Jennings et al., 2006). If a JYG, for example, was to function as a committee within a neighborhood or community building organization, then the actual engagement and participation of youth may be not only less effective but also their token participation would only give an appearance of power transference. In those circumstances, real opportunities to influence communal decision making patterns and structures (Jennings et al., 2006) are not actually provided, though youth and adults may feel the power structure is inclusive and equal.

### **Structure and Format of Materials for Intellectual and Spiritual Skill-Building**

Beyond the explicit themes explored in the materials, the structure and format is conducive to the development of critical thinking skills, powers of expression, and developing a moral framework. The use of recreational activities and creative and artistic projects are a channel in which these skills can be expressed and further developed. The exercises and questions are designed to develop their vocabulary and comprehension, enhance their capacity to understand and express moral concepts, and especially enable them to relate the concepts to their everyday lives. Many questions often relate to their school environment, family life, aspirations, responsibilities in education, challenges they may face, issues of violence, substance abuse, despair, conflict, media and entertainment. At first, some questions may appear overly simple or ambiguous as to what answer is expected, but they are framed to encourage discussion rather than direct them towards a single answer. The few example questions that follow are tied to lessons with particular themes from different materials facilitated by an animator:

- What kind of services do the following people carry out for humanity: a farmer, a doctor, a schoolteacher, a mother, a scientist, a carpenter?
- What kind of thoughts might indicate a feeling of superiority in a person?
- Is it a sign of greed to want to improve our lives?
- How much can we achieve in our lives in our lives without perseverance?

Thus, seeking truth and justice, garnering willpower and a high sense of purpose, “unfurling the standard of fellowship” are all aspects of these empowered skills to face the challenges of a materialistic world. Developing these insights and the behaviors that stem from them contribute to a transformation in their discourses with peers, the decisions they make, and the identity they begin to form as agents of change. To address some of the spiritual skills and qualities relevant to the purpose and goals of the JYSEP is

important to this discussion. The following is a brief description of one of the nine books currently available for animators and a few of the profound themes that it explores<sup>v</sup>:

***Breezes of Confirmation:*** The William Mmutle Maseltha Foundation (2007) describes this book as an entry-level text designed for 11-12 year olds who already possess basic literacy skills. Though it is simple in sentence structure and flow, difficult words are not avoided. By placing them in different contexts and drawing out their meaning through exercises, the text builds vocabulary and strengthens literacy skills. It is designed to strengthen skills in developing the power of expression to help them begin to articulate ideas with some degree of precision and clarity, and will prepare them for the study of higher-level texts. Each lesson includes a short reading followed by a series of exercises designed to increase comprehension and to enhance language skills. Quotations for memorization, songs and discussion questions are interspersed throughout the various lessons. The material strives to create within them the moral structures that will underlie their decisions and guide their actions as they mature into young adults and active members of society. To this end, the materials seek to impart essential moral concepts and build certain attitudes required to live a fruitful and rewarding life. It is only one part of a long-term learning process (p. 1). Through a story of JY considering what they want to do in their lives, the program participants gain insight the following themes: the importance of discovering their own talents, the significance of making an effort to be of service and learning how to perceive the confirmation that will follow, how confirmation empowers individuals to persist in the face of injustice and difficulties, and many other subjects.

As they grow in their understanding of these concepts, a complex language emerges that gives rise to a service-based framework for making decisions in their complex social environment that is not based on rigid rules, but a sophisticated ability to assess the forces of society which can lead to either achieving their full potential or degradation, and to navigate this “crucial stage of life”.

Such environments - which focus on the development of language and moral framework that enable young people to analyze and assess the forces of their social system - empower these individuals to see themselves as agents of social change with great capacities to build unity and champion justice in an interconnected reality, whereby they may develop their own capacity and contribute to the collective generation of applicable knowledge of their neighborhoods. Such a process widens the vision of adults both in the capacity of adolescents and human beings and thus cementing their role of regenerators of the old, perpetuators of that which continues to be useful, and characterizing them as servants to the needs of humanity throughout their lives.

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<sup>v</sup> The following titles are currently available in various stages of publication, each designed for a particular level of reading and writing, which fall into the categories of language of expression, living in society, science and math, and spiritual education: Walking a Straight Path, Glimmerings of Hope, Thinking about Numbers, Spirit of Faith, The Human Temple, Learning about Excellence, Observation and Insight, and Drawing on the Power of the Word. Eventually there will be approximately 27 books for the JYGs to draw from in their 3 year program.

## 2

### **The Experiential Learning Process, Praxis, and Service as an Engine of Individual and Collective Transformation**

*“And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that...he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No...there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.” - ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*

Out of this conversation concerning the assumptions of human nature and the releasing of spiritual and intellectual powers necessary for social action stems an exploration into the significance of developing a culture of learning through service. If our human potential is noble, vastly unexplored, and one which has great capacities for justice and unity at all levels of human society contained within, then how to release this potential in action and our structures must be the purpose at hand. For, if these qualities are not being shown, then it is due to the external conditions and the environment which are hindering every individual, community, and institution. A systematic education that recognizes and allows for that capacity to be revealed involves setting processes in motion that both evolve through study, experience, reflection, and consultation and harmonize individual and collective transformation and discursive practices for the advancement of a community.

A process of individual and collective learning - in the form of a cycle of training, action, and reflection - is infused into the DNA structure, vision, expansion, and quality of the JYSEP. Experiences as the youth empowerment program coordinator at MCBI has provided a special opportunity to observe and participate in real applications of an “experiential learning cycle” (Kolb as cited in Porter et al., 1982, pp. 6-7) for the purpose of individual empowerment and social transformation. By sharing in the experiences, reflections, and consultations of the many actors engaged in working at the different levels of the program, practical insights arose concerning how sincere acts of service unite the processes of individual empowerment and community building. When these acts are carried out in a systematic framework conducive to a cycle of ongoing reflection, action, and study within one’s own community, a ripe context for learning in development emerges, which can harvest great transformation. Though the experiential learning cycle is integral to all levels of the JYSEP, this discussion will be a brief exploration of the interconnection of these processes through the concepts of service, experiential learning, praxis,

reflection, and empowerment which are essential to two levels of the structure of the JYSEP, namely, the animators and the JYGs themselves.

### **Experiential Learning Cycle: Experience, Observations & Reflection, Generalizing, Application**

Kolb (1975) describes a learning process as a four-step cycle based in experience, as opposed to solely cognitive processes. The four steps of the continual learning include concrete experience, observation and reflection, generalizing abstract concepts, and applying or testing learning in new situations. Though learning can begin at any stage of the cycle, Kolb explains that it begins with carrying out an action and observing the effect of that action in the particular situation. Striving to then understand these effects comes through “publishing data” where observations and reflections are shared without assigning meaning. After this, generalizing principles from this experience where connections between actions and their effects are better understood. Lastly, the application in action of this general principle in a new, though possibly similar situation, may give further insight and the cycle of learning begins again. Abilities to anticipate the effects may emerge and learning is consolidated over time.

Kolb’s experiential learning cycle gives a broad model for learning through experience, which has been utilized in pedagogical practices in classrooms and trainings. Many times the application of this model in training has been one where games and artificial circumstances have been created as the “concrete experience” to generate knowledge to apply to real-life situations in work or personal environments. The relevance for this model in the conversation about service however, is one where the process is applied to individual and collective service experiences in the real world for JYGs and their animators. Also, where Kolb (1984) is focused on the production of knowledge - “Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it’ (p. 41) - the JYSEP tends to function on both generating knowledge *and* praxis - or “committed, focused action” (Smith, 2001) that influences the environment as “an ongoing interaction between reflection and the actions that people take to promote individual and community change” (Wallerstein et al., 2005, p. 221). Fundamental, then, to this discussion of knowledge generation through action and the creative, dialogic, and emancipatory process of praxis is how the JYSEP conceptualizes service as both the source of experience for individual and

collective transformation, as well as the very seed and fruit of the JYG in self and collective discovery in a spiritual and material world.

It is important to point out, however, that praxis in the JYSEP is cyclical and iterative in the way the JY are involved in analysis, action, and reflection throughout their involvement in the program during their junior youth years. This differs from other programs which may emphasize moving through the cycle only once or a few times as a conclusion to a cycle, an ending project, or final act rather than an intrinsic part to learning and individual and collective transformation. Rather, “the challenge is to provide youth opportunities to engage in an integrated participatory cycle of critical reflection and reflective actions with the goal of creating change in sociopolitical processes, structures, norms, and images” (Jennings et al. 2006, p. 47). The nature of the projects then often take on educational processes involving language development and critical thinking, long-term relationship building, and application of learning in one’s everyday life.

### **Conceptualizing Service**

First, consideration of the concept of service itself may shed light into many aspects of the connection between lasting social change and individual transformation. Youth programs often offer “civic service” opportunities for youth, which have great benefits such as providing youth “with stronger ties to the community, a greater understanding of other people’s needs, and a commitment to making that community a better place. Such opportunities can promote collective- and political efficacy in addition to self-efficacy” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 49). On a basic level, service is an act carried out with the genuine intention to help others allowing for many creative acts to fall under this category, such as planting trees, preventing inter-tribal conflict, washing the dishes at home, hosting community gatherings, regularly teaching children’s classes, repairing basketball hoops, etc.

