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**The Urgency of Educational Reform in the United States of America: Lessons Learned  
from Fethullah Gülen**  
**Dr. Sheryl L. Santos**  
**Texas Tech University**

**Abstract**

The United States of America is facing many challenges to its educational system and infrastructure. However, I believe that none of these challenges are as critical to our survival as teaching students to embrace their humanity as members of a culturally and linguistically pluralistic nation in a dynamically changing world. Undeniably, we live in an interdependent world where actions taken in one part of the globe can upset the balance of nature worldwide, destroy ecosystems, and create social, economic, and political instability causing human suffering of catastrophic proportions; of this we see proof daily. It is simply not adequate to define educational excellence in terms of academics and test scores. The exclusion of the intercultural attitudes, communication skills, and behaviors that prepare students for living, learning, and working in a world in transition condemns our youth to lives of ignorance and mediocrity. Citing the successes of Gülen-inspired educational projects, this paper will discuss the need for curricular innovations in the American educational system and how the educational philosophy and ideas of Fethullah Gülen might be applied. The application of intercultural and interfaith dialogue as viable approaches to fostering peace, justice, and harmony will be examined in the context of our national identity and educational foundations.

**The Urgency of Educational Reform in the United States of America: Lessons Learned  
from Fethullah Gülen**

As an American public school teacher, university professor, and College of Education Dean, I have experienced K-16 schooling in places as diverse as New York, Texas, California, Kansas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands over the past four decades. I write this paper both from the heart and based upon the authority of my research in the field of bilingual/multicultural education. To say that the United States of America is facing many challenges to its educational system and infrastructure is indeed an understatement. However, I believe that none of these challenges are as critical to our survival as a viable nation as teaching students to embrace their humanity as members of a culturally and linguistically pluralistic democracy in a dynamically changing world. Realistically, however, curricular reform and the desired outcomes of education in a given nation, is dependent upon the economic and political elites in control of funding and policies. Education is tied to a person's employment opportunities, higher education completion, standard of living, and other variables. So, it is very difficult to imagine that a nation such as the United States, with a decentralized education-system in which each state operates its schools independently, will ever achieve consensus about what and how children are to learn. However, based upon the writings and teachings of the imminent Turkish Islamic scholar and philosopher, M. Fethullah Gülen, I feel compelled to make the case for a higher order of thinking to pervade all educational institutions in the United States. Irrespective of one's personal politics, there are truths that are self-evident. It

is self-evident that all students must come to recognize that we live in an interdependent world; that we all must learn to be responsible stewards of our earth; that we must learn to respect human diversity in all its dimensions. Undeniably, we live in an interdependent world where actions taken in one part of the globe can upset the balance of nature worldwide, destroy ecosystems, and create social, economic, and political instability causing human suffering of catastrophic proportions; of this we see proof daily. The transmission of past knowledge coupled with the foresight to meet the challenges of the future for the purpose of survival, allows human beings to perpetuate life on this planet. Ultimately, the essence of what we should be seeking through education is wisdom. I believe that we urgently need a national and international dialogue among the leaders of our education communities.

In the post-September 11th world, for example, I fear that children are learning to have enemies based upon political stereotypes and propaganda. It is critically important that children learn to care about victims of intolerance and inhumanity and about the no-win situation of war, in general. Reflecting deeply about such issues should be part of every student's curriculum. Some available teaching resources can be found at [www.teachingforchange.org/Sept11/htm](http://www.teachingforchange.org/Sept11/htm). (Kohn, 2001, p.2)

To my understanding and interpretation of the works of M. Fethullah Gülen, education should not be about filling the minds and hearts of children as one might empty vessels, but to nurture their humanity, their spirit, and their innate intelligence to propel our global interrelated societies toward peace, justice, and prosperity. Gülen (2002) states:

"The main duty and purpose of human life is to seek understanding. The effort of doing so, known as education, is a perfecting process through which we earn, in the spiritual, intellectual, and physical dimensions of their beings the rank appointed to us as the perfect pattern of creation." (p. 58)

There are many thinkers and writers worldwide who spread their influence through their words, but very rare, indeed, are those whose influence motivates others to higher planes of understanding and to positive action. In *Pearls of Wisdom*, Mr. Gülen (1997) states:

