

## Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory

SEBASTIAN GÜNTHER

Insufficient awareness of the educational achievements of the past bears the risk of not recognizing what is genuine progress in the field of education and what is mere repetition. In other words, without knowledge of the history of education, we may fail to achieve the level of understanding and reasoning reached by former generations while, at the same time, keeping ourselves busy with self-postulated problems, the solutions to which have long been available in the stores of historical knowledge.

Part of the issue is that there is a tendency in contemporary Western research on education to neglect theories, philosophies, and intellectual movements originating from cultures and civilizations other than the occidental one. For instance, studies in education in the West are often concerned with the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian foundations of a European-centered history of learning, while educational concepts and practices of other cultures and civilizations are not given adequate consideration. This is somewhat surprising in view of the complex challenges Western societies are facing at the beginning of the third millennium. In fact, the increasing ethnic and religious diversity of the population in nearly every large city in North America and Europe (and in most institutions of primary, secondary, and higher learning) seems to call rather urgently for a change in the approach toward education, both nationally and internationally. At the same time, it seems necessary to recognize fully that the study of educational thought is a key tool for a better understanding of cultures, civilizations, and religions other than “our own.”

For more than one reason, this latter point is particularly true of Islam: a critical, unbiased, and systematic study in the West of Islam’s diverse values, concepts, and beliefs—especially those relating to the educational theories and philosophies developed by Muslim scholars—is a pressing and real need. Thus, this article is dedicated to shedding light on a spectrum of issues in educational thought in Islam, which may—due to their universal relevance—

The title makes reference to chap. 3, verse 79, of the Qur’an, “Be you masters in that you teach the Scripture and in that you yourselves study [it].” This article presents some initial results from research for my book, tentatively entitled “Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Education: Insights into Islam’s Classical Pedagogical Theories,” planned to be completed in 2007. Sections I and II of the present article revisit certain topics also discussed in a previous article (see n. 6 below). All dates are given in Common Era (CE). Arabic expressions use a simplified transliteration. Different diacritic marks serve to distinguish between the Arabic consonants hamza (ʾ), a voiceless glottal stop, and ʿayn (ʿ), a laryngeal voiced fricative. All translations from the Arabic are my own, unless otherwise specified.

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be of interest not only to specialists but also to a wider readership. This article aims to accomplish the following. First, it will provide an idea of the educational views and philosophies advocated by some great medieval Muslim thinkers. These offer insight into the foundations of educational thought in Islam and show that medieval Muslim scholars have made significant, original contributions to various fields of pedagogy and didactics. Second, it will draw attention to the fact that many “classical Islamic” views on education can only be understood properly if due consideration is given to both the specifics of their development within the framework of Islam and to their place within the general course of the history of ideas in the ancient and medieval Mediterranean world. Finally, it is hoped this article will help reveal the richness, sophistication, and diversity of scholarly discussion in Islam on educational theory and practice, and indicate how “current” and “modern” certain of the educational ideas advanced by medieval Muslim scholars are.

A lifelong pursuit of learning is a characteristic ideal of Islamic piety and underlies the concept of “Islamic” education. While the primary focus of this concept was the nurturing of religious belief in the individual, its scope broadened to incorporate various secular disciplines, literary and scientific, as it aimed at developing within the Muslim community fully integrated personalities, grounded in the virtues of Islam. This general notion relates to the theory and practice of both basic and higher education in Islam. It is evident in the Qur’an and the literature of prophetic tradition (*hadith*), with the latter including, for example, such sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad as “To acquire knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim, male or female”; “Seek knowledge from the day of your birth until the day of your death”; and “Seek knowledge, even if it were in China.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law and a particularly important figure for the Shiites, is quoted as having said: “Learning is the glory of mankind, and the wise are beacons on the road to truth. . . . Knowledge is man’s hope of life immortal. Man may die but wisdom liveth ever.”<sup>2</sup>

The high esteem that knowledge and education are granted in Islam is no less evident in countless proverbs, aphorisms, and wisdom sayings, in addition to poetry and prose texts of the Middle Eastern literatures.<sup>3</sup> It is especially prominent, of course, in the numerous medieval Arabic works devoted to pedagogical and didactic issues. Based on directions provided in the Qur’an

<sup>1</sup> The prophetic tradition, i.e., the authoritative religious literature in Islam, owes much of its vital educational potential to the “model character” of the events and messages included in reports believed to preserve what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, or condoned. For concepts of learning in the Qur’an, see P. E. Walker, “Knowledge and Learning,” in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001–5), 3:1–5; and Sebastian Günther, “Teaching,” *ibid.*, 5:200–205.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by al-Ghazali in his *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion (Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din)*; cf. *The Book of Knowledge, Being a Translation with Notes of the Kitab al-‘ilm of al-Ghazzali’s (sic) Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Lahore: S. M. Ashraf, 1962), 14.

<sup>3</sup> See Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

and the literature of the prophetic tradition, these works explain and analyze teaching methods, the ways in which learning does or should take place, the aims of education, and how educational goals are to be achieved. These include the actions and behavior of both students and teachers, their (moral) qualities, their relationship with one another in the process of education, didactics (including the organization and contents of learning as well as the curriculum), and the means and methods of imparting and acquiring knowledge.

Two general observations can be made about these medieval Arabic texts on education in Islam. First, elements of ancient Arab and Persian culture and, very importantly, the Greco-Hellenistic heritage were creatively adapted and incorporated into Islamic educational theory. This is particularly evident in the works of Muslim philosophers who dealt with the various stages in the development of the human character and personality, child education, and higher learning. Second, from the eighth century to the sixteenth, there was a continuous tradition of Arabic-Islamic scholarship dealing with pedagogical and didactic issues, reflecting a range of individual scholars' theological stances, ethnic origins, or geographical affiliations. Medieval Muslim scholars writing on education included theologians, philosophers, jurists, *littérateurs*, *hadith* scholars, and scientists. Although many of them taught, none of them were specialists in education. Nonetheless, their ideas and philosophies on education contributed much to what can be called Islam's classical pedagogical tradition.

#### Teaching and Curriculum Development in Early Islam: Ibn Sahnun (817–70)

Apparently, the very first Muslim scholar to write a “handbook” for teachers was the ninth-century Arab jurist and chief judge (*qadi*) of the Malikites, Muhammad ibn Sahnun.<sup>4</sup> He was born and lived most of his life in Kairouan (al-Qayrawan), a town in north-central Tunisia and one of the holy cities of Islam, which was, at Ibn Sahnun's time, a flourishing economic, administrative, cultural, and intellectual center of the western lands (Maghreb) of the Islamic empire.

Ibn Sahnun's book on education is entitled *Rules of Conduct for Teachers (Adab al-mu'allimin)*.<sup>5</sup> It is a legal treatise that deals, from the viewpoint of a (conservative) Maliki scholar, with issues teachers at elementary schools may have encountered while teaching. Composed over a thousand years ago, this

<sup>4</sup> Malikites, also called Maliki, are the adherents of one of the four law schools (singular: *madhhab*) in Sunni Islam, named after their principal imam, the legal expert Malik ibn Anas (ca. 715–96) from the city of Medina. This school stresses what was practiced by the local community of Medina. It prefers a strict reliance on the prophetic tradition (*hadith*) to traditional opinions and deduction by “analogy” (*qiyas*). The remaining three law schools are the Hanafi (named after, and developed from, the teachings of Abu Hanifa, ca. 700–767), Shafi'i (derived from the teachings of its founder Abu 'Abdallah al-Shafi'i, 767–820), and Hanbali (named after, and based on, the teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, 780–855).