Related to the experiential learning cycle has often been “service-learning” by Sigmon (1994) as a balance between learning goals and service outcomes, thus equally benefiting the actor and those being served thereby bridging a gap between a community service and field education (as cited by Furco, 1996). The conceptualization of service in the JYSEP however, does not frame the action between a “provider” and “recipient” as a charity-based perspective might employ. A useful distinction is shared by Marullo & Edwards (2000): charity, as often seen by the actors themselves as a moral act rather than a

political one; tends to reproduce the status quo as it is a “provision of help or relief to those in need” and to ameliorate the “negative consequences for poor or needy individuals.” By improving the lives of individuals through providing services to them, there is little focus on changing the causes of such inequalities. Whereas social justice seeks “to alter the structural or institutional practices that produce excessive or unjustified inequalities among individuals or that treat people unfairly” (p. 4). Equally emphasizing the social justice aspect and the learning outcomes is pivotal to the JYSEP.

On a practical level, service consists of the “experiencing” stage in the experiential learning cycle for the junior youth as individuals and as a group. From the experience of planning a service project and implementing it, data is generated through processing questions and, gradually, specific knowledge is abstracted from this experience that may be used to create generalizations that can be applied to improving that act of service or future efforts (Pfeiffer, 1994). As opposed to solely creating structured activities to simulate “real-life” experiences or creating games and environments where specific capacities are developed, the JYGs focus their insights and actions on service within their neighborhoods, both individually and collectively. In fact, the structured activities are used to specifically help develop those intellectual and moral capacities for the purpose of individual and collective service.

In the early meetings of a JYG, discussions about service are crucial. Some of the ideas that are brought up in these early conversations have to do with the implicit connection between the concept of service and the oneness of humanity. As an organic whole, the body of humanity cannot exist, let alone thrive, except according to the extent to which unity is an active force. Each of us is dependent on others. Together, animators and junior youth consider how much we need others for our simple survival in terms of our basic physiological needs such as food, clothing, shelter, etc. The hierarchy of needs, as stated by Maslow (1954) demonstrates the dependence of every individual on others for not only physiological needs, but also our psychological and higher basic needs of belongingness, self-actualization within society. Viktor Frankl (1949) describes a need even higher called self-transcendence, which involves realizing the fulfillment of one’s needs in the fulfillment of others (p.115). This concept mirrors the role of service in social transformation as not just a means towards change but the outcome of change as well. We each needed someone who nurtured us physically and emotionally as babies and children.

Service is the engine and creative force of the JYGs. In a real sense, service connects language, thought and action to an influenceable realm where the JY are growing up. It then it sets in motion individual processes of pursuing excellence in their intellectual and moral development, and gives expression to collective efforts to learn as members of a group. Individual service is carried out in their everyday lives and reflected upon in their groups through the use of the study materials, complimentary activities, and discussions; which, in turn, illuminate their individual efforts and collective projects.

Likewise, service with groups sets in motion collective processes of learning that highlight specific skills and qualities not necessarily understood in the context of individual efforts such as cooperation, unity, justice, generosity, and consultation. As a heart pumps blood throughout the body, delivering the necessary materials and removes the unnecessary waste to keep the body functioning, so, too, does service function as the heart of a junior youth group by generating knowledge, renewing enthusiasm and momentum, providing life to the group through such action, and removing false assumptions or egotistical imaginings that may be obstructive to the purpose of the group. When service becomes the force of generating practical knowledge, remarkable effects can occur in the animators, the individual junior youth, and the groups as a whole.

In the context of this process, service provides the means for capacity-building at the level of individual, group, and community. Purdey, et al. (1994) argued that “capacity-building results from an ongoing and repetitive process of analysis, action, and reflection.” (p. 330). As groups engage in this process on their own accord and the individuals increase in their skills to reflect on their actions that they planned based on critical analysis of their social and spiritual reality, their capacity expands to perceive newer actions, understand the meaning of their expressed purpose to truly benefit the lives of others, and develop meaningful ways to invite others into the process.

It is important to emphasize the role of “critical reflection, reflective action, and social change at individual and collective levels” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 50) in empowerment within the context of JYGs determining acts of service they undertake. In the context of a JYG, the group can collectively decide to develop ways to address a particular problem in their community, but if they lack the intellectual and spiritual insight or are not given opportunities necessary to effectively analyze and understand the spiritual dynamics and sociopolitical processes that underly these problems, then they

have not been effectively empowered to change the causes. For example, a JYG may determine that their neighborhood had too much litter and planned and implemented a trash cleanup. But if this is done without discussions to understand the sociopolitical and spiritual forces that cause littering, uncleanliness, environmental harm, etc. then they will remain unaware of these forces and their impacts. Without conversation and critical reflection about the implications of the spiritual principles of unity, justice, cleanliness, truth, and the dynamics of education, processes of manufacturing, marketing strategies for products, industrial processes, and economic drives for profit over environmental stability, then the youth will likely not develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and insights for altering these forces that are causing the problem.<sup>vi</sup> Again, this cyclical process of learning puts an emphasis on action as well as developing the powers of expression to articulate, share, and communicate that learning and involve others in the social change endeavor.

### **Examples of Service Shaping Structure, Outreach and Training of the JYSEP**

To illustrate this point of service as a dynamic and creative force in experiential learning, some examples will be shared from the JYSEP. Where this emphasis of learning based on action manifests itself within the very structure of the JYSEP, is in the function of coordinator. For a coordinator of the program, it may be expected that his or her tasks and responsibilities rest only in the management, training, and outreach of the program. However, to ensure that the conversations, insights and learning shared with all those with whom he or she comes in contact is not derived merely from philosophy, theory, or training derived from a book or a space separate from experience, the coordinator is responsible for at least one JYG. Many insights, therefore, are drawn from his or her attempts to translate the concepts and training for animators into action, and, in turn, enriches the insights which might be shared. It is also through questions that others may discover what they need to do based on their experience of the group which is more intimate and textured than those of visiting outsiders. In the expansion of this program by outreaching to other organizations or institutions, the sharing of personal anecdotes as an animator to shed light on the effectiveness, unique character, and impact of this program, has proven to be more effective than times where I may only outline the key concepts.

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<sup>vi</sup> The idea of youth needing opportunities to examine the sociopolitical processes that underpin community problems to be effective agents to change the status quo derives from Jennings et al. (2006). However, because there is no discussion of the spiritual forces which impact the organization and structure of society, it is included in this conversation and related to the JYSEP. The trash cleanup example parallels the anti-tobacco campaign in Jennings et al., (2006), p. 50.



A challenge for trainers of animators has been to facilitate training in ways that the discussions are practical, relevant, inspiring to action, and form bonds of friendship among the collaborators. This atmosphere for training thus unites the group in seeking common understanding through action while moderating the amount of personal opinion, philosophizing, or excessive storytelling all of which seem to be a common tendency and detractor of the main purpose of training. This topic will be addressed later in greater detail. An effective skill, which directly relates to the experiential learning process central to themes of organizational behavior topics, is asking carefully thought-out open-ended questions to move the understandings forward without putting forth statements as solutions. Instead the collaborators in the training process gain insights from the discussion that comes from multiple perspectives rather than a one-sided dynamic of listening to lectures from an “expert”. This practice has been effective in not only empowering animators to face their own unique challenges, but also in ensuring that learning is derived from their knowledge and experience of their JYG and training materials. A relationship of frank and caring consultation encourages further commitment.

### **Skills Related to Collective Service**

In my experience as a trainer of the materials for animators of JYGs, there are several communication skills which not only became very relevant to my own efforts, but contribute to a useful vocabulary in articulating necessary skills that the animators themselves needed to develop. This, in turn, filters down to the junior youth groups where these skills are likewise useful in them achieving their goals. These concepts include, but are not limited to active listening, supporting, and differing (Griffin, 2008). In allowing training groups and JYGs to create their own guidelines for behavior and effectiveness in accomplishing the goals of the training, active listening was often mentioned. To help them articulate the concept and visualize its practice, sharing insights into these concepts from Halverson and Tirmizi (2008). For example, active listening consists of listening to understand, practicing empathy, suspending judgment, allowing those speaking to finish, hearing all ideas, asking clarification and open-ended questions (Griffin, 2008). These articulations became solid and tangible skills to remember and practice, particularly when animators in training saw their relevance to empowering others.

Other skills connected to the two concepts of supporting and differing consisted of building on all contributions, feeling free to take risks and freely express oneself, avoiding over-support, and probing all

ideas, (Griffin, 2008) allowing for mistakes to be reconciled by the group itself, and intervening towards the end or speaking last to unite ideas amongst the participants to help learning move forward. To use these ideas as ways of elucidating and forming tangible actions, created a richer vocabulary through which the animators could articulate and put them into practice.

The process of training animators has particularly benefited from this kind of experiential learning. The experiential learning training encourages the development of new skills, attitudes, and behaviors. This raising of capacity, becomes very significant in trying to create transformation. With a great diversity of experiences coming from countless cultures and individual experiences, the training materials encourage discussion that draws people into action, to consider the implications of certain concepts, how this knowledge may be applied to in their own reality, and so that they may also contribute to generating further knowledge. The training also consists of visiting already established JYGs, interacting with junior youth, beginning their own JYG, and having conversations with community members, particularly parents. The reflection that follows these actions, which goes through stages of publishing, processing, and generalizing creates organized discussions that flow into consolidated learning for future action in their own groups.

