

# Gülen's Perspective on Education: Foundations of His Ideas and Actions

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## Abstract

*Gülen believes that education plays the primary role in achieving the values that make a person a real human being. According to him, education is the most beautiful way to embrace the whole life and also it has the most important role in disseminating harmony, balance, discipline, and order in individual and social life.*

*Gülen says that non-educated people will never find the meaning of their existence, why they are created, where they come from, and where exactly they are going. More importantly, they cannot succeed to do what is needed for these. Therefore, according to him, a public education campaign should be done everywhere. Training activities for people of all ages is a necessity. Of course, the goal which will be achieved only by training, education and knowledge, is very important. According to Gülen, science should lead the person to the understanding of the meaning of his/her entity. In other words, it should lead the person to the knowledge of the Supreme Creator and his position before Him and to fulfilling his liabilities to Him. Gülen also believes that education gives the opportunity that people with different religions, languages, cultures and nations can live in peace with each other. This is because people learn, with education, how to understand others, or at least how to respect them and their values.*

*When Gülen was young, in order to be a much better educated person, he read many Eastern and Western classics, scientific books and journals, and then the books in almost every field of the Islamic sciences. He says that religion and science can never be separated from each other and that no contradiction exists between them. On the contrary, they have a very close relationship. For this reason, Gülen encourages everyone to have knowledge of the religion and positive sciences together to some extent. In his opinion, everyone should have knowledge of his or her own major area, but it is also required to have at least encyclopedic knowledge in the other areas like positive and social sciences.*

*Gülen, also believes that education can save one's life in here and in the hereafter. He mentions that the most important service in the world is to serve humankind, and the most important service for humankind is education. So, for that reason, he dedicated himself to humankind and education. During fifty years, he gave thousands of speeches, wrote many articles and more than seventy*

*books. He worked extensively to teach people how to live for others. And now, many schools, centers and institutes are educating generations with the same devotion.*

*Gülen's ideas provide the biggest motivation for all these works around the world. According to his belief, the most favorable man is the most helpful to people. In his idea, if these services be without any materialistic aim, done only with sincerity, devotion and for the pleasure of God, they would be successful. So, today, with his sincere encouragement people, especially Turkish educators and businessmen, delivered the fruits, and they went to many countries, and along with volunteers from each country, they opened the schools, built bridges among the people, and established "islands of peace". These schools in more than a hundred countries are far away from any political, ethnic and other materialistic agenda. Education and services are continuing with sincere volunteers who have been locked on peace, love, tolerance and dialogue.*

Gülen's ideas on education become a way of life for many as a result of his long pursued set of ideals woven into his life. Gülen thinks that humankind is at the center of all problems that we are encountering in this world. Therefore, the way to solving the problem of people pass through educating the human being. He proposes that if we can have a better analysis of humans and better identification of their nature, then through education, we can bring out the best of human nature with the result being that well-educated people will work together to improve conditions and overcome the seemingly intractable problems with face today. According to Gülen, education is the key to the solution. For him, establishing order and harmony in one's personal and social life, and even preparing for a better life beyond the grave, will only be possible through education. Therefore, educational services are a holy task and the most auspicious services in the effort of educating and cultivating nations (*Turgut, 1998*).

## Human Beings and Knowledge

When it comes to the issue of education, it is useful to discuss human beings as the main ingredient of Gülen's educational philosophy, and science as a result of his purposeful education. Gülen points out that human beings sent to this world were created with with such high potential that, if channeled properly, they can surpass the angels. Or they might go so far astray from their potential that they fall off the ladder of humankind and end-up being friends with Satan. Human beings are the only creatures superior to all other beings who were given the authority over the earth and all other creatures. For this reason, Gülen believes that the educating of human beings who have such high potential, raw material is a debt to humanity. Because well-trained, ideal generations will be an asset and gain for humankind, yet improperly educated generations will be a huge loss and a nightmare for the world.

