

SOME EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF IKHWĀN AL-ŞAFĀ' AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This paper seeks to describe some of the educational perspectives and principles of Ikhwān al-Şafā'. Ikhwān al-Şafā' (which translates as the Brethren of Purity) were essentially philosophers, encyclopaedists and educationists who lived around the tenth or eleventh century CE. They were a secretive organisation and were highly dissatisfied with the political state of the Abbasid Caliphate. Being completely disillusioned with the society in which they lived, they tried to reform it in their characteristic ways. This paper touches upon the relevance of their ideas and practices to present-day education, and stresses the need to integrate some of their spiritual concepts and educational goals with our educational policies and practices, and the need to insure a high standard of teaching and learning.

Introduction

Ikhwān al-Şafā' or the Brethren of Purity were essentially philosophers, encyclopaedists and educationists, who lived around the middle of the fourth Islamic century. They were a mysterious society operating in secrecy, inwardly dissatisfied with the political state of the Abbasid Caliphate, and were completely disgusted with the corrupted society they then lived in. They produced a corpus of fifty-two epistles (*rasā'il*) covering a wide range of subjects from magic to music. These epistles are known as *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Şafā'*. They had no prejudice for or against any of the competing and conflicting religious sects nor intellectual schools existing at the time.¹ Relying on several scholarly studies on Ikhwān al-Şafā', this paper seeks to describe some of the educational perspectives and principles of Ikhwān al-Şafā'. It concludes with some thoughts on the relevance of their ideas to present-day education.

Some Philosophical Foundations of Ikhwān al-Şafā'

The worldviews that influenced Ikhwān al-Şafā's educational thoughts can be briefly summarized in the following points:

(1) God exists. He is One and possesses all the attributes of Sovereignty and Might. He created the world and all that are on it from nothing. Yet Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' are seemingly quite confused in simultaneously viewing mankind as being governed by other, astrological forces.

(2) There is a physical world and a spiritual world. The physical world is a lowly and corrupted place, full of tests and tribulations. Man must strive to go back to the spiritual world from which he descended. Because a man's journey in this world only occurs once, he must seize this single opportunity to perfect himself, in order to be able to return to paradise.² God provides man with good things in life, and leaves him to decide on the best course of action using his own mind.³

(3) A man's soul is a potential knower: the souls of children are potentially intelligent; the souls of the matured are actively intelligent. The souls of learned men are active knowers and potentially philosophical. The souls of the philosophers are actively wise, and the souls of sages are potentially angelic. When their souls leave their bodies, they become actively angelic; and hence death is a wisdom and mercy.⁴

Like a crippled man, the soul cannot act unless mediated by the body, which performs actions for it. Like a blind man, the body acts in accordance with the soul's orders. The mind orders the person to do good or bad. The body is deemed to be the obstacle to the perfection of the soul.⁵

(4) Morality is both innate and acquired. It is influenced by astrology, and also by biological, natural and social environments. In order to leave this corrupted world for the eternal happiness of Paradise, one must acquire knowledge and behave according to a high code of moral conduct.⁶

(5) God is the source of knowledge. Knowledge is not innate, but perceived through senses leading to reason and evidence. Revelation and divine inspiration are exclusive to selected men.⁷

(6) The current society is a temporary context which one must strive to leave. The true society is that comprising of purified souls and governed by a group of knowledgeable and wise people possessing the characteristics of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), he being the ideal man. This is the *daulat al-khair* that they aspire to live in after death.⁸

Because of such a view of the world, all of their educational endeavours are geared towards preparation of the soul for life in the *daulat al-khair* after death. They spread their message not as a means to reform the current society, but to call others to purify themselves and join them in their forthcoming ideal world on the basis that the more souls the merrier.⁹