### **Service As Junior Youth Empowerment**

Service is central to the empowerment process of all ages, but it takes on a particularly significant role in the lives of junior youth because at this unique stage of physical, mental, emotional transition, they are encountering themselves and their surroundings in new ways that their search for understanding requires experimentation and action. In this stage, prior to taking on full responsibility in all aspects of life as an adult, the effectiveness of the preparations the youth undertake will determine their ability to respond to the needs of their world (RI, 2009). It is through service projects designed for the communities in which the junior youth live - the very environments in which they are growing up and being shaped by - that their groups plan, implement, and reflect upon their service projects. Preparation through action - or in other words, engaging in a process of experiential learning for service - becomes the process which unites their individual intellectual and spiritual development and the social transformation of their neighborhood. Skills, attitudes, and behaviors gained along the way are not relevant only to their school experiences or training in a profession, but rather, learning by engaging with

their own environment both individually and collectively, helps to empower them in ways that they may characterize their patterns of thought and behavior as agents of social renewal in whatever endeavors they pursue. It is important to note that skills based in action are directly connected to developing attitudes and behaviors necessary for service. One example of this is that qualities like truthfulness, kindness, perseverance, forbearance, and selflessness have a direct impact in the quality and effect of a group's service, reflection, and consultation. Service, in this light, is action carried out with certain attitudes, behaviors and qualities, for example purity of motive.

### **Service as Simultaneous Individual and Collective Transformation**

In the context of the JYSEP, however, acts of service have broader spiritual implications than merely providing opportunities for intellectual and collective outcomes like “effective and active organizational coalitions, pluralistic leadership, and an increase in participatory skills” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 50). Though these are key capacities for the benefit of communities, spiritual development is integral to the purpose for developing such capacities and for what end we use the capacities.

The concept of a “twofold moral purpose”, which is central to the vision of the program and the training of animators of JYGs, is particularly relevant in this discussion as it is what “impels individuals to take charge of their own spiritual and intellectual growth and contribute to the welfare of society...for a person's moral standards and behavior shape his or her environment and in turn are molded by the structure of society” (RI, 2009, U1, p. 27). An individual's whole being is impacted by the environment in which he or she is living, and one's inner life too is able to influence that environment. The individual and environment mutually react and cannot be separated from each other in a way that once one is changed, the other will in turn change as well. Humanity is organic with the world. Both individual and environment influence each other and must be developed simultaneously through service, reflection, and consultation if lasting change in the life of humanity is the purpose (Effendi, 1989, pp. 21-22). Therefore, a program which empowers youth to grow by developing skills as individuals to improve the very environment which is shaping who they are, provides an unparalleled and dynamic ongoing learning experience - one in which they can witness their own individual transformation, the accomplishments achieved in their community, and the building of new community dynamics. Opening up the environment of learning to the tangible reality of their neighborhoods brings immediacy to the experiences upon

which to be processed and reflected, as well as to the translating of high ideals into practice. The nature of this kind of service for the JYG often excites and challenges them because it “counts as real” (Heath, 1994, p. 289). Simultaneous and continuous incremental changes in both individual and community will in time reveal communities of empowered potential.

### **Significance of Service in Own Neighborhood / Social Environment**

Where other youth empowerment programs may seek to empower by teaching skills to the young participants to take back to their communities - often after traveling to another country, city, or a center for a relatively brief period of time - the junior youth and animators, as equal partners of the JYSEP, focus on serving the neighborhood in which they are growing up. They, too, work on building friendships and a group identity which further enables them to accomplish their goals and support each other during this challenging phase of early adolescence when so many new capacities are emerging from within themselves. To have built this group of continued support creates a unique space which clearly contrasts other programs which may strive to keep in touch from a distance or have a few periodic reunions.

It is in this context that the process set in motion to empower and transform becomes apparent in the cycle of action, reflection, group consultation, and study in which the group engages over a three-year period. To recognize in one’s self the ability to communicate profound ideas with clarity and to help others help themselves is a sure sign of growth and empowerment. Many opportunities for this expression and reflection comes through artistic and creative projects shared with their neighborhood, whether is be music, dance, film, theater, murals, or whatever the group decides. Effectively participating in the affairs of their own community will not serve only to empower the youth as they develop their powers of communication, decision-making, and action, but may also encourage the broader community to assist in the process at hand. In this way, junior youth discover their identity not in the context of a narrowly focused particular cause (for example, anti-violence, anti-drug, or political activism) or developing positive self-identities and ego-boosting activities, but through a process of learning how to apply simple skills immediately in their community and how to be of service to the needs of others.

Where self-discovery, “self-worth” and “enhanced self-efficacy” are valuable and important as some empowerment researchers emphasize (Chinman, 1998), it is not done through activities which bolster the ego, but rather through meaningful participation that involves overcoming challenges which is

essential for human development and actualizes their potential as they respond and adapt (Cargo et al. 2003, p. 577). More specific to the JYSEP, it is significant to develop a sense of committed service to humanity that does not derive its motivation from recognition or power but rather comes from a more selfless purpose to discover and serve the needs of others. In doing so, one's capacity to listen, communicate, act, reflect, encourage, etc. grows, creating a different kind of motive and source of self-exploration.

Rather than seeking to teach or indoctrinate young minds by telling them what to think or believe, the goal is to help them develop the basic skills, qualities, and powers that enable young minds to tap into their potential to take charge of their own development and contribute to the progress of their communities, to critically think, to analyze their local reality and assess the negative influences society has upon them, to remain hopeful, to express their ideas with clarity, to effectively collaborate with others, to make decisions and act on them, to seek evolving understandings and practices of justice, unity, equality, and so on.

Working within the realistic confines of their own material and human resources they are guided by an animator who is at once intimately concerned with their wellbeing, aware of their experiences due to the genuine friendships being built, and facilitating the learning process on which they have all embarked, they plan small projects which may organically evolve according to the community needs, the group's awareness and capacity, and the collaboration of others in the neighborhood. As the animators compassionately create a trusting and joyous environment and organize complimentary activities which further buttress the conversations and service projects, a common understanding of a shared social purpose grows, which empowers the group to take on new challenges.

### **Learning to Learn**

The experiential learning cycle thus takes on the character of an ongoing movement where the goal is not to achieve an end goal or to carry out a series of events, but rather to continually improve action directed at advancing themselves and their community. Inherent in this constant improvement is a search for new ways of behaving, new actions, and new attitudes. Learning, in a basic sense, should manifest itself as a change in behavior generated by experience (Lewin, 1951) which implies, yet again, the value of input coming from an experience in the environment one wishes to influence. Kurt Lewin

(1951) describes of cycles of change as moving from phases of being “frozen” or closed to learning, to “unfreezing” one’s attitudes and behaviors which may prevent new insights, and then upon creating an atmosphere conducive to analyze one’s old assumptions and behaviors one is willing to experiment or apply new learning in action. Once changes have taken place, and they have been understood in the context of one’s previous knowledge, the “refreezing” process is one of integrating the new insights into ways of perceiving and being (Lewin, 1951). Further experience in this reflective cycle of learning, particularly among younger people, seems to create a framework for action that is conducive to further and further learning with less “unfreezing” required as time goes on. That individuals learn best through the freedom “to make his or her judgments about learning” (NTL Institute, 1982, p. 56). Rather than a JYG expecting to achieve a final solution or methodology to the complex challenges that lay in their neighborhood, there becomes a process of constant growth and learning within a free environment where they are committed to not only to act on their own but to invite community members to take part as well. A JYG therefore should collectively strive, with the assistance of the animator, to create “the appropriate psychological climate” where “individual growth will take place” because “people have a [natural] predisposition to grow” (Rogers, 1970 as cited in NTL, 1982, p. 56).

The explicitness of this topic of learning and pursuing excellence in JYGs as they strive toward their goals, is one that must tap into their natural predisposition to grow. At the same time it must encourage attitudes of humility and eagerness to grow in their service to others. For young people, or all people for that matter, to consider gaining knowledge of an objective - yet changing - reality as a continuous process of learning and refined according to further experience and growing perspectives - as opposed to arriving at a complete and unchanging understanding of an objective reality despite our finite nature as human beings - is likely to spur on personal and collective efforts. For what but stagnation, ineffectiveness, self-righteousness remains when an individual, group, or institution believes themselves to be the source, channel, or authority of ultimate truth and reality.

A concern may be raised involving the potential negative impact of any effort to work for change in any community; that good intentions are not sufficient in efforts to transform a neighborhood and may very well lead to unintended consequences. However, the scope and nature of the learning process for which groups are striving implies that no effort will be the Solution, Answer, or Cure-All to all the ills

afflicting that community. So with the recognized imperfection and continuously evolving nature of the efforts and the welcoming of new agents of social action to participate in the change. The inevitable mistakes and challenges that arise will not be seen as problems or surprising catastrophes, but rather as sought after sources of knowledge, learning, raising of capacity, and opportunities for greater group unity. As this is an age group just beginning to leave the confines of childhood, the range of their projects may begin rather simple so basic skills, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors are developed. However, this does not mean that the youth cannot or should not strive to gain complexity in their service efforts. Rather, the extent to which they commit to, strive for, and envision the purposes of excellence in learning and service, will determine the quality and rate at which they progress.

To move forward based on experience and to encourage others into similar endeavors based on an intimate knowledge gained by working in the field, rather than vague or philosophical injunctions has an empowering and unifying effect. The cyclical and iterative nature of praxis - reflecting on actions taken as refinements and new efforts are continually made in the very neighborhood they are growing up - is an essential and unique feature of the JYSEP as well as a key process for all agents in the community transformation process. For how could individuals and communities come to be agents of their own development except through increasing numbers of protagonists engaging in a process of learning and working for a common purpose of transforming their environment. Theory, practice, action, reflection, consultation, and study are not separate parts in need of exercise, but rather, all are essential aspects of one process called learning. A culture of learning through service is thus a dynamic and welcoming culture of empowerment, action, reflection, and consultation that unites the ever-evolving process of the development of one's potential and working for the wellbeing of society. And the attitudes of humility and kindness, and seeking understanding that arise from this culture help create a framework that is striving to be, at once, friendly and flexible but self-aware and critical enough that it avoids routine, formula, indoctrination, or traditionalism. The challenge before us immense and to create a culture that has no precedent and which we can only faintly catch a glimpse, let alone claim to put into practice, yet we can strive to create a culture of learning how to learn through action so that we may approach this horizon.