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad ibn Sahnun, *Adab al-mu'allimin*, ed. Muhammad al-'Arusi al-Matwi, reprinted in 'Abd al-Rahman 'Uthman Hijazi, *Al-Madhhab al-tarbawi 'inda Ibn Sahnun* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 1986), 111–28; the French translation is by Gérard Lecomte, “Le livre des règles de conduite des maîtres d'école par Ibn Sahnun,” *Revue des études Islamiques* 21 (1953): 77–105.

work is a document of remarkable significance for the history of pedagogy. It provides us with an idea of the beginnings of educational theory and curriculum development in Islam while at the same time showing that certain problems relating to the ninth century continue to concern us today. The first four chapters of *Rules of Conduct for Teachers* are based on Islamic prophetic traditions that deal with the merits and advantages of teaching and learning the Qur'an and with the fair treatment of pupils by their teacher. The remaining six chapters present questions that Ibn Sahnun asked and the answers given to him by his father, Sahnun—a widely respected jurist at the time and still considered a major authority on Maliki law today. Ibn Sahnun provides to (medieval) elementary-school teachers a number of specific instructions and rules that range from aspects of the curriculum and examinations to practical legal advice in such matters as the appointment and payment of the teacher, the organization of teaching and the teacher's work with the pupils at school, the supervision of pupils at school and the teacher's responsibilities when the pupils are on their way home, the just treatment of pupils (including, e.g., how to handle trouble between pupils), classroom and teaching equipment, and the pupils' graduation.<sup>6</sup>

The curriculum Ibn Sahnun refers to is representative to some degree of the medieval Islamic elementary school (admitting children at 6 or 7 years of age). It includes obligatory topics to be taught, such as the precise articulation and memorization of the Qur'an; the duties of worship; knowledge of reading and writing; and good manners, since these are obligations toward God. Furthermore, there are recommended topics, such as the basics of Arabic language and grammar; good handwriting; arithmetic; poetry, provided the verses are morally decent; and proverbs, historical reports and legends (of the ancient Arabs), and speeches. Ibn Sahnun cites maxims attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that highlight the crucial significance that religiously oriented schooling in Islam grants to the learning and memorization of the Qur'an (just like medieval Europe stressed the study of the Bible):

The best of you is the one who learns the Qur'an and teaches it.

For he who learns the Qur'an in his youth, the Qur'an will mix with his flesh and blood. [However,] he who learns it in old age and does not give up on it, even when it escapes [his memory], will receive double the reward.

You must [occupy yourselves with and] make use of the Qur'an, for it eliminates hypocrisy in the same way that fire eliminates rust from iron.<sup>7</sup>

At several places in his book, Ibn Sahnun stresses that modesty, patience, and passion for working with children are indispensable qualifications for

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Günther, "Advice for Teachers: The 9th Century Muslim Scholars Ibn Sahnun and al-Jahiz on Pedagogy and Didactics," in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2005): 95–110.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Sahnun, *Adab al-mu'allimin*, 113–14; see also Günther, "Advice," 101.

teachers, basing these views again on maxims from the Islamic prophetic tradition. Yet, he makes it also clear that physical punishment was part of rectifying a child's behavior in Islam in the Middle Ages, leaving no doubt, however, that punishment should not cross the line and that the child should not be seriously harmed.

As for the practical sides of teaching and learning, Ibn Sahnun advises teachers to encourage pupils to study individually and with others but also to create situations to challenge their minds. He suggests, for example, that pupils dictate to each other and that advanced pupils would profit from writing letters for adults. Fair competition between the pupils is expressly favored, as the author tells us, since it contributes to the formation of the pupils' character and to their general intellectual development.

Other rules and regulations concern a variety of matters. Muslim teachers are advised, for example, not to instruct young girls together with boys, because mixed classes corrupt young people. This statement seems to imply, first, that education was not restricted to boys and, second, that coeducation was conducted at elementary schools to a certain extent. Furthermore, Ibn Sahnun, citing his father, says that teachers must not teach the Qur'an to the children of Christians. This seems to indicate that (a) Muslim and Christian children were attending the same classes together and (b) Ibn Sahnun took literally the Qur'anic injunction: "There is no compulsion in matters of faith" (Qur'an 2, 256).<sup>8</sup>

**Deduction and Reasoning versus Memorization as Techniques of Learning:  
Al-Jahiz (ca. 776–868)**

A book about teachers quite different from Ibn Sahnun's was written by al-Jahiz, a celebrated man of letters and Mu'tazili theologian.<sup>9</sup> Al-Jahiz, probably of Ethiopian descent, was born in Basra, Iraq, the ethnically and intellectually diverse city that shaped his mind and inspired him throughout his life and scholarly career.

In contrast to Ibn Sahnun's legal text for elementary school teachers, much of al-Jahiz's *The Book of Teachers* (*Kitab al-Mu'allimin*) deals, from a literary-philosophical point of view, with questions of learning and teaching

<sup>8</sup> It is of note that, although throughout the Middle Ages most educational texts by Muslim scholars deal exclusively with the instruction of boys and male students, there is clear evidence, especially in historical and biographical sources, that girls and women were at no time completely excluded from elementary or higher learning, nor were girls always confined to moral education provided within their families.

<sup>9</sup> Mu'tazila is the name of one of the earliest and most important schools of speculative theology (*kalam*). It had the support of the ruling 'Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) during the caliphates of al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim, and al-Wathiq (813–47) but lost this support during the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (847–61). It continued, however, to be theologically creative, though gradually losing its dominance to the Ash'arite school of theology. The Mu'tazila is noted for placing reasoning and dialectics at the center of its doctrine. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mu'tazilism was "rediscovered," especially in Egypt. See Daniel Gimaret, "Mu'tazila," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1954–), 7:783–93.

at the more advanced levels.<sup>10</sup> In this essay, al-Jahiz not only defends schoolteachers but actually champions them and stresses their superiority over all other categories of educators and tutors—an appreciation not evident in society as a whole, where the status of schoolteachers was actually quite low. Al-Jahiz depicts teachers as knowledgeable, diligent, and hardworking people, who are passionate about their profession and suffer with their students when the students do not progress as expected. Parents, therefore, should not blame the teachers when a child is slow in school; instead, they should consider the mental capabilities of their offspring.

Interestingly, al-Jahiz highlights the significance of the teachers' work by emphasizing the fundamental impact that writing has had on human civilization and by speaking of writing and recording data—along with calculation—as “the pillars” on which rest the present and the future of civilization and “the welfare of this world.” He states that the great independent thinkers and researchers of the past disliked memorization, which makes “the mind disregard distinction” and rely simply on what their predecessors achieved, without making attempts to reach conclusions of their own. Still, al-Jahiz says, a good memory is needed and valuable for learning as a process; otherwise, the results of any study would not last. He states:

The leading sages, masters of the art of deductive reasoning and [independent] thinking, were averse to excellence in memorization, because of [one's] dependence on it and [its rendering] the mind negligent of rational judgment, so [much so] that they said: “Memorization inhibits the intellect.” [They were averse to it] because the one engaged in memorization is only an imitator, whereas deductive reasoning is that which brings the one engaged in it to calculated certainty and great confidence.