Scholars have noted that there are Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical influences in the works of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. However, as Netton observed, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' did not take the words of these schools as absolute. For example, although they partially shared a Platonic view of the body being the impediment to the achievement of spiritual perfection, they did not deny the importance of sensory perception. In fact, they explained the stages of learning as

perceptual sequence of senses-intellect-logical deduction, while emphasizing that 'without the senses one can know nothing'. They rejected Pythagorean ideas of transmigration, emphasizing rather that there is only one single life on earth, and that it is through the purification of this single life that a man warrants admission to paradise.¹⁰

Commenting on criticism of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's borrowing of Hellenic, Neo-Platonic, Pseudo-Hermetic, Iranian, Indian, Manichaeic, and Judaic-Christian ideas, implying that the Ikhwan offer nothing original, Wahidur Rahman maintains that there is a possibility that any similarities could be attributed to the natural phenomenon that 'great men think alike'.¹¹

Educational Perspectives and Principles

Although there are some allegations that the establishment of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' was politically motivated,¹² Jamaluddin maintains that there is no historical evidence to support these allegations and that the brethren were mainly philosophers who made education the objective of their group. She summarized their educational objectives as follows:¹³

(1) To know Allah and to testify to his Oneness.

(2) To know the soul and to refine it.

(3) To enable the soul to control the body and enjoy the blessings of *ākhirah* (afterlife). In their view, the purpose of existence in the world is to enable the soul to perfect its virtues (*tastakmila faḍā'ilahā*), to acquire knowledge that will make it see the truth. Thereby, the soul will be delivered from the physical world and the darkness of ignorance, and subsequently rise to the '*ālam al-aflāk* (the higher realm) and the gardens of Paradise.

(4) To ameliorate the affairs of mankind in this world (*dunyā*). This becomes evident when one looks at their view on the advantages of knowledge. They pointed out the fact that the possessor of knowledge gains the following commendable virtues: honour, dignity, wealth, strength, nobleness, generosity, humbleness, grandeur and soundness, instead of the corresponding opposite vices. However, they did not really explain how these transformations could occur – solving worldly problems related to this life was not their main enterprise. Rather their idea of betterment was to leave this world, which is so full of corruption (*fasād*), for a world that promises permanent felicity. They also discussed specialization in theoretical and practical knowledge as well as competency in vocations.

The Ikhwan differentiated between *al-tarbiyah* and *al-ta'lim*. *Al-tarbiyah* is 'to manifest and reveal the potential unique to each individual' (*ibrāz al-isti'dād al-shakhṣī wa jalā'uḥu*) whereas *al-ta'lim* means 'transmission of information and knowledge to the learners' (*intiqāl al-ma'lūmāt wa al-ma'ārif ilā al-muta'allimīn*). *Al-tarbiyah* ends before *al-ta'lim* begins. However, Jamaluddin points out that Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's understanding of *ta'lim* is relatively similar to our contemporary understanding of *al-tarbiyah* in the sense that they did not confine *ta'lim* to the transmission of knowledge. However, in order to be rescued from the vice-ridden

world to the realm high above, they also included the cultivation of virtuous character and the purification of the soul in their teachings.¹⁴

Knowledge is defined as ‘the image of the known in the soul of the knower’ (*ṣūrat al-ma‘lūm fī nafs al-‘ālim*). Learning has nothing to do with the body – rather it is the soul that learns, and knowledge, therefore, is the nutrition of the soul. It is through knowledge that the soul is able to earn its life away from the death of ignorance. Knowledge of God, the messengers, and the prophets, is the most noble and useful knowledge, that enlightens and gives life to the heart. Knowledge raises the level of a man, and it is with knowledge that obedience to God is learnt. Through it, one is able to distinguish good from bad, and *ḥalāl* from *ḥarām*. Knowledge is the guide of deeds (*a‘māl*; sing. *‘amal*).¹⁵