### 3 Toward A Critical Framework for Community Peacebuilding: Structuring an Evolving Culture of Learning, Empowerment, and Unity

*“What we speak becomes the house we live in.” -Hafiz*

This last discussion is an analysis of how insight gained from an understanding of the interconnection of individual action, social discourse, and social structures may give rise, through the JYSEP, to a process that: builds human resources; collaborative relationships; inclusive discourses, identities, and social structures; and a moral framework for service-learning all for the purpose of reproducing evolving social dynamics conducive to the advancement of neighborhoods and structuration of unity, justice and peace.

Structuration theory, developed by Giddens (1979), is concerned with “conditions governing the continuity or transformation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of systems,” which in turn are “reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organised as regular social practices” (p. 66). Jabri (1996) focuses on the “reproduction of social systems and aspects of social life, through the activities of situated actors drawing upon and reproducing structural features of social systems” in the context of understanding how war is produced and legitimated. Where war is not purely a “product of characteristics innate within the ‘make-up’ of human beings” nor “a product of the structure of the international system” (p. 4) - for the purpose of this paper - neither are unity and justice. Rather, structuration, as an outcome of true empowerment, has to do with the ontological relationship between individual agency and social structures where unity and justice as a human action are products of human decisions made within the context of structured social relations. Therefore, if structuration is concerned with the creation of war, it can provide a lens to view the human actions, decisions, and structures which will create unity, peace, and justice. The JYSEP, in this context, will be viewed as an evolving vehicle for such structuration.

#### **Two Common Approaches to Social Transformation**

The JYSEP is founded on continually developing the concept of a twofold moral purpose through action. The twofold moral purpose is where an individual’s conscious purpose is to take charge of their own personal intellectual and spiritual growth *and* to contribute to the transformation of society. It is the



tree trunk out of which the structure, growth, discourse, and action of the Program branch, and an animating principle central to the actor aiming to advance society and respond to its needs. At the basis of this concept are assumptions about human nature, conflict and peace, community building and social transformation, and it seeks to explain the relationship of the individual and society through the JYSEP.

Historically, the development of the individual and society have been approached separately - as though one will be the source of true change or the answer to the problems a society is facing. An assumed solution has been that individuals must be improved through various processes of capacity building - whether religious, secular, political training and education. Once a critical mass of individuals has gained sufficient capacity then an automatic outcome is the effective transformation of the institutions of society. Thus, through the transformation of individuals into “good”, “saved”, or “skilled” collective justice will result. However, there are plenty of examples of good individuals unknowingly participating in institutions that perpetuate injustice or even defend it (Arbab, 1987).

Conversely, another approach to social change assumes that individuals are products of society and little to no change can happen unless the social and political structures which create the social system itself are changed. Therefore the change, which is often revolutionary in nature, may overlook the more immediate needs of the individual and justify all means toward the end of new government, religious institution, educational system, and other social institutions. In such context, the means to change may become divisive, unjust, and even violent in themselves though executed in the name of justice or general social good. But if the social order changes, and the individuals still lack the necessary skills and capacity to uphold a new social structure, it is likely the change will be temporary, conflict will rise as a balance is sought, and those who became victims in the process may likely retaliate (Arbab, 1987). Both views of social transformation oversimplify the nature of social change and reduce the process to include only a few aspects of the complex relationships between the individual and society. The change of one does not lead to the automatic change of the other, but rather both aspects must be considered and recognition of their relationship is essential in understanding social transformation. If society and its institutions were merely aggregates of individuals, indeed, all it would require for social change is the capacitating of one generation of young people to have skills and behaviors that create just social structures. But this implies that individuals can entirely step out of the influence of their environment.

However, because of the organic nature of humanity's relationship with the world, individuals cannot completely transcend the effect of the culture and social forces surrounding them. Rather, "the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those social systems" where institutions are shaped by human behavior but also the action of individuals is only meaningful in terms of its relationship to those structures (Jabri, 1996, p.78) through discourse, policies, and the organization of interaction and resources. At the basis of this discussion, therefore, is an ontological synthesis of the dichotomy between systems and individual agency.

### **Mutual Interaction of Individual Action and Social Structures**

A mere additive model of these two processes will not contribute to lasting social change, but rather, through an action-based exploration of the relationship between individual, discursive, and structural transformation there may be deeper insights into processes that can be set in motion simultaneously and reiteratively to create and strengthen new discourses, social structures, and individual capacities for service and action. The following is a quote in the animator training materials used for discussion concerning the interconnection of the individual and environment:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions. (Effendi, 1989, pp. 21-22)

As summarized in the training materials: "Developing one's potential and working for the welfare of society cannot be separated, for a person's moral standards and behavior shape his or her environment and in turn are molded by the structure of society" (RI, 2009, U1, p. 27). In this twofold moral purpose, one seeks to develop necessary qualities, attitudes, skills, and behaviors to grow in their own capacities to serve humanity and those newly developed behaviors and actions shape the environment in which they live. The environment comprised of by the structures and forces of society, in turn, shape that development.

### **Duality of Structures and Twofold Moral Purpose: Lenses for Impact of JYSEP<sup>vii</sup>**

Though complete separation of their mutual influence is impossible - insofar as humanity is organic with the world and thus constrained and molded by the structures which organize the social arena

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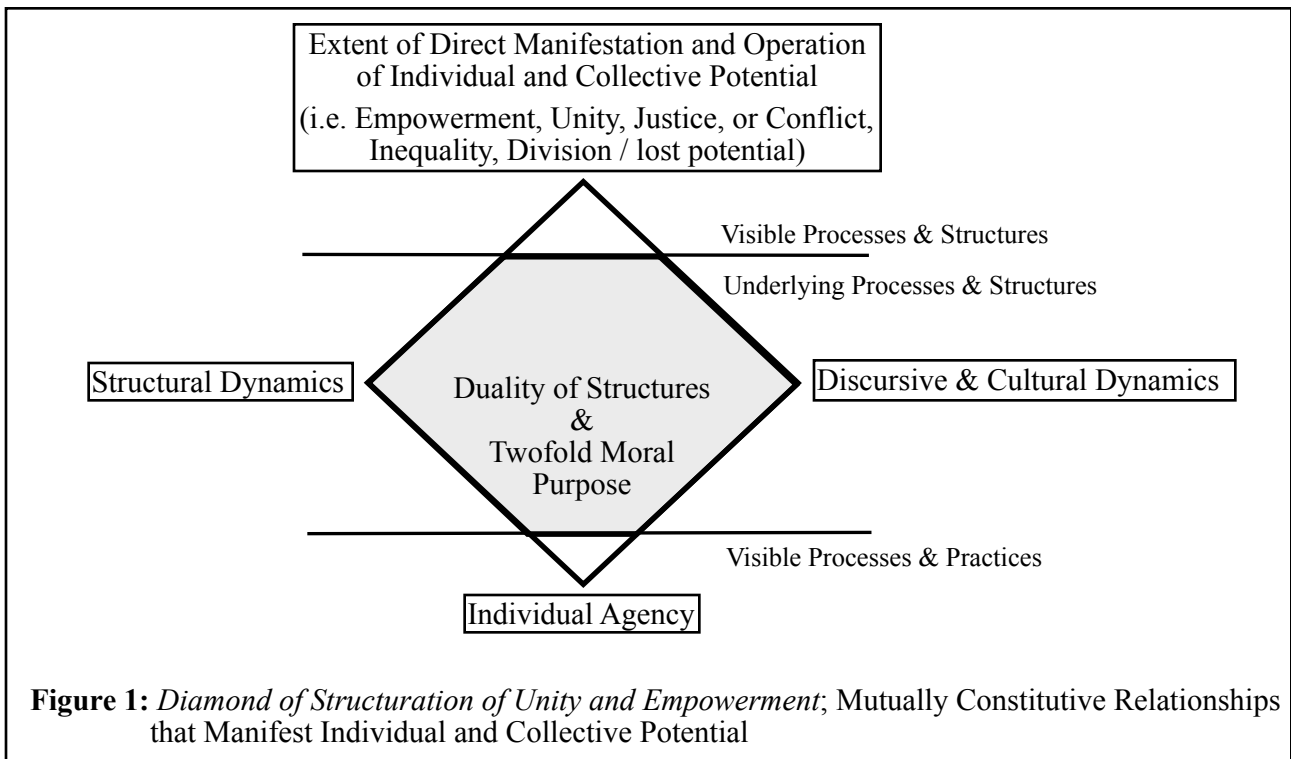
<sup>vii</sup> Figure 1 on page 40 offers a visual conceptualization of the interconnection of the duality of structures and twofold moral purpose.

- the individual is a constitutive part of the structure and can therefore act to influence the structure in which it operates. Johan Galtung's (1969) explanation of structural and cultural violence gives insight to how the material and social conditions of life contribute and perpetuate conflict, domination, dependency, and limit human potential. But to stop here with the analysis would imply a separation between the individual and the structure and thus overlook the role of social action and discourse in the formation and generation of those structures. Jabri (1996) explains that "to conceive of the individual as somehow separate from society is to negate the constitutive implications of normative and discursive processes which define the institutional continuities of social life" (p.8). Inherent in this connection then is the ability for the individual to contribute to the discourse which both "constrains and generates" the agency of individuals within the social system (p. 10). Thus, as Jabri (1996) states, the individual and society have a mutually constitutive relationship where conflict is not necessarily the result of a breakdown of social processes but is constitutive of those same processes (p. 65). The concept "duality of structures" then, will refer to this "interdependent constitutive relationship between the activities of social agents and the structural properties of social systems" (Jabri, 1996, p. 91). The "twofold moral purpose" pertains to the inseparable nature of the mutual reactions between the individual and the environment in creating individual and social transformation. The capacity of the individual is developed to change the social environment for the benefit of everyone and, mutually, the social environment is structured to empower individuals to be agents of this ongoing learning and change for the advancement of society. From this discussion, structuration theory provides a lens through which to view the nature and impact of the JYSEP program and a language to articulate such learning and action: namely, how agency is developed through critical thinking, holistic thinking, spiritual development, and the powers of expression and how social structures may be shaped through collective service and shifts in discursive content and patterns.