The true proposition and the praiseworthy judgment is that, when [a student] learns only by memorization, this harms deductive reasoning; and when he uses only deductive reasoning, this harms learning by memorization—even if memorization has a more honorable rank than [deductive reasoning]. So, when he neglects rational reflection, ideas do not come quickly to him, and when he neglects memorization, [these ideas] do not stick in his mind or remain long in his heart.

The nature of memorization is other than that of deductive reasoning. [However,] what both [memorization and deductive reasoning] are concerned with and support is something agreed upon: it is to free the mind and to [make the student] desire only one thing [that is, learning]. By means of these two (i.e., freeing the mind and desiring only to learn), perfection comes to be and virtue appears.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Jahiz enumerates the major topics for pupils to learn in the following

<sup>10</sup> ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Basri al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Mu‘allimin*, in *Kitaban li-Jahiz: Kitab al-Mu‘allimin wa-Kitab fi l-radd ‘ala al-mushabbiha* [Two essays by al-Jahiz: “On Schoolmasters” and “Refutation of Anthropomorphists”], annotated, with an introductory study, and ed. Ibrahim Gerjes (Ibrahim Jiryis), 1st ed. (Tel Aviv: Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Tel Aviv University [also ‘Akka: Matba‘at al-Suruji], 1980), 57–87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 62–63. See also Günther, “Advice,” 122.

sequence: writing, arithmetic, law, the pillars of religion, the Qur'an, grammar, prosody, and poetry. Further subjects that are to be taught include logical argumentation for all situations in life as well as polo, archery, horsemanship, music, chess, and other games. Al-Jahiz also suggests making the students familiar with the arguments of famous writers, their elegant style of writing and measured use of vocabulary. Moreover, the students need to be taught how to express themselves in a way that people can understand, without any need for additional interpretation and comment. They should also understand that content has priority over style. Teachers are, therefore, advised to provide a good example and choose ideas for their classes that are not shrouded in complexities or scattered throughout a long discourse.

As for the actual process of teaching and education, al-Jahiz advises teachers in particular to take the mental ability of students into account; thus, teachers should use a language understandable to the students. Furthermore, teachers are to treat their students gently and in a most loving way and attempt to reach their students' hearts when it comes to the subject matter taught. Al-Jahiz concludes his book on teachers with an inspiring passage on the merits of treating students gently, advising readers to treat students with great care, gentleness, and kindness, not to force them so as not to make them dislike good manners, and not to neglect them, for students, as al-Jahiz says, "deserve your care and hard efforts."<sup>12</sup>

#### **Student-Centered Learning and the Art of Instruction: Al-Farabi (d. 950)**

Abu Nasr al-Farabi (known as Alfarabius or Avennasar in medieval Europe) is considered to be one of the most influential philosophers and, perhaps, the first truly eminent logician in Islam.<sup>13</sup> Medieval Muslim thinkers refer to him as the "second teacher," with the first being Aristotle. Al-Farabi was of Turkish origin. He was born in Turkestan, but lived many years in Baghdad, Iraq, and in Aleppo, Syria. He died in Damascus at the age of 80 years or more.

Al-Farabi was among the first Muslim scholars to suggest an integrated curriculum for the higher learning of both the "foreign" and "religious" sciences, with the foreign being those grounded in Greek philosophy and science and the religious being those based on the Qur'an and its interpre-

<sup>12</sup> Al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Mu'allimin*, 86–87. See also Sebastian Günther, "Al-Jahiz and the Poetics of Teaching," in *Al-Jahiz: A Humanist for Our Time*, ed. Tarif Khalidi (Beirut: Orient-Institute, 2006, forthcoming), and "Praise to the Book! Al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutayba on the Excellence of the Written Word in Medieval Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam (Franz Rosenthal Memorial Volume)* 31 (2006), forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Farabi believed that "human reason is superior to religious faith, and hence assigned only a secondary place to the different revealed religions which provide, in his view, an approach to truth for non-philosophers through symbols." In his view, "philosophical truth is universally valid whereas these symbols vary from nation to nation," being the work of philosopher-prophets, of whom Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was one. See R. Walzer, "Al-Farabi," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2:778–81.

tation.<sup>14</sup> The curriculum al-Farabi envisioned “depicted the hierarchical structure of the universe and affirmed the distinction between human and divine knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> This approach toward studying, however, did not become an integral component of formal higher learning in Islam; yet, it did have an impact on the philosophers who—in their private studies and in study circles—followed it to some extent.<sup>16</sup>

Certain ideas of al-Farabi’s theory of instruction are included in his treatise *The Demonstration (al-Burhan)*; they are part of his discussions on logic.<sup>17</sup> He begins his treatment of this topic by stating that Arabic terms such as *ta’lim* and *talqin* (both basically meaning “teaching” and “instruction”) are often used imprecisely, and sometimes interchangeably, with what could be called “[general] education” and “refinement of character” (*ta’dib*), or “acustoming” (*ta’wid*). Al-Farabi then specifies that *ta’lim* results in understanding, or in an aptitude for acquiring understanding, while *talqin*, however, whose aim is not the acquisition of knowledge, results in a strengthened character that produces action. The imprecise use of these terms prevents people from discriminating correctly between the different methods necessary for acquiring knowledge, habits, skills, or strong traits of character. Al-Farabi stresses, moreover, that terminological precision is a basic prerequisite of learning in general, for clarity in expression promotes clarity in ideas and, thus, learning.<sup>18</sup>

These are reasons enough for al-Farabi to define “instruction” more precisely. He states that although there is divine and human instruction, he is

<sup>14</sup> This view is particularly evident in al-Farabi’s *Enumeration of the Sciences*; see Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Farabi, *Ihsa’ al-‘ulum*, ed. ‘Uthman Amin, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglu al-Misriyya, 1968); a German translation (based on a twelfth-century Latin translation of the *Ihsa’*) was published by E. Wiedemann, “Über al-Farabis Aufzählung der Wissenschaften (De Scientiis),” in *Aufsätze zur arabischen Wissenschaftsgeschichte: Mit einem Vorwort und Indices herausgegeben von Wolf Dietrich Fischer*, by Eilhard Wiedemann, 2 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 1:323–50. A summary is given by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, with a preface by Giorgio de Santillana (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 60–62.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Michael Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, A.D. 700–1300* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 84.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 84. See also David C. Reisman, “Al-Farabi and the Philosophical Curriculum,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52–71. Sebastian Günther, “Education: Islamic Education,” in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Detroit: Scribner’s, 2005), 2:640–45; and the insightful article by Asma Afsaruddin, “Muslim Views on Education: Parameters, Purviews, and Possibilities,” *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 143–78.