There are different kinds of knowledge and not all of them can be acquired by the ordinary human being. A man is limited by his inability to know the events that took place before Adam, nor is he able to know the far away future, nor the intricate make-up of his body, nor images that have no substance, nor the underlying reason for existence. Unlike the prophets, who are able to see far deeper, far in the past and far in the future, man in general is only able to perceive two kinds of knowledge: natural intuitive knowledge that can be perceived by the senses or the simple mind; and that which can be taught and acquired, such as mathematics and literature.¹⁶

The objective of learning is therefore to reform the essence of the soul, refine its *akhlāq* (character) and to prepare it for the Hereafter (*ākhirah*). Knowledge that does not lead to the *ākhirah* is of no benefit. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ also had the notions of *‘allama bil-quwwah* and *‘allama bil-ḥiṣl*.¹⁷ The former refers to the innate ability to acquire knowledge, a predisposition shared by every soul, while the latter refers to the actualization of the acquisition of knowledge through the teaching and learning processes. This is due to their belief that there are two types of power in the man’s soul; as the knower and as the doer. Learning and teaching is about bringing the attributes of the knower from dormant potentiality into actuality. For this transformation to happen, the soul of the student who is the potential knower needs to learn from the souls of the teachers, who are actual knowers.¹⁸ Therefore, every human being must have teachers from whom they learn the various sciences, knowledge, views and doctrines either through instruction (*talqīn*) or examples.¹⁹

So, what to learn? Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ acknowledged individual preferences, the distinction between knowledge that is appropriate for the general population and that which should be confined to a particular group of people, as well as the fact that knowledge is so diverse that there is no possible way that one could master it all. They therefore set some general parameters for selecting which knowledge one should acquire: (1) a person must learn what he cannot afford to be ignorant of, (2) he should choose what suits his nature and readiness. Some knowledge is suitable for the general population but not the specialist, while some is suitable for the specialist and not the general.²⁰

Their curriculum also included music, particularly at the fifth stage (see below). It was not aimed at entertainment, but rather at the understanding of the essence of relationships and the knowledge of composition. This practice was based on the assumption that listening to music helps refine the soul and senses, leading to tenderness of feeling and certain desirable virtues such as phlegmatism, dignity, wisdom and meditation.²¹

Educational Stages

First Stage: Infancy Stage (0-4 years old)

The infancy stage is not exactly a learning stage, but rather one of nurturing. The infant was viewed as a blank slate completely devoid of knowledge, virtue, opinion or doctrine. The *sinnu al-tarbiyah* (age of instruction or nurturing), which starts from the day the child is born and lasts until the age of 4, is the stage for nurturing strength, and the kind of perceptive sense and intuition that would enable the development of the child's ability to understand, to differentiate, to think, to narrate and to acquire intuitive knowledge; that is, the basic skills that are much desired for further learning, especially in later stages. It is at this stage that the infant's sense of touch (to differentiate between smooth and rough), perception (to differentiate between bright and dark), sense of taste (the taste of milk), sense of smell (to differentiate among different kinds of smells) and sense of hearing (to differentiate among the voices of mother, father, brothers, sisters and relatives ...). It is through the development of these perceptive senses, until the end of the nursing stage and the beginning of speech development, that the prerequisite forces of comprehension and knowledge are developed.²²

Second Stage: Childhood Stage (4-15 years old)

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' believed that after the age of 4, the personal predisposition inherent in a child begins to emerge in a gradual and evolutionary manner, just like the flowering process of a plant. However, they did not attribute this predisposition to genetic causes, but rather to the influence of the stars and planets when the child was still a foetus.

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' also acknowledged the tremendous effect of environment on the child, in at least two ways: first, it inculcates or reinforces the child's virtues and morals, and secondly, it influences the child's preferences and inclinations in selecting both what knowledge to acquire, and a vocation. If the child grows up with the brave, horse riders and people of martial abilities, he will behave like them and become like them. The child will model *himself* on those around him. The sounds and foods that he grew up with will bring much pleasure to him, when compared to the effect that the ones he never knew have. Similarly the child will be better able to perform the vocations that he grew up watching his father or forefather doing. This phenomenon, according to Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', is ordained by God.