### **JYSEP: Structuring Unity, Justice, and Peace through Service and Discourse**

The vision, structure, and implementation of the JYSEP form a grassroots response to the sociopolitical forces at work and the ontological relationships between agency and structure that create, legitimate, and perpetuate conflict, inequality, and injustice in society. Functioning with a recognition of the duality of structures and developing the twofold moral purpose, the JYSEP seeks to conversely

structurate unity, justice, and peace. In this way, the JYSEP is setting a process in motion that builds human resources, collaborative relationships, inclusive discourses and identities, and a framework for action and learning all for the purpose of reproducing social dynamics conducive to the collective advancement of their neighborhood. At once, it seeks to: 1) empower young individuals to take charge of their own learning in the development of service-oriented skills, attitudes, behaviors, language, and actions for the purpose of bettering their own neighborhood and contributing to the transformation of their community. And 2) create experiential learning environments of reflection, consultation, and collaboration for individual and collective service which further widen the circle of community participation and give space for discourse transformation. Intrinsic to this form of learning is that formulas or solutions would reduce our ability to perceive the complexity of our social reality and commit the same fallacy of many modern and Western ideologies which presuppose the discovery of some theory that will, once implemented properly, effectively respond to all needs and problems.



### **Role of Discourse in Universal Participation for Structuring Unity**

The organic nature of lasting and deep change is very significant to the JYSEP. It would be difficult to deny that the causes of the ills of the current system - which perpetuate the hegemonic forces of disunity, inequality, and injustice - must be directly addressed. To expect however, that these causes

can and must be transformed quickly and forcefully would only perpetuate past aggressive and intrusive behaviors that have historically failed in social and economic development efforts throughout the world which involved an insider/outsider dichotomy of those being helper to the needy, economic-based solutions, and anything of a “top-down” methodology.<sup>viii</sup>

The purpose from the beginning of the JYSEP is the empowerment of entire neighborhoods and communities. The initial focus may start with JY, but the long-term purpose is to involve all people in the learning, action, and reflection process for community building and individual/collective transformation. A junior youth group can function as a portal to action, relationship building, elevation of discourse around themes of community advancement, which continually widens in support and participation by siblings, parents, other supportive adults, and potentially community organizations where time is focused on newly emerging dynamics of service and conversations. In this way, animators of JYGs are more than mentors to JY, but rather “renaissance” agents of social change and empowerment by engaging in conversations of spiritual import and community building, developing friendships with parents and others, all of which draw those who resonate with these purposes into action. Such a level of engagement is a crucial skill for animators to develop over time by going into neighborhoods and striving to establish genuine friendships that give rise to a shared understanding of the needs of their own neighborhood, exigencies of this time in human history, sociopolitical climate of their nation, and the means for addressing them. The nature of this interaction is not as an agent of an organization but as a true friend and expands youth empowerment to all ages to become protagonists of change. This is the first part of the organic process of discourse transformation which will be addressed in the following subsections.

A significant example of a JYG and animator committing to persistent long-term efforts which lead to a shift in community life, discourse, and empowerment involves a 13 member JYG that had been meeting for several years in an apartment complex of over 1,000 residents. Every weekend for seven months, the JY and children had been cleaning their courtyard and made garbage boxes, which in time caused neighborhood to stop throwing garbage on the ground. At a community gathering initiated by a grandmother of one of the JY, 80 members met to consult on improving the living environment and

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<sup>viii</sup> Consider critiques of social and economic development by: Herman E. Daly, John B. Cobb, Jr. Consider, too, the forceful, intrusive, violent nature of Colonialism and the ideologies and structures that legitimated this aggression. These approaches to reality still influence us. Consider Enlightenment philosophers and the pervasiveness of their assumptions in exalting reason and rationality to the point of discounting any other possible means of gaining in other cultures.

listened to her appeal that the youth were more concerned about their environment than the adults who were doing nothing about it. The animator suggested to the gathering that the JYG could also organize themselves to plant flowers in the garden, build a playground, repair the entrances to the houses, and even pave broken lanes in order to improve their environment. The neighbors asked the animator to lead and organize them and that they would give their full financial support. A mother spoke out saying that the most important task would be to work under the main building which were filled with dirty stagnant water bringing mosquitos and risk of malaria for everyone. The animator suggested the appointment of a task force, and one person to represent each of the eight entrances to the building complex. Once agreement was made about the amount each family would contribute to cover costs, each entrance would hire two laborers to help with the immense tasks ahead and residents would volunteer in assistance. The grandmother also addressed the mothers at the meeting and suggested that instead of sitting on the benches in the courtyard, the animator should be assisted in the intellectual and moral education of their own children. Inviting them to form study groups for each entrance, the animator began offering training to the mothers. So much activity in the neighborhood brought interest and new energy to the community and further reflection gatherings planned by the neighbors themselves followed to evaluate the progress of their plan and to consult about future steps. The task force also shares updates, information, and quotations from the study group materials and JYG in a newsletter distributed throughout. Though this is but one example, and the results are not guaranteed to mirror this exactly, it provides great insight into the possibilities of relatively quick social and cultural change in the life of a community sparked by a few youth dedicated to service, and the rapidity in which others may become intimately involved in such a vision and process of learning.

### **Transformation of Discourse and Structures through Construction, Attraction, and Attrition**

Striving to remain apart from reductionist and event-oriented frameworks like those which see change in terms of political revolution by focusing strategies and attack on those who most benefit from the rules of the status quo or those who are active oppressors, the efforts of Bahá'í-inspired programs are process-based, organic, sustaining, and non-adversarial. In the terminology of Michael Karlberg (2007), this is a strategy of “construction, attraction, and attrition” (p.151). He describes this process as a non-adversarial strategy to essentially change the “rules of the game” of the cultural institutions. By

withdrawing “time and energy from the old game in order to construct a new one” that is attractive by demonstrating for example “increased social justice”, then “it will begin to draw increasing numbers of people to it (i.e. the majority of people whose interests and values are not served well by the old game)” (p. 151). It is thus an attrition of participation in the old game that leads to the creation of new rules instead of “defeating oppressors or attacking those who profit most from the old rules” (p. 152).

The vision of peaceful neighborhood social transformation is a similar strategy on a smaller scale. As individual neighborhoods or communities engage in this learning process and form new ways for collective consultation, they may more keenly recognize the causes of the problems and injustices of society. While withdrawing their time and energy away from the systems already in place and redirecting their focus to the creation of new social dynamics, discourses, and actions, the atrophy of old practices will open possibilities for learning how to structure new system of organizing the affairs of society. It is therefore the relationships, attitudes, language, decision-making structures, and actions that become the focus of the change. The attrition of participation in conversations relevant to the old norms, patterns of behavior, and action generates momentum in a new model and thus attracts further numbers of potential agents of social change who may contribute to the richness of consultation and creative collective responses to community needs. Such attraction therefore is a component of social change which is not forced but natural, genuine, and a decision made exclusively by the potential collaborator. Again, this is the nature of the process of meeting JY and establishing new JYGs, but is also exemplified in the JYG that began picking up trash.

### **Discourse Situated between Individual Action and Social Structures**

As mentioned in the second section of this paper, service is at the intersection of the relationship between the individual and structures which effects a mutual transformation in each. Service helps to develop individual potential through the qualities that arise from sincere efforts to respond to the needs of others and to help empower them to take charge of their own development - thereby setting processes of learning and action in motion for collective community building and the creation and strengthening of new social structures. Service is thus intrinsically tied to the ongoing development of individual action and language used in articulating that learning and insight of their social reality to others. In taking on new responsibilities in one’s own development and participating alongside others in service, capacities

directly relevant to discourse must also begin to take form in new behaviors and skills - namely, that of language, communication, and elevation of discourse to principles of unity, learning, and action. The significance of communication in discourse and structuration are highlighted by Jabri (1996):

“The socio-cultural aspect of life emerges through linguistic communication and every such interaction draws upon and reproduces a rich mosaic of symbolic and interpretive meanings as well as the normative expectations which become structured through time and space. Communicative action, through the duality of structure, draws upon symbolic orders, interpretive schemes, norms and resources, in the reproduction of structures of signification, legitimation, and domination. **Social institutions are, therefore, implicated both in the enablement of communication and in its constraint or distortion. The ability to “make a difference” or to overcome institutional constraint in order to generate unhindered, open communication, constitutes what Habermas calls “emancipatory interest.”** (Emphasis added) (p. 161)

What is being suggested in this paper through the example of the JYSEP, and where an important emphasis must be made, is that norms of peace and unity are structured through “communicative action through the duality of structure” (Jabri, 1996) *and* through the discourse that arises from the process of experiential learning in service which informs and expands the conscious efforts to continually develop abilities for “emancipatory interest”. In other words, the interconnection of communication and discourse to learning and service must be seen as mutual processes welded together where action is based in consultative, unconstrained, collective discourse and such an evolving discourse advances the effectiveness and complexity of service.