Those who want to secure their future should apply as much energy to raising their children as they devote to other problems. While the energy devoted to many other things may go in vain, whatever is spent for raising a young generation elevates them to the rank of humanity. Such people will be like an inexhaustible source of income. (p.37)

Those words of advice provide a window to the world of Gülen's thinking about the importance of the investment in children and youth to a nation's future. I have since learned much more about the positive influence and extent of his inspired vision. For example, The Journalists and Writers Foundation, the parent organization of the Intercultural Dialogue Platform, is inspiring interfaith dialogues and peace and understanding worldwide. Multitudes of schools based upon Gülen-inspired educational philosophy are springing up worldwide. While these institutions are not founded or run by him, his educational philosophy serves as the foundation and motivating force behind these efforts. It is estimated that there are such institutions in many places worldwide. These include schools in central Asian Turkic republics, in the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, the Balkans, South-East Asia, Africa, Russia, Eastern Europe, Australia, and the United States. Some schools in Uzbekistan were closed due to a political rift between Turkey and that country; however, others are still functioning there. It is believed that there are about 700 Gülen-

inspired schools throughout the world. (Woodhall, 2005; Central Asia: Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools, 2002).

Desiring to contribute to educational reform in the United States, I believe that there are lessons to be learned from the works of Fethullah Gülen that can, and should specifically, be applied to schools in America. Obviously, many of the Gülen-inspired schools and academies are private institutions that can expel students who do not meet the expected standards. Two of these private schools are Brooklyn Amity School ([www.amityschool.org](http://www.amityschool.org)) and Pioneer School in New York. Nevertheless, I believe that all public schools, including public charter schools serving a diversity of students, can benefit from the prototype and the philosophical underpinnings of Gülen-inspired schools.

There are four aspects, in particular, that urgently need to be infused into American schooling: Interfaith/intercultural dialogue, character education, parental involvement and education, and the integration of science and spirituality. Many American schools have been incorporating some of these aspects, but there still is a lot of work to do.

Character education has been attempted to help students become better citizens and a positive influence in their society. (Refer to: <http://www.goodcharacter.com> for resources and links). Nevertheless, statistics from the National Crime Survey report that "almost 3 million crimes occur on or near school campuses every year; that's 16,000 per school day, or one every 6 seconds. A recent study on domestic violence found that many high school boys thought it was all right for a boy to strike his girlfriend if she angered him" (What makes kids care? p. 1). Parents and family must be an integral part of students' lives at school as well as at home. However, this is simply not the case for millions of latchkey students, students with parents in prison, underage parents, or those who live with aged grandparents or brothers and sisters. Severe social issues affecting many of our nations' youth eventually winds up in the laps of America's teachers, principals, and other public servants. Hence, the contributions of Gülen's commitment to invest in and promote excellence in education should serve as a model for the public sector as well as the private.

While recently published results of a U.S. Department of Education study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, indicated that students in public schools in the U.S. "do as well or better in some categories-such as 4th grade math-as students in private school ... when scores are adjusted for socioeconomic, race, and other characteristics (Zehr, 2006, p.1). However, when looking closer as what is being measured and what the "best practices" are for attaining high scores, only quantitative data about subject matter is accumulated. Nothing is mentioned about qualitative variables having to do with the affective domain, racial attitudes, character development, human relations, intercultural protocol and the like, (Viadero, 2006, pp. 1-2).

Education is indeed our collective hope for spiritual enlightenment and intellectual development for our human family. Ideally schooling can offer people of all ages, races, cultures, religions, creeds, language groups, national origins, genders, socioeconomic levels, handicapping conditions and all, a safe haven to come together under the "flag" of intellectual and spiritual freedom to explore the meanings of our life and forge our dreams for a brighter tomorrow for ourselves and our progeny. Families with children in public or private school must care about and look into what their children are actually learning about the dimensions of their humanity, not only cognitive subjects that can be easily memorized and regurgitated on an examination.

For example, we should all be concerned about what children learn about their own and each other's cultures, historical struggles and contributions to humanity. What do

children in America, for example, learn about their own self-worth, their dignity, and the worth and dignity of others? Do our children learn to communicate across racial and cultural barriers? Do they learn to see through the stereotypes, myths, and attitudes perpetuated throughout our national history about the value of cultural and linguistic diversity? Are they encouraged to understand the struggles of oppressed peoples around the globe as well as those Americans who continue to bear the burden of a legacy of racism and economic deprivation? Is the pursuit of intellectual inquiry, critical thinking, and the development of humane attitudes towards all peoples the goal of American education? Is it the goal of any nation's education?