The children at this stage learn the basic requisites such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and the study of literature. It is at this stage that they are to be acquainted with an important learning skill: to understand questions and to answer them.²³

Third Stage: Youth Stage (15-30 years old)

At this stage, learners are called *al-abrār al-ruḥamā'* (the dutiful and kind). By this stage, the learners should have attained the intellectual ability to distinguish the meaning of sensory objects. In the previous stage, the use of reason was limited to the immediate surroundings of the child. But at this stage, learners should be better able to abstract from their daily experiences, and generalize them to more universal and unseen matters. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' imposed several conditions on these learners: having

an interest in learning, having faith in God and the Hereafter, and not subscribing to any particular school of thought.

They emphasized that the selection of youth as the focus of instruction is in accordance with God's Law, as God only gave His wisdom to one while one was within this 'youthful' age range. The desires and inclinations of youth, including those related to marital life and marriage, were also influenced by a number of planets and the Sun. After the age of seventeen youth become inclined to taking care of others and acquiring power, due to their becoming governed at this age by the Sun, the possessor of dignity and leadership. It appears that Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' subscribed to the opinion that there exists a force other than God and nature governing the biological, social and psychological development of a person.

The youth learned various types of knowledge and skills. Some learnt theoretical subjects to enable them to become teachers, judges and physicians. Others learnt practical subjects, becoming traders, blacksmiths, carpenters or farmers.²⁴

Fourth Stage: The Wisdom Stage (30-40 years old)

Learners of this stage were ranked *al-akhyār al-fuḍalā'* (the Good and Virtuous) and known for their leadership virtues, such as determination, courage and talents.²⁵ They were considered leaders in terms of their taking care of other member brothers, leading villages, preparing army chiefs, etc.²⁶ In terms of knowledge, they relied on reason, logic and evidence.²⁷

Fifth Stage: The Legal Stage (40-50 years old)

These learners were called the *al-fuḍalā' al-kirām* (the Virtuous and Honourable). These learners were characterized by religiousness, piety, repentance, asceticism, abundant 'ibādah and other noble characteristics that lead to the consciousness of God. Distinguished by wisdom and piety, they had a deep understanding of matters by mere observation and they upheld the divine code.²⁸ Their curriculum included philosophical sciences.²⁹

Sixth Stage: Angelic Stage (50 years and above)

Learners at this stage were characterized by their angelic ability to discover facts and intangible spiritual truths on their own, without relying on evidence or logic, or what was written in books.³⁰ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' placed these learners at the level of the angels, as the latter surpassed men in their fear of God.³¹

Instructional Methodology

Knowledge is acquired through three means:

(1) The rational: this was the means by which the prophets received revelations through the angels, and by which the wise and the philosophers reached their conclusions. The kind of knowledge acquired by this means was the most noble and wise. Such knowledge included names of meanings, meanings that were not based on substance, and perceiving things beyond facts and existence.

(2) The sense of hearing: this was the knowledge that could be perceived by the soul through the sounds of language. Words carry meanings. Through such means, one could acquire *akhbār ghaibiyyah* (hidden knowledge or information) by relying on what was related by another party.

(3) Vision and intellectual observation (*al-baṣr wa al-ra'y al-'aqlī*): this constitutes that which the soul is able to perceive from current existence. Even in the absence of tangible things, the soul is capable of making judgements about what he had perceived, and to come up with its own opinions and judgements, as well as to grasp the facts. This was the means of knowledge for those special people just below the ranks of the wise and the prophets.