<sup>17</sup> *Al-Burhan* is the Arabic equivalent of *Analytica Posteriora* or *Apodeictica*, as Aristotle’s work *Posterior Analytics* was known in the medieval Arabic sources. Of Aristotle’s works, it was one of the most frequently commented on or paraphrased by medieval Muslim scholars. Al-Farabi’s *al-Burhan* is one of the earliest of such paraphrases. Compare M. Fakhry, in *Al-Mantiq ‘inda al-Farabi: Kitab al-Burhan wa-Kitab Shara’it al-yaqin ma’a ta’aliq Ibn Bajja ‘ala l-Burhan*, ed. Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987), 1 (introduction). See also Michael E. Marmura, “The Fortuna of the *Posterior Analytics* in the Arabic Middle East,” in *Probing in Islamic Philosophy: Studies in the Philosophies of Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali and Other Major Muslim Thinkers* (Binghamton, NY: Global Academic Publishing, 2005), 355–73.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Farabi, *Kitab al-Burhan*, in Fakhry, *Al-Mantiq ‘inda al-Farabi*, 17–96, esp. 77–78. See also Fuad Said Haddad, *Alfarabi’s Theory of Communication* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1989), 123–24, 126–27.

only concerned with human instruction.<sup>19</sup> According to al-Farabi, human instruction (*a*) is a human activity, (*b*) deals with human intelligibles, and, therefore, (*c*) should be examined within the parameters of philosophy, whereas divine instruction is not. Furthermore, for al-Farabi human instruction is a purposeful activity that aims to achieve a certain end, that is, the understanding (*maʿrifa*) of things not known before; requires a kind of previous or initial knowledge for instruction to build upon; builds on the fact that the increase in knowledge is a natural desire in humans; takes into account that the realization of the desire to learn implies the learner's awareness of his ignorance; and acknowledges that ignorance is a necessary condition or component of instruction, for it is the level at which instruction starts.<sup>20</sup> However, making a person recall previously acquired knowledge that he is no longer aware of is not to be called "instruction." As for the process of instruction, al-Farabi generally notes that

teaching can take place verbally or through providing an example. The verbal [method of teaching] is the one in which the teacher uses articulate statements; this is what Aristotle calls "aural teaching" (*al-taʿlim al-masmuʿ*). The [other] one, the one [conducted] through example, takes place when the student observes the teacher [engaged] in an action or the like, so that [the student] will imitate him in this regard or act as he does, and thus attains the capacity [to do] the same thing or [perform the] same act.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, he specifies:

Every instruction is composed of two things: (a) making what is being studied comprehensible and causing its idea to be established in the soul [of the student], and (b) causing others to assent to what is comprehended and established in the soul. There are two ways of making a thing comprehensible: first, by causing its essence to be perceived by the intellect, and second, by causing it to be imagined through the similitude that imitates it. Assent, too, is brought about by one of two methods, either by . . . [conclusive] demonstration or by . . . persuasion.<sup>22</sup>

As can be seen, instruction is expressly conceived of here as an interactive process that involves both the teacher and the student. While it is the teacher's responsibility to introduce new knowledge to the student in ways that he can understand, it is the student's responsibility to work actively with new facts until he can use them in contexts different from those demonstrated to him. Furthermore, an effective method of instruction ensures that both teacher and student participate actively in the process. This interactive element in

<sup>19</sup> Al-Farabi, *Kitab al-Burhan*, 82; see also Haddad, *Alfarabi's Theory of Communication*, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Farabi, *Kitab al-Burhan*, 79–80; see also Haddad, *Alfarabi's Theory of Communication*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *Kitab al-Alfaz al-mustaʿmala fi l-mantiq: The Utterances Employed in Logic*, Arabic text, ed., with introduction and notes, Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq [Imprimerie Catholique], 1968), 86, par. 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle [Tahsil al-saʿada]*, translated and with an introduction by Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 44.

the learning process allows the instruction to be student-centered since the aim is for the teacher to facilitate the student's own voyage of discovery.

Al-Farabi stresses that the teacher needs to facilitate the students' comprehension and conceptualization. He offers several pieces of advice in this regard. For example, he recommends that the teacher should describe and define the matter to be taught, using various methods of explanation. It is also helpful to name the various aspects and individual qualities of the object of study or to refer to a correspondence in kind or quality or similitude of it. Teachers may rely in this regard on methods and techniques such as arrangement and classification, induction, analogy, and syllogisms; these help to familiarize the students with the subject matter to be taught, facilitate their comprehension, and, thus, assist in imparting knowledge or conviction of something to them. Hence, the use of a variety of teaching techniques facilitates the teachers' efforts at creating in the students' minds an image or an idea of something not previously known, which assists them in their learning. Additionally, this makes it easier for the students to retain new information. However, this kind of instruction should be used only until the students are experienced and strong enough to be taught "directly" so that the teacher can instruct the students in the matter or subject itself, without needing to draw anymore on elaborate explanations and comments.

Al-Farabi relies here again expressly on Aristotle, who, al-Farabi says, discredited teaching that involved substituting nonessential qualities or accidents of a given thing or matter for the thing or matter itself, since this bore the risk of getting too far away from the actual teaching subject. As a result, the students will become confused rather than more knowledgeable. They will waste time trying to decipher what the teacher has said or be discouraged in their attempts to learn. Thus, at a more advanced level of learning, a preferred discourse between teacher and student is one that relies on such principles as directness in approach and clarity in thought and expression; it deliberately aims at conviction and complete certainty.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Specifics of Child Education and Psychology: Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037)**

Ibn Sina, an eminent Muslim physician, philosopher, natural scientist, and administrator, known in the West as Avicenna, was born near Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan. He never left the eastern parts of the Islamic lands and spent his most productive years in Iran, in cities such as Isfahan and Hamadan. Although Persian was Ibn Sina's native language, he wrote his principal works in Arabic, the lingua franca of medieval Islamic civilization.

Ibn Sina envisaged a world resting on two pillars: (a) Greek philosophy and (b) the Qur'anic revelation and the virtues of Islam. In uniting philosophy with the study of nature, and in understanding the perfection of man as lying

<sup>23</sup> Al-Farabi, *Kitab al-Afz*, 86–93; see also Haddad, *Alfarabi's Theory of Communication*, 134–37.

in both knowledge and action, Ibn Sina creatively adopted key principles of ancient Greek philosophy. Hence, his general conception of learning profoundly reflects Aristotelian premises. Ibn Sina was a highly spiritual and ethical person, considering that, for him, teaching and learning should lead also to rooting the faith deeply in the soul of the individual. Yet, these particulars of his convictions do not undermine the fact that many of Ibn Sina's more specific discussions of education are medical or psychological in essence and approach.

Ibn Sina believed that the actual process of knowing begins with the five external senses: hearing, touch, smell, taste, and sight. These senses reached their pinnacle in humankind, thus distinguishing humans from animals. Furthermore, by the presence of the soul, humans have two intellectual faculties: the practical and the theoretical intellect, with the practical intellect governing bodily movements and the theoretical the higher order of reasoning and thought processes within the soul. Interestingly, Ibn Sina specifies that the theoretical intellect comprises four distinct processes that are characteristic only of humans. Listed from the lower to the higher, they are: (1) The "potential to acquire" knowledge (i.e., the *intellectus materialis* or "material intellect," *al-'aql al-hayulani*), which serves (2) the "ability to use" acquired knowledge and to actually think (i.e., the *intellectus in habitu* or "intellect being in a certain state or habit," *al-'aql bi-l-malaka*); it serves (3) the "ability to generate" intellectual activity in order to understand more complex concepts (i.e., the *intellectus in actu*, the "intellect in act" or "acting intellect," *al-'aql bi-l-fi'l*), and, finally, (4) the "ability to internalize" knowledge of the intelligible world (i.e., the *intellectus adeptus* or *aquisitus*, "adoptive" or "acquired" intellect, *al-'aql al-mustafad*, i.e., "the governor," whom all other intellects serve). To have obtained this capacity and to be able to make adequate use of it means to have reached the ultimate stage of learning.<sup>24</sup> Although rather theoretical and complex in the way they are expressed, these ideas are highly relevant for the various practical sides of learning. They are significant especially with regard to the education of children and youth, including particularly activities that involve young children in sensory experiences, for these help to stimulate children to identify, compare, and classify items as they explore the world around them.