### **Service Influences Social Discourse: Action Shapes Conversations**

In the context of discourse being situated between individual agency and social structures, service takes on yet another significant role in social and conflict transformation as an influencing force of social discourse in two ways. Firstly, how series of actions creates conversation, and secondly, how gathering for discourse is an act of service. For the former, if we consider the process of learning about community building and individual empowerment as an ongoing conversation in which the collaborators are participating, then each act of service can be seen as a contribution to this conversation and thus instrumental in the generation of data for reflection, and the capacity to articulate and respond to community needs. As experiences multiply and the conversation of action gains in complexity with the rising number of collaborators and those observing the impact of these acts of service, the diversity of ideas may contribute to a discourse focused on these unifying and transformative processes. The arena of action then, provides a space for a discourse that positions itself diametrically opposed to the status quo



of divisive pressures that emphasize the development of ego, competition, and accumulation of material wealth and power. Where these forces have historically created inequality of opportunities and knowledge, the grassroots nature of the JYSEP encourages universal participation in the generation and distribution of knowledge as gained by those participating in the action, study, and reflection process. By creating new opportunities to act and reflect on service ideals, the generation of knowledge for service through this learning cycle becomes an empowering process of inclusion. In other words, new language and new actions are created through processual efforts to translate ideas and words into action. The intimate link between language and action is why the cycle of study, consultation, action, and reflection brings words and deeds into agreement.

Another example of action shaping discourse is shown in the training pedagogy and materials for animators. Recognizing that the majority of learning will come through experience and reflection, the training materials are designed in a way to quickly advance the understanding of the participants, but not to dwell or delve as deeply as possible into each concept and theme. Rather, when new understandings arise through the material and brief discussion about the meaning, possible implications, and applications, the facilitator will move forward in the material to keep the rhythm of progress. Because learning must be genuine and related to each individual's process, it cannot take on a dogmatic character or one of pressure to believe or blindly accept certain ideas. It must be alive and dynamic knowledge that will grow through the action, training material, and group study which spurs them forward. It should also be noted that the facilitator is in a learning mode and does not function as a teacher or expert, but as one who has had more contact with the material and the experience of animating.

The second way that service influences discourse is in the act of gathering for the purpose of learning and refining action. The gathering for reflection of any group that has been historically marginalized by the status quo or given unequal opportunities to meaningfully participate in the affairs of their community is an act of service in itself. These groups who chooses to create an open space to unite for open dialogue about their experience and to pursue understanding which might give rise to ideas that spur action are actively combining discourse and social action. Such an act of gathering produces spaces for an explorative discourse that has an emancipatory interest. For example, young people gathering to support each other; sharing in their daily experiences, learning and challenges; and developing powers of

expression together for the purpose of service to their community is also a remarkable service to the community in which they are an integral part. Consistently meeting reflects their strength in taking charge of their own development for the betterment of their social environment.

### **Characteristics of the JYG Discourse: Arts, Equal Participation, and Questioning the Status Quo**

The spaces that JYGs are striving to create and the animators are helping to construct may take on an artistic character similarly described by Lederach (2000) as needing “a predisposition, a kind of attitude and perspective that opens up, even invokes the spirit and belief that creativity is humanly possible” (p. 38). The JYSEP, engaging as a systematic yet creative process is, at once, scientific in the continual experimentation in service and reflection upon the new data, and artistic by constructing spaces for dialogue and consultation for creative action that gives rise to what was previously unimagined. Arts “can serve as triggers for reflection as well as a medium through which youth can express their views and messages regarding social issues” (Messias et al. 2005, as cited by Jennings et al. 2006, p. 48). In the case of the JYSEP, arts are not solely for the sake of the youth, but to be directed at engaging others in communal discourse for change. Striving to articulate one’s experience and understanding with others, especially in the context of reflectively refining of action, provides opportunities for a diversity of experiences and ideas to be shared, which potentially influences the way one perceives their social reality and the ways they can interact with it. Therefore, strategies of action become creative and dynamic according to the quality and effectiveness of the dialogic and reflective space.

“Equal participation” of the animator and JY and “the right to question the validity of claims of normative and factual statements in a dialogic process which aims at reaching free rational consensus about such claims” consists of the “ideal speech situation” that Habermas describes as an key aspect in the structure of discourse (as cited in Jabri, 1996, p. 164). Other constructive qualities conducive to creating spaces for new discourses and actions are described as an “emergent ‘rational consensus’ [that] results from unhindered dialogue...where every statement is interrogated in terms of validity claims” (Jabri, 1996, p. 165). Where this particularly relates to a JYG is when the JY can openly question and challenge assumptions and contradictions they see in the functioning of society to the point where they can arrive at a service project that responds to their perceived needs of whom they aim to serve and invite to be involved in their project.

A goal of the animator is to achieve these dynamics; to create an environment where decisions made for the activities and service projects are based in consultation that allows for this kind of participation, openness, and commitment to a process of individual and collective transformation. In this context, Jabri (1996) may call a JYG, “a zone of peace based upon dialogic principles” because it makes possible the “inter-subjective moral understanding based on participation, empathy, and recognition” which is founded in “a procedural framework which enables a questioning of dominant norms” (p. 165)

### **Skill-Building and Training Structure for Discourse Transformation**

Many of the concepts in the animator training come directly from the writings of the Bahá'í Faith - though they are presented as statements - the meaning, implications, and application of which are explored in the context of our daily lives and as potential animators. A statement by the Ruhi Institute (2007) in the first training book to those who are collaborating in the process, touches upon some dynamics conducive to the emancipatory interest and unity sought and needed in creating a culture of learning, discourse, and action. In this statement it is recognized that, “Clearly, there is nothing wrong in having and expressing one’s own ideas; but an understanding of the [Bahá’í] Writings must begin by focusing the mind on what is being read before allowing one’s imagination to roam and personal opinions to flow freely” (p. 1). The purpose is to develop “a capacity to focus attention on the immediate and explicit meaning of sentences” which will be “contributing to the creation of unity of thought in our communities, since such a unity can only be attained when personal opinions are illumined by Divine Wisdom” (p. 1). It is easy for profound statements to spark many ideas, stories, and experiences in the participants, but those thoughts can be shared in any other social environment. However, to exercise the skill of focusing on the meaning of the concepts at hand allows for the group to arrive at common understandings of the ideas which will gain greater meaning through discussion of their implications and application. Quickly, the purpose, momentum, and concepts for understanding can become clouded by too many additional ideas, personal anecdotes that the material itself is lost or the actual insights are dropped in a sea of ideas. To practice this skill in reflection and consultation with others outside of the training environment will produce similar impacts in neighborhoods.

This training experience is very different than most classrooms, study and discussion groups, though it may parallel some aspects of trainings which use the experiential learning cycle. The Ruhi

Institute's (2007) experience suggests that efforts which "prolong consultation on each idea beyond [three levels of meaning: words, implication, application] by introducing too many related concepts, actually diminish to a great extent the effectiveness of the courses." To avoid the habit of speculation that often stems from prolonged discussions it is further suggested to avoid questions like "what does this mean to you?" and rather seek to,

nurture the development of communities which look first to the Writings as the principal basis of consultation whenever they are faced with a question. We believe that the habit of thinking about the implications of the Writings with minimum of personal interpretation would eliminate a great share of disagreements which afflict consultation in many communities, and would make the activities of our communities more effective. (p. 2)

When animators approach their own learning by returning to the training materials and core principles of the program while reflecting and consulting after each JYG meeting, conversation with parents, animator and community gatherings, the outcome will be twofold. Firstly, the animators will be facing their challenges and improving upon their efforts by planning new action and applying their insights that arise from their consultations - thus effecting a transformation in their own lives and the lives of the community. Secondly, a growing contingent of collaborators may develop similar skills that may put unified and diverse ideas into action. Correspondingly, JYGs, though taking on characteristics unique to their purpose and needs of the JY, will grow in unity of thought and action from this kind of focus and cycle.

### **Developing Language and a Moral Framework**

Infused into the structure and engine for action for JYGs is the development of language in two ways. Firstly, developing language skills for articulating ideas and concepts, making decisions and transforming them into action in the JY's lives and as the collective JYG. In this way, the goal for the discourse of JYGs and collective consultations of animators mirrors Jabri's (1996) articulation of how communication is situated in participation and difference: "Communication implies a process of common discovery, the emergence of a "we", through a process of unrestricted questioning and dialogue" (p. 161). At each level of the program, study, discourse, reflection, action and consultation facilitates a process of common discovery and the establishment of inclusive identity. There is a strict avoidance of dogma, rhetoric, and ideology which are used to impose opinions as may be the case in Chanteur's (1982)

description of “pseudodialogues.” Such an environment that develops young minds to eloquently expressing their ideas in their language and individual/collective service is an empowering one.

A simple example from the JYSEP of this first discursive approach - and likely any youth empowerment program that incorporates service into its action - is when a group of these young individuals approach the adults or institutions in their neighborhood or are carrying out a service project which they planned. These acts open up conversations with those who observe such efforts. Immediately, the purpose and vision of the group are naturally shared with community members and new relationships can be formed with those who resonate with the aims of the group. As these simple service projects strengthen the JY and their group, they may grow with more JY who want to be a part of the same process but have not yet been invited or previously lacked an understanding of the group’s purpose. Through this organic process of building friendships - which, at its inception came from inquiring amongst any JY in a neighborhood if they think it would be important to have a group that supports each other in their efforts and to help their neighborhood - the JY are provided with many opportunities to express their vision and goals, raise their own understanding of them, and to center their conversations around those of service and individual and collective development.