Souls differ in their readiness and ability to perceive the different kinds of knowledge and the different means through which knowledge is transmitted. Some need evidence, others need poetic support. Some others need debates while some are content with mere imitation. As much as knowledge should not be given to those who are not ready or do not appreciate it, it should also not be withheld from those who deserve it. Philosophy is to be taught only to those who have acquired the basic knowledge of religious and other sciences. For this reason, the *Rasā'il* (the epistles of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā') were compiled systematically according to the levels and stages of learners. After completing these lessons, the learner was to move into scholarly meetings with people of knowledge in the mosques, the markets and other places, and was to see the world and discover its wonders, so as to wake up from ignorance, and be able to think rationally.³²

Instruction was based on several principles:

(1) To instill and develop in learners a love for knowledge, to develop competency and rational thinking rather than research and discovery skills. The emphasis on developing thinking skills is especially evident in the epistles on *Manṭiq*. Instruction should not complicate matters by presenting unnecessary arguments.

(2) The use of symbolic stories, narrated by animals and birds complaining to the genies about the tyranny of men. Such a method was chosen for its ability to capture the attention and enthusiasm, to further illustrate particular morals, and especially in the fact of its working more effectively on the mind in comprehending the morals of stories.

(3) Clarity of the subject matter. For this reason, the teacher adopted the method of teaching gradually and in reasonable and appropriate proportions. It was for this reason that they employed various teaching techniques. A learner in general "does not learn what he is not interested in, he is not interested in something he cannot verify, and does not verify what he cannot imagine, and cannot imagine an unseen unless through extensive description of its advantages."³³

(4) Success causes more effort to be made on the part of the student, and, therefore, more learning to take place. With every step forward, a learner who has tasted the

flavour of success becomes more and more unlikely to make mistakes, and in fact becomes more driven to persevere, so as not to be deprived of this ecstasy arising from success. This is indeed a long known fact that is yet to receive sufficient attention from educators even today: learners simply must have some sense of accomplishment to boost learning and avoid any feeling of alienation in their learning endeavours.

It was indeed very apparent that Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' paid much attention to the psychological aspects of learning. Jamaluddin makes the important observation that instruction among Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' differed markedly from that of other Muslims. It did not take place in study circles in mosques, or open debates amongst scholars, nor were there well-known teachers who students from everywhere sought to study with. In fact, teaching happened only periodically, when the content of *Rasā'il* would be read or discussed, or sent to selected members through a messenger delivering the content to other members and explaining the obscurities.³⁴

The Teacher

Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' viewed teaching as a social obligation in accordance with the tradition that every member should desire for others what he desires for himself. Since a member was concerned with rising to the real world high above by perfecting the soul, he should desire the same for other members, and the society at large, who would probably be ultimately interested in achieving the same goal. This explains why, despite the secret modality of their operation, some of their epistles were intentionally disseminated as a means of attracting potential members. A member who had passed a particular stage was required to teach the stage to others.³⁵

A teacher was not only the purveyor of knowledge and the engineer of the mind. He was also the spiritual father (*ab rūḥānī*) of his learners and a role model. "It is the source of happiness for a learner if he gets a teacher who is intelligent (*zakī*), good natured, has beautiful morals, a clean mind, loves truth, and is not biased (*muta'aṣṣib*) to any particular stand or school". The teacher was like a father and the source of the development of one's life. For this reason, teachers must be obeyed, and must not be doubted. Because of the parental nature of this role, the teacher was not to take any remuneration for teaching. The teacher was a role model not only in religion and knowledge, but also in appearance and behaviour.

Given the great magnitude of the responsibilities of the teacher, in addition to the ability to keep matters concerning the group highly confidential that he would have to have, potential teachers had to have certain characteristics and pass rigorous tests in order to qualify as teachers in Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's group. The teacher had to be minimally concerned with worldly affairs, ascetic, have genuine willingness to acquire knowledge and trades, put in all efforts for the purification of the self, and be able to withstand difficulty in the pursuit of knowledge. He had to be wise, gentle, submissive, excellent in *'ibādah* and morals, have angelic ethics, along with maintaining an apparently average appearance. He must strive to earn the trust of other members, be willing to leave behind loved ones and wealth in order to assemble with other Ikhwān members, and be patient in facing challenges and tests. According to these stipulations, the potential teacher was observed and evaluated. The tests given also sought to reveal the internal purity and strength of the teacher. The teacher would

be requested to fast for 40 days, pray and perform certain rituals before being entrusted with certain secrets.³⁶