<sup>24</sup> This hierarchy of intellectual development is discussed in Ibn Sina's *The Book of Salvation [from Error]*, *Kitab al-Najat: Min al-gharaq fi bahr al-dalalat*, ed. Muhammad Taqi Danishpazhuh (Tehran: Danishgah-i Tihiran, 1364 [1985–86 CE]), esp. 333–43. See also F. Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology: An English Translation of Kitab al-Najat, Book II, Chapter VI, with Historico-Philosophical Notes and Textual Improvements on the Cairo Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), esp. 33–38, and Rahman's comments, 87–95. The latter study was reprinted in Fuat Sezgin et al., eds., *Islamic Philosophy*, vol. 34, *Abu 'Ali ibn Sina (d. 428/1037)*, Text and Studies Collected and Reprinted (Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 1999), 39–175. See also Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam*, 86–87, although no sources are given there. For the relation of these terms to Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias, see also O. N. H. Leaman, "Malaka," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 6:220.

The fact that Ibn Sina had a special interest in educating the young is evident, for example, in his monumental *Canon of Medicine* (*al-Qanun fi l-Tibb*), a summa of all the medical knowledge of Ibn Sina's time, augmented by his own observations.<sup>25</sup> Here he deals with child education as part of his discussion of the four stages of life. Insights into certain physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of child development form for him the starting point for exploring aspects of more general importance to a child's education in the period from infancy to adolescence.<sup>26</sup> He states:

The great principle here is the inculcation of control of the emotions. One should take care that they [the children] do not give way to anger and fear, or be oppressed by despondency, or suffer from sleeplessness. They should therefore be allowed that which is pleasing and appetizing, and one should avoid giving them anything arousing disgust.

There are two useful objects attained in this way. The first is that the mind grows from its very start by being accustomed to favorable emotions, and develops a fixed habit for good. The second is that the body benefits. For just as bad habits of thought affect the temperament of the body, so also a physical intemperance may be traced to habits of the mind which are contrary to the ideal. . . . Therefore, in safeguarding the emotions, the health of the mind and body are at the same time maintained.<sup>27</sup>

Ibn Sina affirms that consideration of the characteristics of the human intellect (as he sees them) is vitally important in a child's education. Moreover, he seems to suggest that the way a child develops has a direct effect on his learning. Here he draws particular attention to the centrality of stable emotional conditions, for these safeguard the child's physical and mental development. Along these lines, Ibn Sina recommends that children begin to attend elementary school when they are both physically strong and mentally mature enough to do so. This includes, as he says, the requirement that children be in possession of the necessary language skills and be able to

<sup>25</sup> A.-M. Goichon, "Ibn Sina," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3:941–47, esp. 942.

<sup>26</sup> According to Ibn Sina, the four periods are (1) youth, i.e., the period of growth (up to 30 years of age); (2) the prime of life, i.e., the period of study and comprehension (up to 35 or 40 years of age); (3) elderly life, i.e., the period of decline and senescence, when one's best vigor has passed, the intellectual power begins to decline, and one is becoming old (up to about 60 years); and (4) decrepit age, or senility (to the end of life). More specifically, the first period of life, youth, comprises five subdivisions: (1) infancy, i.e., the period before the limbs are fit for walking; (2) babyhood, i.e., the period of formation of the teeth; (3) childhood, i.e., when the body shows strength of movement and the teeth are fully out; (4) juvenile, i.e., the period up to the development of hair on the [boy's] face and pubes; and (5) adolescence, i.e., the period up to the limit of growth of the body (to the beginning of adult life). Compare al-Shaykh al-Ra'is Abu 'Ali Ibn Sina, *Al-Qanun fi l-tibb*, new ed., ed. Idwar al-Qashsh (Beirut: Mu'assasat 'Izz al-Din li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1987), 1:25. See also O. Cameron Gruner, *A Treatise on "The Canon of Medicine" of Avicenna, Incorporating a Translation of the First Book* (London: Luzac, 1930), 68–69.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Sina, *Al-Qanun*, 1:208–9; the passage is a slightly altered version of Gruner's translation; cf. Gruner, *A Treatise on "The Canon of Medicine" of Avicenna*, 379.

concentrate and understand; this is, as he notes, usually at the age of 6.<sup>28</sup> However, harmony between the physical and mental components of education continues to be a major prerequisite at all stages of learning. Thus, he advises instructors to pay close attention to the “natural” intellectual capabilities of pupils and choose topics to be taught that match the pupils’ mental capacity and level of education. Teachers and educators need to ensure, especially at the beginning of formal education, that the way to learning is paved as far as possible. Any obstacles must be removed and learning made an interesting, enjoyable, and exciting experience for the pupils; this, Ibn Sina says, is the most effective method to encourage pupils to learn and progress in their education.

As for the curriculum at the beginning of elementary school, two points from Ibn Sina’s *The Book of Regimen* (*Kitab al-Siyasa*) will be presented here.<sup>29</sup> First, priority is to be given to teaching (a) the Qur’an (this means, traditionally, to have the pupils begin to memorize it), (b) reading and writing, and (c) the basic principles of faith (*ma’alim al-din*). Remarkable in this context is that Ibn Sina points to an important pedagogical principle when he advises teachers to combine the teaching of reading and writing. He exemplifies this idea by indicating that the teacher should write letters (on the board) so that the pupils get familiar with them, and then ask the pupils to copy the letters until they know how to write them.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Ibn Sina also seems to argue here, as was concluded by A. Shams al-Din, a widely published contemporary Muslim researcher of Ibn Sina’s educational theory, that studying the Holy Scripture provides young learners with all the eloquence and explanation of things they need to have at an early stage of life. Moreover, the various philological and thematic issues that emerge from learning and studying the Qur’an stimulate thought and help increase the pupils’ mental abilities. In addition, the Holy Scripture in general is a great source for teaching children ethics, exemplary traditions, morals, and good behavior. All this is beneficial for helping youth to become eventually fully integrated members of the community and to find their place in society.<sup>31</sup>

Second, Ibn Sina, like the majority of medieval Muslim thinkers, values poetry highly as a means of education. In child education, poetry is important for several reasons: (1) in poetry the language is balanced and the composite structure well thought out and organized, which strengthens children’s memory, trains their minds, and prepares them to understand eventually more complicated concepts; (2) poetry makes the pupils familiar with eloquent

<sup>28</sup> ‘Abd al-Amir Shams al-Din, *Al-Madhhab al-tarbawi ‘inda Ibn Sina: Min khilal falsafatihi al-‘amaliyya*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Alami, 1988), 127–28, 130; based on Ibn Sina’s *al-Qanun*.