Concerning knowledge and its' targets Gülen says, *"Since "real" life is possible only through knowledge, those who neglect learning and teaching are considered "dead" even though they are still alive, for we were created to learn and to communicate what we have learned to others.*

*Right decisions depend on having a sound mind and on sound thinking. As science and knowledge illuminate and develop one's mind, those deprived of science and knowledge cannot reach right decisions and are always exposed to deception and misguidance” (Gülen, 2006, p. 50)*

Gülen is an intellectual who truly believes the philosophy of the Anatolian sufi, Yunus -“We love the created for the sake of the Creator”. Because of his unconditional love of humanity, we see Gülen deeply touched with the ravaged Afghani people at war, we see him crying for the innocent civilians killed in Bosnia, we see him praying for days for the difficulties in Iraq, and we see him bending down onto his knees with the Tsunami in Indonesia. As he thinks of the children under the threat of bomb attacks in Israel, in a similar token, as he observes the mobilization of tanks into Palestine against innocent civilians, we see him hospitalized due to a heart attack. In fact, he is a man with a lofty heart who engages with all the troubles of humankind, not just sharing their hassle, but also finding cures for their ailments. Helping suffering people smile has become the purpose of his life. He considers this as his sole mission — the mission of grabbing the hands of needy people, helping crying people ease their pain, caressing the heads of orphans, and being next to the victims. For him, this is a big opportunity to earn the blessing and satisfaction of the Supreme Creator (*Gülen, 1993*).

He says that the mind is the most important factor that makes a person as human. The mind, however, he believes, is given to humans in a simple and closed form for further processing and enlightenment. The mind, by being integrated with human conscience, should attain a new nature so that it serves its fundamental duty which is to attain “Marifetullah”, the knowledge of God. The attainment of this state will be one of the important factors to help humans reach perfection and maturity, and thus it helps to keep humans distant from their animal behaviors, and it invites committing good deeds. Otherwise, the mind becomes a useless load for humans, and a trouble to their hearts, and it will eventually become an instrument to lower the status of humans below that of animals (*Gülen, 2009, p. 49-53*).

The mind, through a sound education, will be saved from becoming a sharp knife that hurts human, and instead, it will become a tool serving the entire humanity. Of course, this change will only be possible through shaping minds with faith. Yes, knowledge, an important step for faith and an essential touchstone separating guidance and heresy, is a divine mystery (*Gülen, 2007, II, p. 22*).

Gülen considers education as the essential ingredient for the future of each society. After all, it is the society through which moral and social values manifest themselves. For social harmony, it is very essential to teach these values to the general public in that society. He explained this fact in one of his articles by stating that, “whatever role marriage and reproduction plays for the continuity of generations, education plays [a] similar role for the continuity of their moral and social life” (*Gülen, 1998, pp. 98-101*).

## Education

Gülen states that unlike other creatures, humans are sent to world with a clear need for education for the most essential needs of their lives. For example, while it takes two to seven days for an animal to learn how to walk and perform vital functions, it will take a human almost one year to learn walking, and almost two years to learn talking, and approximately twenty years to learn what is really good and bad for him, even the latter is a lifelong process continuing until death (*Gülen, 2009, pp. 164-168*).

Gülen, like other modern scholars, emphasizes the importance of early childhood education received in the family especially for the 0-6 age group. According to him, these are the critical ages through which proper education should be given to new generation, so that, they learn the concept of “halal” (permitted) and “haram” (forbidden), learn honesty, and understand the future responsibility of establishing a family where moral and social values are cherished. Gülen finds parenthood as an important mechanism for the moral welfare of children, and he urges future parents to prepare themselves before getting pregnant, and exercise extreme caution to stay within the framework of a halal life during the maternity period. Consistent with the findings of the modern pedagogues, he claims that the unborn child can be affected not only from the psychology of mother but also from sounds in the environment. Therefore he urges potential parents to use nice words to each other in their daily discourse. He believes that a baby’s personality can be affected negatively from the use of vulgar profanity (*Gülen, 2002, p. 62*).