The teacher also had to be able to understand and accommodate individual differences among learners. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' mentioned that the role of the teacher was similar to that of a doctor. While the doctor strives his very best to reform the physical body, the teacher too must strive his very best to reform the soul. The teacher must therefore ensure that a good rapport with learners has been established, and that this relationship is based on mutual love and respect. He must have mercy on them, have patience in delivering knowledge, and never show boredom at any sign of a learner's slow understanding or memorization.³⁷

The Learner

The characteristics of a learner that Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' emphasized encompassed learning *adab* and particular procedures, internal purity, and commendable virtues and behaviour. This included having an interest in learning, obedience to the teacher, the interaction of questioning, keeping silence, listening and thinking in learning, practising what knowledge had been acquired, being truthful, trustworthy, observing one's conduct, the rights of self and the rights of Allah, sincerely loving, and desiring for them what he desires for himself. It also included not being sectarian, not claiming mastery in some branch of knowledge or other unless competency had been attained, and not to be arrogant about his own talents, but rather to remind himself constantly that knowledge is a blessing from Allah. One of the most important characteristics was the freeing of the heart from worldly concerns and greed. Learners were also required to trust and imitate the teacher.³⁸

Learning

When sufficient knowledge has been mastered through imitation of the teacher, learners must do away with imitation and search and discover for themselves facts through the use of reason and logic. The way to avoid *taqlīd* (unquestioning adoption) is to always ask the six 'W' questions for any particular learning object: What? Why? Which? Where? When? Who?³⁹

Unlike a piece of wood which can only be carved to take one particular shape at any one time, the human soul is capable of storing all possible images, a wide range of knowledge and contradictory information, all in one location. The soul is like a blank slate. Once something is engraved onto it, it becomes very hard to remove it. This was the very reason why Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' did not want to waste time educating older people, who were already corrupted.⁴⁰

Educational Principles

Jamaluddin captured Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's educational principles in twelve points, namely that:

- (1) Acquisition of knowledge is obligatory as it leads man to know his God and to be able to raise himself to the level of angels.
- (2) Teaching is obligatory, because all men have responsibilities to bring society closer to God.

- (3) Learning is continuous until the age of fifty.
- (4) Individual differences in learners exist, in terms of inclination and capability.
- (5) Learning begins through perceiving.
- (6) Learning should be gradual.
- (7) The need to attract the learner's interest in the subject being learnt through diversified means, such as the use of stories, animal voices, and giving previews of the succeeding lesson.
- (8) Clear delivery of subject matter, and expending effort in improving the effectiveness of teaching.
- (9) Learning is about gaining spiritual reward in the hereafter. Punishment should barely be discussed.
- (10) The teacher is the spiritual father of the learners. This bond is stronger than the biological bond. Such a bond reinforces the notions of *amānah* (trust) and *qudwah* (role model) in the teacher.
- (11) Obedience to the teacher is a must because he is like a father to the learner.
- (12) he neglect of education for females, as their rank in society is regarded as being similar to that of children.⁴¹

To these, Ismail added several other important observations: the comprehensiveness of education in terms of traditional and rational knowledge, worldly interests and eternal concerns, the influence of environment on learning, the necessity of developing the human intellect for deeper understanding, the need for specialization in both theoretical and practical knowledge, and the youth being the basis for the vitality of education.⁴²

Women in *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*

The brethren did not devote any special segment in their epistles to women, nor did they talk about education for women. Rather, they saw that women had only two functions: procreation, and being loyal wives to men, remaining at all times at home. Women are, in several places, categorized with children and the ignorant where societal ranks and the intellect are concerned. According to *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, society is made up of many levels. The common rank consists of women, children and the ignorant, whereas the elite consist of the scholars and the wise – the rest of the society lies in between. The common rank, to whom women and children belong, “do not look into the facts of sciences and do not know them.”⁴³ This view, though a faithful reflection of the belief that was widespread at the time, is clearly incongruent with the true teaching of Islam.