Secondly, the connection between language and building a moral framework for decision-making is directly related to discourse development and individual/collective service. As has been said previously, there is a relationship between language and the way one perceives and interacts with their environment; the words we use to describe our understanding and perception of reality shape the decisions we make. Therefore, materials which purport to empower and assist in the development of a moral framework must take this connection into account:

One can identify, for example, volumes of educational material in which moral concepts are presented as a series of virtues, obligations, rules and facts aimed at improving behavior without elements of language and thought that enhance spiritual perception and foster commitment to social transformation. The approach suitable for a program dedicated to the spiritual empowerment of junior youth will necessarily pay attention to the role of language in the creation of moral structure. (RI, 2009, p. 30)

By avoiding the seemingly widespread relativism of standards, tendency to accept negative cultural norms, moral ambivalence, and paternalism, the materials designed for the JY are open and explorative, made relevant to their own lives, and trust in the integrity of junior youth as community members (RI, 2009, U3, p. 31). Jabri (1996) states that “society is a product of language, social determination, and

human behavior” (p. 24) and so the shaping of language plays a role in the creation of counter-discourses that step outside the status quo to create new social dynamics. The animator training materials explain that what is needed more than a set of rules in a society of many contradictions and relativistic attitudes is a moral framework which enables them to distinguish that which leads to their benefit or hindrance, and selfless service (RI, 2009, U3, p. 30). Skills of critical reflection assist youth to effectively to navigate through the complexities of life, far more than dogma or a list of dos and don'ts. With the development of a high purpose, moral framework, and powers of expression an individual becomes empowered to ask new questions and find previously undiscovered insights that pertain to a reality that presupposes a noble human nature, an interconnected reality, and that actions done for the purpose of helping others will prepare young minds to live fruitful lives.

Instead of asking themselves, “What should I be when I grow up?” or “Is it right or wrong for me to do this?”, the process of decision-making may take the form of questioning “What is most conducive to me fulfilling my greatest potential to be of service to my family, my community, and even the world?” In this way, it is based in a purpose that transcends the individual and moves a person to action and service, rather than materialistic motivations. Decision-making is performed then in the context of a unity-building, service-oriented purpose. For example, JY will have a richer vocabulary that sheds insight into one's behavior by asking, "How does violence, taking drugs, backbiting, or lying contribute to my goals of being of service and developing my intellectual and spiritual self?" An answer to which may be, “None of those things contribute to my goals and so I should not do it. Instead I could...” Of course this is merely an oversimplified example, but it demonstrates the need for language which gives meaning, expression, and action to lofty purposes and sheds light on the high capacity latent within young people. If an animator can spark the natural desire for progress in a spiritual sense, then junior youth may ask themselves how they can overcome the negatives forces around them and ensure that they are always walking a path of service in which they learn to increasingly manifest virtues of justice, generosity, truthfulness, purity, forgiveness, etc.

Another example to demonstrate the significance of language is found in the JY materials titled, *Walking the Straight Path*, where fables collected from many different cultures are read and discussed. These stories have historically been told with ambiguities that make the ethical behavior unclear, but they

have been rewritten in this book to foster ethical actions. Rather than a fox being portrayed as having the admirable quality of being a trickster for flattering a crow to sing and lose its cheese, the fox is shown to be a liar seeking his personal gain by praising the crow for qualities it possessed and others it did not. It is here that the participants begin a discussion about the foxes behavior and why the crow fell a victim to it, the JYs own experiences of flattery, what situations they see in their daily lives where they may be at risk of flattery, and how they might protect themselves against this possibility. It may become particularly significant conversation for junior youth in the context of social pressures and interactions with the opposite sex. The language used in the story, the comprehension and vocabulary questions, and the discussion that follows in the light of their own lives, provides a rich conversation about practical efforts they can make to apply that knowledge in their everyday interactions with others.

Now that the JYSEP has been gaining experience, what is foreseen for those JY who graduate from the Program after 3 years of participation is their continued development by engaging in materials designed for those 15 and up; especially the animator training. As learning, service, intellectual and spiritual development are all part of a seamless development process, the JY who continue in these materials engage in the training and implementation of the JYSEP on a level that far excels many other animators. Firsthand experience as a JY in a JYG, becoming reacquainted with the JY materials through training and using them as potential animators will further deepen their understanding and capacity to articulate and apply that knowledge in service for individual and collective transformation. This new generation will have such keen insight based on multiple levels of experience, that their vision of the potential of the JYSEP and capacity of JY will introduce to communities a new worldview that embraces the nobility and oneness of humanity in action.

## Conclusion

*We must not hope to be mowers,  
And to gather the ripe gold ears,  
Unless we have first been sowers  
And watered the furrows with tears.*

*It is not just as we take it,  
This mystical world of ours,  
Life's field will yield as we make it  
A harvest of thorns or of flowers.*

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The interconnection between language, service, and social discourse is particularly significant in individual and collective transformation in the JYSEP, because the source of knowledge, practice, and

creativity is based on the construction of an environment for committed processes of practical discourse, decision-making, and action through the practice of the experiential learning cycle for service. The building of this social space in a community where the participants live and interact provides an arena for the study and application of qualities and concepts related to the unity of humanity, building unity, investigation of reality, and the advancement of civilization, thus generating knowledge through service and subject to questioning and dialogue. Knowledge generated in the context of these principles gains meaning through its practice, reflection, and refinement through consultation. The extent to which this experience and context-based knowledge is disseminated and applied as well as how effectively others are invited to envision and participate in such processes correlates to the equality, justice, and emancipatory effect the new evolving discourse has on the status quo of the community.

Thus, by transforming our language through an organic learning process founded in efforts to translate spiritual concepts into action in our daily lives and social environment, we will in time gradually transform our self-conceptions and conceptions of human nature that shape our actions giving rise to diverse and previously unimagined processes and strategies for creating a unified and advancing society reflective of the inherent oneness of humanity. Or using terminology similar to that of Jabri; in its structure, content, implementation, training and educational processes, action, and learning, the JYSEP seeks to structurate an evolving culture of learning and unity so that humanities full potential may eventually manifest itself at all levels of the human condition. And even more so, that it may “produce and reproduce in the practices, forms of meaning, discourses, and institutional frameworks which are implicated in the reproduction of” the oneness of humanity, unity, justice, and peace “as a social continuity manifest across levels of social action” (Jabri, 1996, p. 175).

Through the lenses of the content and pedagogy of the JYSEP training and education materials, David Kolb’s model of experiential learning, Vivienne Jabri’s critical analysis and structuration theory, and insights from critical youth empowerment by Jennings et al. (2006), this study had significant findings for not only youth empowerment programs but for all those engaging in efforts to transform society as well. What this study found is that the implications of a conception of the nobility of human nature and the insight into the inherent and necessary capacities that youth possess for the advancement of the human family - dynamic and regenerative capacities to overcome the individualistic, unjust, and



divisive forces of society - creates a unique framework of service and learning for the development of ongoing processes of study, action, reflection, and consultation. This framework: 1) empowers individual agency towards building unity through systematic action, discourse, envisioning capacity, building language skills and a moral framework, 2) transforms communal discourse into inclusive, consultative, emancipatory processes of learning that are applicable to daily life through the dialogic spaces it opens, and 3), creates new social structures that legitimate and systematize these processes of learning about the actions and discourses that are conducive to peacebuilding. The vision is the creation of an evolving culture of learning, service, and unity which may lead to the manifesting of the oneness of humanity, revealing of human potential, and pursuit of global prosperity.

This framework has instructive elements for empowerment programs in the ways it applies an understanding of the mutually constitutive relationship between individual agency and the social structures and thus demonstrates the organic and non-adversarial nature of individual and collective transformation. Acts of service simultaneously contribute to the intellectual and spiritual development of the actor and the social environment in which it is enacted to the extent that is followed by purity of motive and a process of reflection, study of training materials, consultation, and refined action. It has been seen that through the repeated process of action and critical reflection within this relationship of individual and community, unity is the generative force that brings the fruits of these efforts and therefore emphasizes the need for universal participation. Such environments - which focus on the development of language and moral framework that enables young people to analyze and assess the forces of their social system - empower individuals and communities to see themselves as agents of social change with great capacities to build unity and champion justice, contribute to the collective generation of applicable knowledge, and processes that transform the social discourse and structures to release human potential.

Clearly, there is much to explore in terms of the implications and application of these spiritual and intellectual themes. One of the greater challenges must have to do with the assessment of the progress of these processes of learning and transformation, which, at the many levels these complex social factors intersect, can be overwhelming. As JYSEP coordinators, animators, JY, and community members gain experience and learning, and as the institutions and structures develop in their assisting of that generation

and dissemination of knowledge throughout the globe, the global program as a whole will develop more effective means to not only evaluate particular and broad outcomes but to also respond to the increasingly complex social dynamics (such as race, class, gender, culture, etc.). The built-in nature of constant reflection and assessment within the structure of JYGs, communities, groups of animators in small and large regions, between coordinators, and on a global scale, much will be learned in the upcoming years which will help fortify these ongoing processes and ensure greater insight into our human nature, the potentialities of youth, and the character of conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Empowerment is not the bequeathing of power by the powerful to the powerless, as though there is a finite amount of power that has to be poured from the top to those below in order to reach some sort of “just” equilibrium. Instead, empowerment is the process that manifests the latent and intrinsic power in all people to take charge of their own spiritual and intellectual development for the purpose of advancing their community and nation towards a unified, just, and peaceful global civilization. Through selfless service; creating learning communities that study, critically reflect, and act; engaging in conversations and discursive processes at individual and institutional levels; and forming new social structures and norms that legitimate and perpetuate this purpose, JY may form the spearhead of this ever-evolving global movement. The catalyst of this movement therefore, through which the JY are a channel, is critical and spiritual education that empowers the building of unity-based, globally-centered worldviews which manifest in a grassroots framework that brings youth to the forefront of community building and is porous in nature by encouraging the participation of all community members in the process, thus engaging neighborhoods in a potentially dynamic processes of transformation.