Gülen believes in the importance of education within the family. For this reason, establishment of families with strong values, rules, orders, and discipline is very important. The love, compassion, and peace in family life that kids experience during the times of initial development of their feelings, has direct positive impact on the character and physical health of the children. Today’s statistics propose that people who commit crimes largely either had a family problem or came from a problematic family. According to him, a good family and orderly family life is essential not only for a healthy upbringing of a generation but also for a healthy continuation of social structure. No matter how influential schooling is and how much it can give to children, it will not be as permanent as those values given by the family (*Gülen, 2002, pp. 63-65*).

He also indicates that in educating our children we should first give priority to developing faith and respect for the Almighty Creator, respect and gratitude those forerunners who told us about God, kindness to parents, love and concern of people, skillful use of language, and commitment to national values and love of homeland (*Gülen, ibid, pp. 86-88*).

The following behavior and attitudes indicate important ingredients in child educating one’s children; consistency of parents' behavior in their words and attitudes, being close to kids, following their developments closely, becoming active participants in their daily play, grafting them with personality by assigning private rooms, books, lockers, showing them much compassion, taking them in one’s arms to show love, calling them with the names they like, often asking how they are feeling, being with and helping them in their difficulties with great understanding, leaving them free to a certain degree to play the games of their choice, assigning them occasional tasks and following up tenderly, cleaning their play area from harmful and inappropriate materials, and equipping their surroundings with positive and educational materials (*Gülen, ibid, p. 150*).

Fethullah Gülen mentions the necessities of establishing a positive direction in education, in cooperation with the state, that will be further fostered by the family, a friendly and safe neighborhood, and by proper publications that appeal to the conscience of the public and are supportive of universal human values. He continues to say that whenever family, school, and community work together to equip new generations with uplifting values, to nourish their souls against social erosions, and to strengthen their hearts, only then can we consider ourselves to have accomplished enough to give us much hope for the future (*Gülen, ibid, pp. 151-153*).

Gülen looks forward to ideal generations yet to come. Provided that today's young people are educated with high ideals and guided with appropriate targets, they will grow into young people full of potential and energy. This will be the awaited generation by all humankind. Gülen, further says, From then on, they use all their abilities to maintain their posts and win the favor of their superiors, things which humiliate a man, and become more and more degraded. If they show a capacity to be promoted, they will no longer think of anything other than getting promotion even if at the cost of losing all their honor and dignity, and doing things contrary to the dictates of their conscience and faith. They will bow down before every person from whom they anticipate benefit, and display so weak a character that they may speak excessively ill of one whom they praised to the skies a day before. (*Gülen, 1998, pp. 25-27*).

Gülen believes that young people who are well-trained and firm in their beliefs, will play major roles in solving the problems of humanity. He takes examples from the prophets to show the desired qualities that this new generation should possess. He dreams of a generation that, "... Their spirits are cleaner than the cleanest angel, their ideas are powerful enough to solve the problems of their era, their hearts are as soft as angels, and their wills are strong enough to overcome the fear of hell fire. This is the awaited generation, who will clean the market of rhetoric, will make words meet with the words' master, will say the things that need to be said, and will do the things that need to be done." This generation possesses Adam's fidelity and loyalty, Noah's determination and commitment, Abraham's softness and surrender to the righteous, Moses' bravery, and Jesus' tolerance (*Gülen, ibid, pp. 105-108*).

Referring to the importance of the school in education, Gülen underlines that the school is a place for both learning and education. In fact, as schools may appear to be appealing to a period of human life, their natures dominate all times, and foundations gained here seem to have dominated the rest of human life.

Referring to the importance of teacher education, Gülen indicates that the teacher must integrate substance with meaning before presenting it to child. The teacher should possess a sense of being useful to the student and should have feelings of self-sacrifice. A teacher should suffer deep inside searching for ways to help kids learn better. A teacher should be systematic, disciplined, and possess exemplary behavior. A Bedouin who has found an ideal teacher may surpass even the angels; the life of Prophet Mohammad (saw) is an example of such escalation (*Gülen, ibid, pp. 98-101*).