I found very interesting, indeed, some parallels between the description of the cultural diversity of ancient Anatolia and that of the United States. In *Love, and the Essence of Being Human*, Gülen (2004), discusses the concept of how the different races and religions, and world-views contributed cultural enrichment to the development of an Ottoman culture. He states that: "in my opinion this cultural richness should be used and evaluated in the future as an unmatched treasure and source of strength". (p. 80) The uniqueness of the Turkish culture came about by the enrichment of the blending and the tolerance of the diversity of the confluence of its peoples. Gülen's life has led him to be a worldwide leader in interfaith, intercultural dialogue. He acknowledges that dissension can come about playing upon variety in society as a negative force instead of a strength. He writes that although people may think differently and espouse varying world-views, "we are all longing to build a world without conflict and contention based on tolerance and dialogue." (p.81).

The history of the U.S. is one of trying to create a national unity and consciousness from a broad mix of peoples that have become Americans under different circumstances. We must deal sensitively with the legacy of slavery, border issues with Mexico, continuing immigration, migration, and annexation of lands, wars, the existence of hate groups such as the Klan and others that may spring up as a consequence of current events.

The one constant I note in U.S. education is the absence of true intercultural dialogue and a serious attempt to bring understanding and appreciation to our diverse learners about the nature of living in a culturally and linguistically society within an interdependent world. American schools were not desegregated until 1954 with the SC decision, *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Blacks and whites began to study together but they were not taught to accept one another spiritually. Attitudes remained entrenched and steeped with misperceptions for many years. Any nation with such a legacy of oppression as the U.S. must reverse this pattern through a conscious effort at teaching people to appreciate and understand one another. Hatred is taught... so too Love must be taught. Ignoring cancer will not cure it. I wonder now what the newest Middle East conflict in the Lebanese-Israeli theater will bring to generations to come if not taught otherwise?

Even today, 240 years after the Civil War, African American parents worry about what they will encounter in our schools. I would like to share with you a beautiful poem entitled "I Ask You My Children", written by Ronald Coleman, (cited in Hale, 1986).

I ask you my children,

What did you learn today?

did anyone tell you how to meet tomorrow?

did anyone tell you why there are people who don't know you?

did anyone seem to know who you were?

did anyone know that you have the blood of Africa in your veins

or did they pretend to be blind to your color and thereby deny its value?

What did you learn?

did anyone explain the nature of freedom?

did anyone explain the nature of racism?

did anyone explain the nature of love?

did anyone know anything about those things?

did anyone know anything?

What DID you learn today? (p.151).

Formal education as we know it today in our public institutions, oftentimes does not provide either time or psychological space for our children to develop the rational thinking skills and spiritual intuitiveness necessary to reflect honestly and openly about the complexities of the human condition in relation to their curriculum. Parents and family members must insist upon a multicultural curriculum designed to teach children to respect and admire human diversity and the contributions of all of us to human civilization.

Gülen writes: "Remaining respectful to others' thoughts and feelings because "they are human," we must accept all people in their own special circumstances and with their thoughts. This disposition is not alien to, rather it is given a high priority in Islam. In this respect, I personally believe that it is very important for the sake of human peace and happiness to spread such concepts as "social peace and tolerance." (p. 83). Other faiths espouse this sentiment as well, but children are not learning about the similarities of these teachings. These concepts should be included in curriculum worldwide, and especially in nations like the U.S., which are pluralistic by definition.

In the 1960's, there existed a democratic spirit to address educational equity and multiculturalism that gave rise to curriculum innovation and a zest for social justice. Unfortunately, there has been a backlash toward this movement since 2000, with a political mood away from affirmative action and equal educational opportunities. However, one organization, the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) continues to foster curricular change to support equity in education. The definition of multicultural education according to NAME as it appears on its website is as follows:

"Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, constitutions of South Africa and the United States, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations. It affirms our need to prepare student for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. It recognizes the role schools can play in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. It values cultural differences and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. It challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice" (nameorg.org).

I believe that the underlying philosophy of NAME can be bolstered by the interfaith and intercultural work being done by those who support and encourage the dissemination of Gülen's writings. I also believe that the importance of disseminating his ideas and writings to like-minded educators will provide greater worldwide unity and solidarity of purpose for U.S.

educators unaware of Gülen's prolific productivity in support of global peace, human dignity, and human development.