<sup>29</sup> Compare the chapter “On Man’s Regimen of the Child” of the *Kitab al-Siyasa* [The book of regimen] attributed to Ibn Sina. The work is published in *Al-Turath al-tarbawi al-islami fi khams makhtutat*, ed. Hisham Nashshaba (Beirut: Dar al-‘Ilm li-l-Malayin, 1988), 25–45, esp. 40–42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Siyasa*, 40. See also Shams al-Din, *Al-Madhhab al-tarbawi ‘inda Ibn Sina*, 131–32.

<sup>31</sup> Shams al-Din, *Al-Madhhab al-tarbawi ‘inda Ibn Sina*, 130–31.

and aesthetic speech, which helps them to speak correctly, using proper diction, as well as increases their imagination and broadens their intellectual horizons; (3) poetry makes the pupils familiar with “the virtue of good manners and the praiseworthy nature of knowledge” (*fadh al-adab wa-madh al-‘ilm*); and (4) poetry recitation is a pleasant experience that makes learning interesting, lively, and enjoyable for both the reciter and the listener. However, Ibn Sina leaves no doubt that, at the beginning of learning, the teacher must choose short poems with an easy meter for the class and only gradually proceed to using longer, more complicated ones.<sup>32</sup>

As for the instruction of pupils at school, Ibn Sina stresses that children should share the class with pupils of the same age. He expressly favors—and who would not—that a child’s fellow pupils be children who have been brought up well and are well mannered: spending time with well-behaved children stimulates a child’s activity and encourages the child to learn and to advance. In addition, communication and debate among children benefits their minds and may help to dissolve complications.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Ibn Sina recommends that the educators of children be virtuous people, of laudable character, and possessing the pedagogical abilities to deal with children: “A child’s educator must be a rational and devout [*dhu din*] person, insightful in developing moral [principles], possessing high ethics, skillful in educating children, dignified, decent, distant from frivolity and inanity, neither profuse nor longwinded, and neither inflexible nor dull. He must be kind-hearted, intelligent, gentleman-like, refined and honorable.”<sup>34</sup>

**Guidance versus Correction, and Rules of Conduct for Students and Teachers:  
Al-Ghazali (1058–1111)**

Ibn Sina’s main critic, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali—perhaps the greatest theologian in Islam, a mystic and religious reformer—approaches the question of learning from a distinctly different perspective. Al-Ghazali was born in Tus near the city of Mashhad in Iran. He and his younger brother Ahmad (later a noted mystic in his own right) were left orphans at an early age. Al-Ghazali pursued most of his education and higher studies in Nishapur and Baghdad. In 1091, at the age of 33, he accepted the head teaching position at the newly founded Nizamiyya College (the most famous institution of higher learning in Baghdad and perhaps the entire Islamic world in the eleventh century). Until 1095, he served there as professor of canonical Islamic law, lecturing to several hundred students. At a later stage in his life, he returned to teaching, albeit in Nishapur and later in Tus, not in Baghdad. Thus, his educational ideas arguably reflect real teaching experience and the pedagogical expertise

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Siyasa*, 40–41. See also Shams al-Din, *Al-Madhhab al-tarbawi ‘inda Ibn Sina*, 134–35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Siyasa*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

of an eminent educator rather than, simply, mere common sense or the idealistic declarations of a pious scholar.

Al-Ghazali is generally noted for accepting Greek logic as a neutral instrument of learning and for recommending it for theologians. It is, however, in his mystical writings that we encounter two things of significance to education: the first is his incorporation of basically Aristotelian ethical values into an Islamic mode, presenting them as Sufi values; the second is his insistence that the path to mystical gnosis must begin with traditional Islamic belief.<sup>35</sup> Based on this, “his writings and example solidified the religious sciences as the main body of studies for those seeking higher education.”<sup>36</sup>

Al-Ghazali has come to be seen as one of the great architects of classical Islam’s educational philosophy and ethics. His understanding of education as guidance rather than correction of the young, for example, became a prime pedagogical principle that recurs in many medieval writings on Islamic education. His most elaborate and influential views on teaching and learning are found in his *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion (Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din)*,<sup>37</sup> a work that is considered to be “a complete guide for the devout Muslim to every aspect of the religious life, worship and devotional practices, conduct in daily life, the purification of the heart, and advance along the mystic way.”<sup>38</sup> It reflects al-Ghazali’s deep conviction that religious knowledge and education are a means for humans in this world to attain salvation in the world to come.

Al-Ghazali’s theological-mystical approach toward learning is evident, for instance, in his conception of both the “heart” and the human being, with the former being intimately linked to the latter. For al-Ghazali, the heart is a “transcendental spiritual subtlety which is connected to the physical heart; this subtlety is the essence of man, which comprehends, learns, and knows.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, he considers the heart of the child as being in particular need of special care and attention. For him, the heart of a child is “a precious jewel, neutral, free of all impressions, susceptible to every impression and

<sup>35</sup> Günther, “Education,” 643.

<sup>36</sup> Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam*, 87. See also M. E. Marmura, “Al-Ghazali,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137–54.

<sup>37</sup> Important for the study of educational theory in Islam are, furthermore, (a) al-Ghazali’s earlier and almost rationalistic work *The Balance of Action (Mizan al-amal)*, ed. Sulayman Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1964); the French translation is by Hikmat Hachem, *Critère de l’action* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1945); (b) *O Disciple (Ayyuha l-walad)*, written in reply to a former student, and advocating, among other things, the idea that knowledge proves its value by the fruits it produces in life (cf. the English translation by George Henry Scherer [Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1951], xx of the introduction); and (c) *The Students’ Guide (Minhaj al-mut’allimin)*, published in *Al-Turath al-tarbawi al-islami*, ed. Hisham Nashshaba (Beirut: Dar al-‘Ilm li-l-Malayin, 1988), 55–92, a treatise attributed to al-Ghazali.

<sup>38</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, “Al-Ghazali,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2:1038–41, esp. 1040.

<sup>39</sup> Leon Zolondek, *Book XX of al-Ghazali’s Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 3–4. See also Julian Obermann, *Der philosophische und religiöse Subjektivismus Ghazalis: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Religion* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1921), 313–14.

every inclination to which it is brought near. If one accustoms it to good, the child will grow into a happy state in this world and the next, and his parents and educators will have part of this reward. But if one accustoms it to evil and the child is left to himself like an animal, he will be unhappy and will go to perdition, and his educators and teachers will bear the responsibility.”<sup>40</sup> This line of thought is continued by his advice that the heart needs to be educated, since “just as the body is not created perfect but its perfection is achieved by means of sustenance which makes it strong and great, so also the soul (heart) is created imperfect but is susceptible to perfection which it can only attain by education, good morals, and knowledge.”<sup>41</sup>

Al-Ghazali makes it very clear that, for him, true knowledge is not simply a memorized accumulation of facts but rather “a light which floods the heart.” Therefore, the first and foremost aim of learning is the study of the divine. Al-Ghazali thus exhorts the students to attain the gem, that is, the knowledge of the hereafter, for “the noblest of all disciplines is the one of knowing God. . . . Seek, therefore, nothing else and treasure nothing besides it.”<sup>42</sup> Despite al-Ghazali’s predilection for the “science of the hereafter,” he does not scorn other branches of scholarship; he merely ranks them lower. In fact, he praises those who study them and compares them with “those who have undertaken to guard the outposts of Islam where they are encamped, or . . . the conquerors who are warring on behalf of God.”<sup>43</sup>