Conclusion and Implications

The educational perspectives of *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* were quite remarkable for their time. They were directed, comprehensive and very detailed. However, confusion and contradictions can occasionally be detected. Due to the prevailing Greek influence, for example, they attributed human development not just to divine government, but also to astrological forces. They considered a newborn baby as a blank slate, yet at the same time they claimed that there is such a thing as innate virtue to which a child is already predisposed, as determined by the movement of the stars. These apparent

contradictions could possibly be put down to the open-mindedness of their nature, or to the fact that they were trying too hard to harmonize between different perspectives, or indeed to their excessive reliance on rational thinking. Another possible explanation is that their confusion could be a reflection of the general society at large at the time, with its many intellectual and doctrinal conflicts. Nevertheless, their works reflect the degree of intellectuality and scholarship, and the appreciation for learning that existed during the Abbasid Caliphate.

It is interesting to note that most of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's educational views were in general orthodox in nature, and many of their principles are still relevant to the education of today. I would like to highlight four of these:

(1) Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' maintained that learning is all about the refinement, purification, completion and perfection of the soul in preparation for everlasting life in the hereafter. And in doing so, they emphasized the feature of asceticism. Yet, we see no traces of complete isolation from engagement in worldly crafts and vocations in them (though we do not know how much they did in fact contribute to knowledge and civilization). Our education, which is moving closer and closer to corporatization, and sees education as nothing but the preparation of manpower for the job market, is indeed alarming. It is a system formulated on the implicit worldview that education is for this world, and nothing beyond that. It is indeed crucial that educationists and educators scrutinize the principles and the underlying worldview of our educational policies and practices and suggest the type of integration that is desirable in principle and practice.

(2) Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' maintained a very high standard of the professionalism of teachers and teaching. Equating teachers to doctors is professional recognition par excellence, which could perhaps yield better expectations and responses in teachers and in society. Teachers were, in those times, perceived to have a very comprehensive role in society and impact on learners. The screening of teachers should therefore not be limited to their cognitive and pedagogical competencies, but should include the teachers' personality, internal spiritual strength, and willingness to engage in continuous professional development. Teacher education needs to seriously consider the development and evaluation of teacher attitudes, aptitude, intellect and internal regulations for continuous professional development.

(3) They placed a very heavy emphasis on the teachers' understanding and actual interpretation of learners' psychological dimensions. Individual differences in learning were acknowledged, teaching styles were diversified to gauge learners' attention and comprehension, and most importantly, learners were not seen as people who merely sought knowledge from a teacher. Learners were to be regarded as children, on whom the teacher must bestow his mercy and with whom he must have patience. A learner's self-esteem had to be increased, just as his sense of accomplishment had to be enhanced. These are much talked about principles right up to the present day, yet the degree to which this is practised in classrooms and schools is questionable. One wonders whether the many cases of alienation, academic failure, moral decline and school violence that we face today could be attributed to the lack of appropriate treatment for learners' psychological and affective dimensions.

(4) Learning begins by reliance on authority and indoctrination and then gradually progresses towards self-discovery. It is not evident in any of the reviews on Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' as to whether such an approach was effective. However, we should question the model of authority-autonomy that would be most appropriate for our educational system, given our cultural and religious context. When should autonomy be introduced? How much autonomy should learners be given? In what matters and for which learners would autonomy be appropriate? How do we strike a balance between teacher authority and learner autonomy?

These are difficult but pertinent questions and we must address them if we are to establish an education system that takes care of the physical, psychological, moral and spiritual aspects of both the teachers and learners. These issues must occupy the minds of our educators at a time when the world is becoming increasingly secular.

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