Another important feature of Gülen-educational philosophy is that science and technology do not have to be divorced from one's spirituality or faith. Hence, there is a heavy emphasis on technology and science in these schools around the world. Gülen-inspired schools participate in science fairs and competitions throughout the world, oftentimes with great success. A case in point, is the Willow International School (aka Turkish College) in Mozambique. This school won second place in the International Computer Project competition held in Romania (Aydemir, 2006). Turkish schools in the UK also participated in the 3rd Axis Science Fair co-organized by the Axis Education Foundation and the Light House Education Foundation

(Samar, 2006). There are many such examples of excellence in the sciences in Gülen-inspired schools. Gülen's ideas about the role of science and its connection to the Divine laws of the Creator, are completely consonant with the totality of his views about education. In *Essentials of the Islamic Faith* (2005), the reader gets a clear vision about the inextricable relationship between science and creation. He urges the reader not to fear science, but rather its exploitation. He states that... "the natural world is like a book for us to study, an exhibition to behold, and a trust from which we can benefit." (p. 272). He also states that science reveals to us the Creator's purpose. (p.272) Such ideas can be found in others' writings, and even supported in other faiths. In the Bahai Faith, for example, one of the principles is the harmony of religion and science. Paul Lample, (1999), a contemporary Bahai writer, states that: "The individual who aspires to wisdom is continually seeking orientation from the twin knowledge systems of religion and science. Throughout history, humanity has repeatedly fallen into the pitfalls of superstition and fanaticism on one hand, and materialism and moral relativism on the other. The complimentary truths of these two systems make it possible to avoid these dangers" (pp. 16-17)

It is ironic that in the United States today, there is a raging polemic about the value of science and of scientific-based theories such as evolution. There has been little interest in trying to reconcile science with faith in the American education system. Since 1925, for example, there have been many challenges to anti-evolutionist policies beginning with the Scopes Trial (*Evolution, Education, and the Law*, 2005). On the other hand, there is a strict polemic in American culture between the so-called "separation of church and state", leading to almost fanatic behavior from those who do not want any mention of God or religion of any kind in schools, even denying students the right to pray in silence or wear appropriate cultural attire in accord with their beliefs, to a severe attack on science in general. In an informative article about attacks on science, Leon Lynn (1997, 1998) writes: Right-wingers and religious fundamentalists have been buoyed by newfound political strength in recent years. They are attacking evolution-as well as the whole concept of a secular, publicly funded school system—with ever-increasing vigor as they attempt to batter down the U.S. Constitution's separation of church and state and stamp their own brand of religion upon school curriculum. (p. 1) So, even in the sphere of faith and science, politics rears its head and makes tolerance of diversity a cause for misunderstanding. On the other side of the argument, there is a fresh lawsuit from the family of a Las Vegas high school valedictorian whose speech was cut off for her mention of Christ and invitations to join her faith (*Valedictorian sues Nevada school for cutting off speech*, 2006).

I am not certain how, or if, one's attitudes about science is limiting the choice of academic majors in the U.S., but it is observable that many professors of engineering and the hard sciences in American universities were international students prior to employment. Also,

there is a severe shortage of science and math teachers in the United States as well, and tests reveal that students are not excelling in the public schools in these subject matter disciplines. Academic rigor, the investment in youth, attention to our communities, and to the future of democracy in America are all at stake if the public does not passionately support its schools.

It is important for parents to monitor their children's understandings. Asking your children daily, not only what did you learn today, but what do you think about what you learned today, or how do you feel about what you did in school today, may give you some helpful insights about the attitudes and perceptions they may be developing about society, past, present, and future and about themselves, their family, and their own beliefs and values.

In this way, families have a point of departure from which to develop a dialogue with their children concerning their own ideas and interpretations about life and reality. It is then that they will be able to help them negotiate their own meanings about things and become autonomous, critical thinkers, who are self-confident and assured that what they think has value and merit.

In closing, admittedly, there is much more to say and write on this theme beyond the scope of this paper. I do hope, however, that more scrutiny and cross-cultural dialogue will occur about what children and youth in the U.S. need to know about each other and about the world we all share. Education must be a top priority for America. Time is running out for peace and for an educated electorate to maintain a democracy.

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