Since all who “seek God through knowledge, no matter what kind” are embarking on a blessed journey, al-Ghazali provides assistance to both those beginning the journey and those who guide others on the mystical path of learning.<sup>44</sup> It is to this end that he devotes the first chapter of *The Revival* to “The Excellence of Knowledge, Teaching, and Learning” (*Fadl al-‘ilm wa-l-ta‘lim wa-l-ta‘allum*), which is followed, in chapter 5, by a great catalog of detailed advice on the duties and proper behavior of both the students and the teachers, entitled “Rules of Conduct for the Student and Teacher” (*Adab al-muta‘allim wa-l-mu‘allim*).<sup>45</sup> Given the fame *The Revival* has received throughout the Muslim world since it appeared, it is safe to say that the pedagogical ideas and practical educational directions al-Ghazali formulates here have long found their way into mainstream Muslim society.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, 15 vols. (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1356–1357/1937–1938), 8:130. These passages are slightly revised quotations of Zolondek’s translation, 4; see also Arent J. Wensinck, *La pensée de Ghazzali* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1940), 44.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, 8:110, Zolondek, trans., 5. See also Wensinck, *La pensée de Ghazzali* 45.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, Faris, trans., 121, 130.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 129, 130.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that in *The Revival* al-Ghazali revisits educational issues that he already discussed in *The Balance of Action* (see n. 37), an earlier work that he wrote before he became a mystic. Yet, apart from details, the concepts of learning are nearly identical in both of these works.

Al-Ghazali specifies the rules of conduct for students in 10 points:

1. The student must first purify his soul by ridding himself of bad habits and other unpleasant character flaws. Thus he prepares himself to become a worthy vessel for knowledge.
2. The student must remove himself as far as possible from his ties to the affairs of the world, because the ties to family and country pull him away from fully focusing on knowledge. As al-Ghazali notes, "Knowledge will surrender nothing to a person unless the person surrenders his all to it."<sup>46</sup>
3. The student must not set himself above his teacher and should accept whatever his teacher teaches him. He should embrace all advice proffered by his teacher and trust his guidance implicitly: "The pupil [is to] be to his teacher like the soft soil which has received heavy rains and completely absorbed them."<sup>47</sup>
4. The student must ignore the contradictory opinions of others in his chosen field and concentrate on mastering the "one and only praiseworthy way" given by his teacher. Only then may he consider other schools of thought. Additionally, he should ensure that the teacher he chooses is one who follows his own line of reasoning and does not continually voice the opinions of others, for this behavior is "more misleading than it is helpful."<sup>48</sup>
5. The serious student must ensure that the nature and scope of all branches of knowledge become familiar to him, because all types of knowledge are linked and related to each other. If time permits, all of them should be studied in detail; if not, then mastering the most important is imperative.
6. The student, however, must not attempt to study everything at once. Rather, he should order his study, beginning with the most important disciplines.
7. The student must not study a new branch of knowledge until the previous has been mastered, because each new bit of knowledge builds on the foundation of the previous one. Moreover, no science or branch of knowledge should be deemed useless because of the faults of its practitioners or because of the disagreements that may arise among them.
8. The student must know how to judge the noble nature of a science. This is a twofold judgment: one entails being able to appraise the fruit of the science and the other is to be able to assess the validity of its principles.

<sup>46</sup> Compare al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, Faris, trans., 129.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

9. The student's immediate purpose should be the attainment of inner virtue, and his ultimate goal should be to draw close to God and achieve spiritual perfection rather than to gain authority and to look impressive in front of his peers.
10. Finally, the student is to have a clear idea of the "relation of the different sciences to the goal [of learning]."<sup>49</sup> This will enable him to give correct weight to those matters that he encounters rather than to judge the less important to be the more important and vice versa.

In complement to the student's role, al-Ghazali identifies the following eight rules of conduct for teachers:

1. The teacher should be sympathetic to his students and "treat them as his own children."<sup>50</sup>
2. The teacher should follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad and teach for free. He should not seek praise or payment for his services but should teach solely "for the glory of God." In this way, he is like the "Lawgiver" (i.e., the Prophet Muhammad) and, thus, will draw nearer to God.<sup>51</sup>
3. The teacher is obliged to ensure that each of his students works at the correct level for himself. He is to do this by supplying them with the necessary information they require to succeed and not allowing them to attempt to move to the next, more difficult level until they have mastered the simpler one that precedes it. On a different note, he should also tell the student that the reason he is learning is to get closer to God and not for any worldly gain.
4. The teacher must persuade his students to give up bad habits by subtle suggestion and compassion rather than by doing it openly and reproachfully. Direct attempts to dissuade people from following a bad course often lead to their open defiance.
5. The teacher must not say anything derogatory about sciences other than those he is teaching but, rather, use his own subject to prepare his students for learning other branches of knowledge later on.
6. The teacher must ensure that the materials he provides for the students' study and tests are not too difficult for them; student success is important, for it ensures that the student continues to enjoy learning.
7. With regard to students who are having difficulties learning, as al-Ghazali states firmly, the teacher must ensure that "only things clear and suitable to their [limited understanding]" should be taught to

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 146.

them.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the details or specifics that are not common should not be presented to them so as not to confuse and discourage them.

8. Last but not least, the teacher must practice and live what he knows and teaches, and not allow his work or behavior to contradict his words.

Al-Ghazali's catalog of advice for students and teachers clearly marks a high point in the classical Islamic educational tradition. It allows us to picture this scholar as an academic educator who is fully aware of his responsibilities. He is someone who passionately cares for his students and attempts to help them actualize their best potential. Likewise, he is concerned with the state of the teaching profession. These observations help us to understand why al-Ghazali's educational ideas have lost nothing of their significance over the centuries and why they are attractive even to today's educators. It is therefore not surprising that his requirements for students and teachers have provided many generations of Muslims with guidance and inspiration, including later medieval scholars who also wrote on pedagogic and didactic issues. Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274), a Shiite philosopher-vizier and scientist from Iran, for example, suggests that education is a process involving the teacher, the student, and the student's parent(s); he also says that the process of obtaining knowledge is in itself a pleasure and that it can lead to everlasting happiness. Likewise, al-'Almawi (d. 1573), a scholar and preacher at the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, strongly promotes the idea of books being indispensable tools for learning. Of course, both of these ideas are so commonplace today that we easily forget that at one time they were novel.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

Several points are evident from our study. First, early Muslim scholars writing on education were well aware of the vital importance that accessible and efficient education holds for societies developing as dynamically as those of Islamic civilization were from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. This is evident from their discussions of educational matters, which display an awareness of principal issues, an open-minded approach, and a preference for

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>53</sup> Two major works on education by Muslim scholars from later medieval times are available in English translation: Burhan al-Din al-Zarnuji (first half of the thirteenth century), a Hanafi scholar from Iran, provides in his *Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning* detailed, pious advice on the study of theology. He emphasizes—as many scholars of his and later times do—the integrity and purity of the transmission of knowledge of that which has already been definitely established; see the translation by G. E. von Grunebaum and Theodora M. Abel (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947). Furthermore, there is *The Memoir of the Listener and the Speaker in the Training of Teacher and Student* by Ibn Jama'a (d. 1333), a Shafi'i chief judge in Egypt and Syria; this work was translated by Noor Muhammad Ghifari in the series One Hundred Great Books of Islamic Civilisation, vol. 10, *Education and Pursuit of Knowledge* (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1991).

analytical reasoning. Moreover, these scholars appear to have been remarkably creative and original in developing pedagogical theories that could be applied to the culturally diverse contexts in which they lived. These findings are of note for the intellectual history of Islam. However, they are also of interest within the paradigms of modern liberal democracies, with their appreciation of logical reasoning, scientific response to individual and societal needs, and pluralism.