Gülen also puts forward some opinions about the nature of knowledge to be given at schools. For example, according to him, anything that does not help solve the mystery of the universe with the human personality is useless and an unnecessary load and bother for students. "...Just during the early years of schooling, loading kids heavy load with world geography, human history or philosophy, will be a misfortune not only for the course, but also for the kids. As for tutor who often leaves his students with doubts and several hesitations for the sake of science, cannot be considered as true teacher. A building with its laboratories if that does not guide teachers to the right cause cannot be named as school." "During the initial years of schooling, kids first should gain language, ideals, belief, morality, and character. Based on these foundations, one must reach to a new understanding in terms of building social identity, and bringing new revival by demonstrating reformist approach of his / her era when dealing science. Then, starting at this point, it will be desirable to have children engage in art, trade, agriculture, science and technology." (*ibid*)

Gülen also lists some methods to be followed in education. For example, such principles as knowing the students, principle of gradualism, tolerance, use of beautiful words, equipping one's heart with lofty ideals, principle of materialization of abstract matters, principle of keeping a balance between fear and love, guilt and punishment, and the principle of opposites in explaining mutually exclusive concepts (*Gülen, 1996, pp. 15-18*).

Thus, we see that Gülen's educational philosophy includes not only ideas about the nature and importance of education for raising human beings to the level of khalifah or vice-regent and to bringing about ideal generations for the benefit of humanity, but he also specifies how education should proceed and what methods should be used. But not only that; Gülen is not interested in developing a philosophy and methodologies just for their sake. He does not believe that mere rhetoric is beneficial to anyone. Rather, Gülen is someone who consistently lives his life along the lines of his thoughts and he encourages others to do the same. In this way, Gülen is unique among modern Islamic philosophers; he inspires others not to just listen to his ideas, but to take action. Thus, in this section of the paper, we explore how Gülen translated his ideas into actions.

Gülen first put his philosophy into action while teaching at the Qur'anic School in Kestanepazari, Izmir. He immediately noticed the fruits of his teaching method. Soon after, he started encouraging people to participate in conversations, seminars, and conferences in mosques and homes. His aim with this pursuit was to create awareness among the people and convince them about this important service. He encouraged them to get involved and make sacrifices to facilitating the good training of the new generation. There are a few important points here; first, a role model with an exemplary life must be presented to the new generation. For him, Prophet Mohamemad (pbuh)'s biography which includes specific examples covering nearly every aspect of human life, provided an agreeable prototype — a role model for the uplifting of new generations. With the prophet's life history, Gülen found an opportunity to showcase the prophet's lofty morality as an example for universal moral values to the new generation. Additionally, in order for his teaching, guidance and actions to be effective on others, he worked to live his own life according to the role models provided by the Prophets' lives. Through this, he proved that the lives of these role models are not a utopia for us, but rather a livable reality that can be attained.

Gülen went to each city in Turkey to give speeches and sermons. He called people to become not a destructive but a constructive force, and not a divider but a unifier. He described his target generation as the “Altın Nesil” — the Golden Generation. After noticing his sincerity and seriousness, first university students and later business people joined with him to answer his call. Later, dedicated people from all walk of life — university students, teacher, workers, artisans, women, and men, joined him to mobilize a massive educational effort throughout the entire country. These people first started by setting up educational foundations, and small companies became devoted to the cause in their cities. Later, they opened schools, university preparation centers, and reading centers. The teachers working at these institutions were all qualified university graduates and idealistic teachers well equipped with Gülen’s ideals and with a sense of responsibility.