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## APPENDIX A

# *Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute* **Junior Youth Empowerment Program**

The empowerment program develops two age groups:

- Junior youth (11-15)
- Animators/Mentors (16+)

### **Junior Youth Development:**

- Youth ages 11-15 participate in a youth group. These groups are:
  - A group of friends who support each other in their efforts to improve themselves and their community
  - A place to systematically discuss and learn to apply concepts of justice, unity, peace, and generosity in their daily lives
  - An environment to study specially prepared materials designed to develop their abilities to read, write, and express their ideas; to consult and make decisions upon which they take action
  - A place to become empowered to protect themselves against the negative forces of society by dedicating themselves to a life of service to humanity

### **Animators/Mentors Development:**

- Youth/Young Adults (16+) are trained to start, serve, and empower groups of junior youth to develop their intellectual and moral capacity through social action. The training consists of the following:
  - Learning about the development of character in one's own life and in the life of young people
  - Gaining an understanding of this unique stage of life and their needs
  - Study of the curriculum for junior youth groups and its implementation
  - Reflection on the inherent and potential capacity of junior youth
  - Developing skills of dialogue facilitation, empowerment, and being a true friend
  - Helping the participants establish junior youth groups in neighborhoods
  - Accompanying new mentors in the early stages of group formation

#### Qualifications for Mentors:

Good-standing citizens (usually ages 16-35) who are willing to be trained and to serve their community in the capacity of a junior youth mentor.

Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute  
Created 2010

## APPENDIX B

### Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program Overview

The Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute (MCBI) is a non-profit organization providing educational and service programs to children, youth, and adults of all backgrounds, faiths and denominations. These programs are designed to empower individuals by developing their spiritual and intellectual capacities for the purpose of service to their community. The Institute serves communities and neighborhoods in five states: Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

Recognizing the inherent, growing, and untapped capacity of junior youth (11-15 years old) to contribute towards the betterment of the world, the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP) at MCBI is designed to assist them in developing and manifesting this capacity in their own neighborhoods. **Helping junior youth to navigate this crucial stage of their life by developing a moral structure to distinguish from right and wrong, their powers of expression, and decision-making skills, this program sees youth as agents of social change and community building.** In these years of transition for a historically underestimated, misunderstood, and neglected portion of our population the physical, emotional, and mental changes take on special significance in the context of emerging new powers, awareness, and consciousness. Therefore, it is in this period when the junior youth in this program embark on a life dedicated to the service of humanity and channeling their energies towards service to their own neighborhoods and communities.

The Institute provides training and practice for youth and adults (usually 18-35) to form **junior youth groups that meet once a week to explore concepts of justice, unity, cooperation, and equality in the context of their daily lives by learning to translate these ideals into practice.** Through a process of action and reflection - a process most central to the purpose of these junior youth groups - they strive to apply this learning in their own neighborhoods and communities through service activities. Those who become trained are called an **“animator” whose multifaceted role is one of being a true friend and wise advisor who helps the junior youth remain hopeful and assured that they will not only protect themselves against the negative influences of society, but also recognizes their nobility as human beings and willingness to effectively contribute to their families and communities.** As they engage in these activities, they find themselves in the company of like-minded individuals who become their co-workers in this process of building up a new civilization. Seeing themselves as champions of justice, they become a part of a global community of youth dedicate to spiritual and intellectual excellence.

The facilitation of these groups acknowledges the need for the junior youth to be the animating force of their endeavors and for them to express their hopes and needs - a junior youth group for junior youth by junior youth. The animator assists them in articulating and accomplishing the group's evolving goals by creating an environment of mutual support conducive to developing the perception and patterns of thought and behavior that will characterize them as lifelong contributors to the betterment of humanity.

Training sessions are designed to reach out to interested youth and young adults in pursuing this unique volunteer opportunity. MCBI offers both weekend intensive training sessions at the institute or weekly training sessions in communities themselves. In an experiential learning method, the training emphasizes learning through practice and thus all volunteers will be accompanied by experienced animators until they feel comfortable and confident in their skills to establish and sustain a junior youth group of their own. MCBI primarily focuses on establishing junior youth groups in neighborhoods or in collaboration with after-school programs, youth organizations, and youth programs.



## APPENDIX C

### Cycles of Action for Animators and Junior Youth Groups (JYGs)

**An animator in training will likely participate in most or all of the following actions as a part of the experiential learning process:**

1. Studying *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*
2. Meeting Junior Youth (JY) and getting to know them
3. Studying JY materials and how
4. Observing established JYGs
5. Co-animate
6. With the accompaniment of another animator, starting up a JYG in a neighborhood and co-animating the first 4 meetings
  - a. Facilitate discussions about service, spiritual and intellectual excellence, study materials, create a JYG pact for how they will behave and accomplish their goals
7. Maintaining a JYG of one's own
8. Attend monthly Animator Gatherings to share and reflect on experiences, challenges and learning with others to improve one's ability to animate; study the training materials; contribute to the quality, expansion, and strengthening of the program

#### **Responsibilities of Active Animators:**

1. Animate their JYG(s) at least once a week, as decided upon by the JY
2. Establish relationships with parents of JYG to progressively share the vision of community building, build friendships and network in the community,
3. Study JY materials with JY
4. With the JY, plan and implement simple service projects
5. Use the arts to engage the interests of the JYG and contribute to development of talents and learning of spiritual themes
6. Recreational activities
7. Attend monthly Animator Gatherings
8. Assist other animators with their JYGs or help new (or in-training) animators establish new groups
9. Assist coordinators in planning county-wide JYG gatherings for the many JY to share their experiences and learnings with each other and build new friendships to see wide-scope of the Program
10. Call, encourage, and spend time socially with other animators (the goal is for the animators to build their friendships and support the program)

#### **Responsibilities of Coordinators of the JYSEP:**

1. Animate a JYG of their own to ensure learning, accompaniment, advice and encouragement are coming from study and experience as opposed to philosophy
2. Actively seek out new animators and invite them to learn about the JYSEP
  - a. The expansion of the program relies on the development of increasing numbers of animators, so this task takes a lot of priority

- b. Ideally, animators should be raised up from the neighborhoods where JY already live so that the community is able to take charge of its own development (as opposed to animators coming in from outside that neighborhood)
- 3. Train new animators through the experiential learning and praxis-based training process
- 4. Call and visit animators to learn about their material needs, challenges, and learnings
  - a. Use this insight to assess the needs of the program as a whole and plan the monthly Animator Gatherings
- 5. Assess receptivity of neighborhoods for potential animators and JYGs by visiting and meeting community members
- 6. Maintain accounts of numbers of animators, animators in training, JYGs, numbers of JY in each group, locations of JYGs, trainers of animators, etc.
- 7. Visit periodically each JYG to see firsthand and reflect with the animator afterwards

**Outline of how a new JYG is may be established in a neighborhood:**

- 1. If a neighborhood has any animators in training then their natural connection to that community is necessary for meeting JY. If, however, an animator does not live in a neighborhood with many JY or JY who are not receptive then the animators should assess a neighborhood by walking around to see if it may have more than 10 JY.
- 2. If there are 10+ JY, then engage in a conversation with the JY by letting them know your names, who you are, and that your purpose for being in the neighborhood is to see if anyone their age might be interested in being a part of a group that wants improve their community by doing acts of service, becoming friends that support each other.
  - a. In this initial stage it seems to be important to ask questions and get to know each other personally while still engaging them in understanding how they see the neighborhood being improved and how they might be able to accomplish these ideas.
  - b. It may also be important to ask questions about how included and listened to they feel by adults, teachers, parents, and peers and see if they would find it useful to have a group of friends get together regularly to begin figuring out how they can be of service and develop themselves
- 3. If they know of any JY who are interested, or are interested themselves, ask if they can direct you to them or any friends they might know who would like to be involved
  - a. Most JY seem to be interested at this stage and willingly introduce the animators to their groups of friends.
  - b. It is also a good idea to meet their parents soon after this point so you can share with them the purpose and benefits of this program. Building relationships with parents is central to the quality, effectiveness, and consistency of the JYG
- 4. Visiting each friend and sharing with them the vision of the program should lead to the gathering of 10 or more JY from the neighborhood, all of whom should be invited shortly after getting parental permission to gather together as a group and have their first meeting.
- 5. In the first meeting, it seems to be useful to play a game that encourages everyone to get to know each other better and break the ice.
  - a. The training materials for the animators (RI, 2009, U3, p. 54) which is based on many experiences of animators from around the world, suggests that in the first meeting it is important to go over several key topics to effectively establish a JYG:

- i. Firstly, it is important to go over the vision and purpose of the group again by asking them why they think a group like this is important, and why they want to be a part of a group like this.
- ii. Secondly, a conversation about what individual and collective service is deepens their understanding, and a list of simple service projects responding to what they see the needs of their community to be can be generated
- b. Another topic of conversation that the animator should have in the first meeting is about spiritual and intellectual excellence and what these mean in our daily lives and in our group.
  - i. Asking them questions about what excellence is and sharing with them a quote like the following seems useful: "Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday."
- c. At this point, cooperative games or recreation can be played to further strengthen the group and relationships

As said before, there is no strict formula and this is only a broad outline that may give a picture of how to go about the establishment of a JYG. In animator trainings, role-plays and broad scripts are often used to practice having these initial conversations with JY and other community members in sharing the vision of the program and inviting people to participate. Scripts or methods that are too specific often detract from the initial purpose which is to establish friendships with JY and leads to awkward and seemingly insincere interactions.