The second point is a development of the first. It concerns the central place medieval Muslim scholars grant the “ethics” and “aesthetics” of learning. As we have seen, they perceived the ethical conduct of education to be essential for success at all stages of learning. Thus, intellectual instruction was not limited to imparting knowledge of facts and data. Rather, as al-Ghazali informs us, the responsibilities of teachers extend to bestowing on their students enduring values and to educating them to desire the good. Interestingly, al-Jahiz, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, and others suggest as well that the framework of education, designed for the imparting and acquisition of knowledge and skills, be transformed into something more desirable, so that learning becomes both effective and enjoyable for all participants, and nobody is left behind.

Third, medieval Muslim theorists of education value highly passion for instruction and passionate desire for learning. As Ibn Sahnun maintains, modesty, patience, and a passion for working with children are indispensable qualifications for teachers; al-Jahiz depicts teachers as knowledgeable and hardworking people who lovingly care for their students; al-Farabi argues that instruction be a student-centered process, in which the teachers facilitate in the best possible way their students’ comprehension and own educational voyage; and Ibn Sina recommends that teachers need not only to possess adequate pedagogical qualifications but also to be virtuous people and of laudable character. These are ideas of great appeal to the modern educator, since the ethical and emotional aspects of learning seem almost to be disappearing in our technologically defined, bureaucratic world. Similarly, today’s educators would benefit from reemphasizing the idea that teaching is a caring profession.

Although every era is determined by its own distinct characteristics, tasks, and impulses, both culturally and pedagogically, the circumstances and issues of each age are part of the larger picture of humankind’s development and need to be viewed in this way. In other words, we cannot expect to obtain solutions to the questions we have in education today by simply “deducing” them from the past or “retrieving” them from some universal system of thought. Yet, we can clearly deal with today’s educational issues more successfully when we know their historical contexts and have an adequate understanding of them, since “today’s issues in education are often rooted deeply in the historical grounds of the past,” as Albert Reble correctly ob-

served in the introduction to his *History of Pedagogy*.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, with sufficient awareness of what has come before us in the field of education, we will also be more confident in our ability to assess what is, in truth, progress in the field and, thus, to determine what truly needs to be done next in order “to see further.”

In terms of their importance to the development of pedagogy, early Muslim thinkers writing on education share a pool of great ideas with figures in the Western educational tradition such as Master Eckehart (ca. 1260–1327), a Dominican theologian and writer and one of the greatest German speculative mystics, who, like al-Ghazali, says that the learner first needs to “let go” and “free himself” from things and people in order to make education possible and successful.<sup>55</sup> One may also think of the first specifically pedagogical treatises in medieval European intellectual history written by fifteenth-century Italian scholars, including Piero Paolo Vergerio (1370–1444), a physician and humanistic educator, who deals with the prerequisites and methods of moral, intellectual, and physical education. Like Ibn Sina, Vergerio stresses the need to adapt learning to the child’s individual abilities and combine moral with intellectual instruction and with physical exercise at the earliest possible age.<sup>56</sup> Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536), a theologian and humanist from Holland, in turn pleads with us to honor a student’s individuality and establish a relationship between teacher and student that is based on mutual trust. In the same way as al-Jahiz, Erasmus advises us also to care for and respect the student.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), professor of Greek, theology, and rhetoric at Wittenberg University, Protestant reformer and “Teacher of Germany” (as he was called due to his far-reaching educational reform work), uses a rationalist approach toward learning that has much in common with al-Farabi’s, including the idea of extending the curriculum at the more advanced level to fields such as literature, history, philosophy, and mathematics. Melanchthon also highlights eloquence as a basic prerequisite and tool of learning in a way that recalls al-Jahiz.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670), bishop, great Czech reformer, and “Father of Modern Education,” emphasizes—much like his Muslim predecessors—the need for teaching all aspects of language, since good language skills are a basic prerequisite for intellectual improvement. Moreover, Comenius maintains as well that education should aim, in particular, at equipping young people with a profound knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and religious duties—ideas that are major concepts also in Islamic education,

<sup>54</sup> Albert Reble, *Geschichte der Pädagogik*, 21st ed. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004; 1st ed., 1951), 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> Winfried Böhm, *Geschichte der Pädagogik: Von Platon bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 2004), 41–42; H.-E. Tennorth, ed., *Klassiker der Pädagogik*, vol. 1, *Von Erasmus bis Helene Lange* (Munich: Beck, 2003), 88.

<sup>56</sup> Tennorth, *Von Erasmus bis Helene Lange*, 21–27.

<sup>57</sup> Böhm, *Geschichte der Pädagogik*, 45; Tennorth, *Von Erasmus bis Helene Lange*, 28–31.

<sup>58</sup> Böhm, *Geschichte der Pädagogik*, 51; Tennorth, *Von Erasmus bis Helene Lange*, 32–33.

expressly advocated by Ibn Sahnun, among others. It is no less important, however, that Comenius affirms as well that teachers should ensure a rapid, pleasant, and thorough education that follows in the footsteps of nature and, furthermore, that intellectual, spiritual, and emotional growth are all woven together—views discussed most insightfully, as we have seen, by al-Ghazali and several of his predecessors and successors in the rich tradition of Islamic educational theory.<sup>59</sup>

This article started out to provide insights into the developments of Islam's classical pedagogical tradition, attempting to show that medieval Muslim scholars have made serious contributions to humanity in various areas of education. It has become evident in the previous pages that the theoretical considerations, which medieval Muslim thinkers offer, are highly intellectual. Yet, they also display a desire for practical wisdom about learning and teaching, along with care for the ethical, moral, and emotional aspects of education. Finally, spiritual and religious components of knowledge acquisition and learning are of fundamental significance to them, with the Qur'anic revelation and the virtues of Islam placed at the very heart of Islamic education.

I believe that medieval Muslim educators understood well the intimate relationship between knowledge, theoretical and practical wisdom, logical reasoning, ethics and aesthetics of learning, loving and caring, and spirituality. If modernity is willing to learn from the past and, as the great American educational reformer and pragmatic philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) put it, “conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men,” we can be confident that we can recreate that which we seem to have lost and so restore our picture of an education system that gives credence to human development as a whole.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Böhm, *Geschichte der Pädagogik*, 53–54; Tennorth, *Von Erasmus bis Helene Lange*, 45–59. Hermann Weimer, *Geschichte der Pädagogik*, 19., völlig neu bearb. Auflage von Juliane Jacobi, Sammlung Göschen 2080 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), 81–86.

<sup>60</sup> Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1997), introduction, xx.