When the time came, this educational campaign moved beyond the borders of Turkey. Gülen, gave thoughtful advice to his followers to initially emigrate (as in the context of holy pilgrimage) to Central Asia, and later to all over the world in order to pass the beauties they possessed to all humanity. Followers of him took his advice as an order and went the extra mile and well beyond the call of duty, and they opened hundreds of elementary, middle, and high school to help train the new generation in high moral values, who would believe in peace, harmony, dialogue, and respect science and intellectual development. Shortly after the school openings, these schools demonstrated great success. The success especially became more visible in the behavior of students and in their relationship with their parents. For this reason, the people were pleased with the opening of these schools, and they wanted to increase the number of such schools in their cities. For example, speaking at the grand opening ceremony, Moscow’s director of education stated, “There are two important events in Russia’s recent history; one is the travel of Gagarin to Moon, and the second one is the opening of a Turkish school here” (<http://tr.fgulen.com/content/view/12486/11/>). In Afghanistan and in Kyrgyzstan, more than a thousand applications were submitted to these schools even though the enrollment slots available were just around hundred. Another school in the Philippines teaches Christian and Muslim students side-by-side in harmony and peace despite ongoing conflicts in that country. This reality made people highly satisfied with the mission of these schools. A school in Northern Iraq, a place simmering with daily violence and terror, has been teaching students from Sunni, Shi'a, Arab, Turkmen and Kurdish descent, and no slightest discomfort has been reported so far. Therefore, it is a reality that these schools in both Northern Iraq and Eastern Turkey have helped keep the young generation away from joining terrorist groups and instead have involved them purposefully in the community as a contributing member.

The achievements of these schools have been first noticed and assessed by the academicians and scholars of these countries. For example, the Macedonian educational researcher Bekim Agai, just says: "These well equipped schools provide education that no other school in this region can offer. The consequences of this initiative can be seen as a great success not only in the national but in the international arena as well" (*Koray, 1997*).

Another author, after having visited and observed several of these schools, speaks highly about them, and says, “The purpose here is not simply to increase religious knowledge, not to create religious awareness of a Sharia thru a series of symbols, but to facilitate the moral change and

character uplifting of the new generation. When closely observed, we noticed that students all obtained a degree of self-discipline, and show great respect for their own tradition as well as Islamic-values" (*Bayramoğlu, 1996*).

Hulusi Turgut, in his series about these schools, underlines that the majority of students quit smoking and stopped consuming alcohol. Mehmet Altan mentions about two mothers who chose to send their kids to these schools only because students here do not smoke, and English is the medium of instruction (*Altan, 1998*).

These schools do not carry any political, ethnic, or materialistic agenda. The people who established these school and the teachers being deployed there are working with great sacrifice. As the founding business people do not make money out of these schools, teachers are also paid a meager salary. In addition, these schools provide science and technology education, and they are far from being religious schools. However, high moral, and universal values which bind all humanity are central theme in the daily discourse (*Bayramoğlu, 1996*).

We see these volunteers and followers of Gülen going to Tajikistan, while the county experienced civil war, we see going to Bosnia even while the country was being sucked into a war, we see them in Georgia when that country had much social unrest, all with the sole purpose of opening new schools. Despite facing serious difficulties, and occasional danger of losing their lives, they did not give up and leave the countries in which they were working. They have proven to be true friends without any materialistic expectation. Their perseverance is best described in the words of Georgian President Saakashvili, "They came during such a hard time that no one wanted to come to Georgia. They came in a real difficult time, and never left us" (*Demir, 2010*).

## Foundations of His Ideas and Actions

I do not think we can go wrong in saying that the first main factors influencing Gülen's ideas were his family and the environment provided by his extended family. The effects of these are apparent in his many speeches, writings, and actions. Here we ask, what was his family atmosphere like, and who influenced him the most? We can answer these questions with Gülen's own words:

The first person from our family to settle in Korucuk was my great-grandfather Molla Ahmed, son of Hursid Aga, son of Halil Efendi. Molla Ahmed was an extraordinary person distinguished by his knowledge and piety. During the last 30 years of his life, he never stretched out his legs to lie on a bed and sleep. It was said that when he became sleepy, he would sit down, rest his forehead on his right hand, and nap a little.

My grandfather Samil Aga resembled his father in some ways, for he was also like a man of the next world. His seriousness and dignity made the village people feel awe. In addition to his influence, my grandmother Mûnise Hanım had perhaps an even greater influence upon me. She was a unique woman who spoke very little and tried to fully reflect Islam with her state of being. My father also had a great influence on me. He lived carefully, had eyes full of tears, and did not waste time. Although



raised in a small village amidst material poverty, scarcity, and drought, according to one who knew him closely, he seemed to have received an "royal upbringing." This generous, noble lover of knowledge had an agile mind that revealed itself in subtleties and was tied to Islam with all his heart. My maternal grandmother, Hatice Hanim, was a monument of purity in every respect. Her daughter Refia Hanim, my mother, was a symbol of compassion and profundity. She taught the Qur'an to all the village women and to me at a time when even reading it was difficult.

Guests, especially scholars, were frequent in our house. We paid great attention to them. During my childhood and youth, I never sat with my peers or age group; instead, I always sat with older people and listened to them explain things that satisfied the mind and heart.

My father constantly adorned his comments with witty remarks he had heard or made up. This shows that he had a fine mind. I was impressed that he would never step over the line of what was proper. In both his love and his anger, he protected that boundary. He was bound to the Prophet's Companions to the extreme, and instilled in me and my siblings his love of them.

Outside of my family, Muhammed Lütü Efendi had a very great influence on me. Every word coming out of his mouth appeared as inspiration flowing from another realm. We listened attentively whenever he talked, for it was as if we were hearing celestial things that had previously come down to Earth.

I cannot say that I fully understood him, because he passed away when I was not even 16 years old. Despite this, because he was the one who first awakened my consciousness and perceptions, I tried to grasp his points with my mind and natural talents, since my age prevented me from comprehending him. My intuition, sensitivity, and feelings of today are due to my sensations in his presence. *[Erdoğan, Zaman Daily]*

So, his education began in his father's home and continued at the knees of Muhammed Lutfi Efendi. Since then, his spiritual and religious training has never ended. In his early youth, he met students of Bediüzzaman Said Nursî and Risale-i Nur, and they contributed a great deal to his intellectual and spiritual formation as well.

In my personal experience, I can say that, his mind is constantly busy with the Qur'an and Hadith. In every aspect of life, when he faces problems, he looks for solutions from these sources. At the same time, no day passes without him giving examples from the life of the sahabah (companions of the Prophet Muhammad (saw)).

When Gülen started dialogue activities in Turkey, some people who believed that they were so religious, learned for the first time from Gülen about the Prophet Muhammad's dialogue with people from other religions. Gülen reminded them of some verses from Qur'an like Qur'an 60:8 — "Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just" (translation Yusuf Ali). We can look at Gülen's interpretations of Qur'an and Hadith, and find very unique ideas for he is a man who understands well the times in which we live, and he is able to see those

connections and relevancy of these ancient texts to modern times. With the Qur'an and Hadith as his guide books, he has dedicated himself to serving humanity. In addition, he is very open-minded and will take knowledge and experience from anybody without any hesitation (Qur'an 16:43 "...if ye realise this not, ask of those who possess the Message" (translation Yusuf Ali). He encourages his friends to improve their skills and knowledge day-by-day until the end of their lives. This is his philosophy by which he lives his life, and his focus on education is coming from this philosophy.

## Conclusion

In shaping our lives in our daily discourse, Gülen highlights the importance of the first message "Read" (*Qur'an, 96:1*) that was brought to all humankind by the prophet Mohammad (saw). Gülen places great emphasis on reading in his personal life. Despite his sickness and his busy daily schedule, he has a habit of reading a couple of hundred pages every day. Teaching others what you know is also an important advice of the prophet Mohammad (saw). Therefore, despite his high age, he has shown great effort in reading and teaching students. With this pursuit, he aims to show all humankind that education should start at the cradle and continue until the grave. Through his life's work, he illustrates that reading, learning, and education are among the most important features that make us human.

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