



Iranian philosophy of education

Bakhtiar Shabani Varaki & Reza Mohammadi Chaboki

To cite this article: Bakhtiar Shabani Varaki & Reza Mohammadi Chaboki (2020): Iranian philosophy of education, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2020.1837619](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1837619)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1837619>



Published online: 23 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 239



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Iranian philosophy of education

The Persian intellectual tradition (religion, philosophy—theosophy/Hikmah and Irfan) refers to two distinct ‘spiritual worlds’—Zoroastrian and Islamic—with ‘the same Divine Origin’ and ‘certain profound morphological resemblances’ (Nasr, 1996). The tradition influences educational theory and practice in Iran. Therefore, writing past, present and future of Iranian philosophy of education required to scrutinize the most prolific Persian intellectual tradition. Further, philosophy of education in this country, as an academic discipline and institution, has a short history. As Clark (2015) pointed out, philosophy of education could be considered in three ways: as a social institution, as an academic activity, and as an intellectual pursuit. In this editorial, we would like to introduce and analyze developments in philosophy of education in Iran as in a different priority.

Philosophy of education in Iran as an intellectual pursuit is rooted in the cultural traditions in a historical period of about three thousand years. To quote Hegel (2001, p. 191). ‘The Persians are the first Historical People’. So, we can trace Persian tradition in education during the long-lasting historical period. For example, in his book *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon (1914), Greek historian of the fifth century BC, demonstrated the education of Cyrus the Great and explained how the Persians endeavour to foster their citizens through emphasizing and deliberating on education. Accordingly, referring to what Kaminsky (1992) called ‘pre-history’, the philosophy of education in Iran can be divided into two pre-historic periods (before the establishment of the discipline) and historical (after the establishment of the discipline). In the context of the Iranian education system, educational philosophy during the historical period can be divided into two periods; implicit philosophy of education and explicit philosophy of education

As stated before, the central beliefs of Zoroastrianism/Mazdeism and Islam have had a profound effect on education in Iran and every aspect of life as well. The three principles of Zoroastrianism, namely Good thoughts (*Humata*), Good words (*Hukhta*), and Good deeds (*Hvarshata*), led to the formation of the cultural identity of Iranians and their moral and scientific life. The founding of the Academy of Jundi-Shapour (Gondi-Shapour) in Sassanid’s era (226–652 AD) was one significant achievement of this cultural identity (Nakosteen, 1965). In the 7th century, the golden age of Persia emerged, followed by the widespread of Islam (Frye, 2000). During this period, several Muslim philosophers and thinkers delineated their point of view on education. Of course, Islamic philosophy is confined to more than a single school. There are several Islamic philosophical schools including Peripatetic (*Mashshai*, 3rd–9th century), Illuminationist (*Ishraqi*, 6th–12th century) schools and the ‘transcendent theosophy’ (*Al-hikmah Al-muta’aliyah*, 10th–16th century) that developed over centuries. There is even an anti-philosophical view developed by some of the Iranian Muslim thinkers. Despite this diversity, Islamic philosophy designated by specific distinctions of breaths in a religious universe (prophetic), and concern with the harmony of reason and revelation within the context of monotheism.¹ Therefore, as the heir to Ancient Greek and medieval philosophy, ‘Islam created a powerful and original philosophy within the intellectual universe of Abrahamic monotheism and the Quranic revelation, while incorporating those elements of Greek philosophy which conformed to the Islamic Unitarian

perspective' (Nasr, 1990, p. 131). However, there is less availability of the systematic nature of the Iranian philosophy of education from this perspective. By the way, The Islamic perspective regarding all aspects of education may be found in the Persian philosophers' works congruent with their ontological, epistemological and axiological. For example, Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (872–951 AD) describes an ethical outlook in his work *the virtuous city (al-Madinat al-fadilah)* and argued that, the ultimate goal of education is to attain happiness in the utopia, but this is the prelude to happiness in the afterlife (*Ākhirah*). Accordingly, educators should help to shape the moral virtues of students (*Talabeh*) through habit-building and practice and prepare them for specific skills and careers respecting individual differences and different talents. Also, according to Ibn-Sina (Avicenna) (980–1037 AD), education is planning and activity for the child development, family health and planning of social activities for human beings to reach the worldly and afterlife (*Ākhirah*) perfection and happiness. For him, the teacher should be an excellent religious and intelligent man who discern moral virtues and know how to foster students in decent manners and good morals. He also believes that it is appropriate for the children to be included in a homelike environment in contact with other children of elites with pleasant habits in a school along with healthy competition, dialogue and discussion for learning.

Moreover, the implications of Islamic philosophy in educational goal, purposes, content, principles, and methods, are known as practised in school called; *Maktab*. This school characterized with unique features such as freedom of age at school entry, no specific age limit, no limits duration of school education, freedom to choose a teacher, scholarship, dialogue and discussion, needs-based education and individual freedom in school, teacher assistant (*Khalifa*) and so on which was similar to Illich (1971) ideas on education, notably Deschooling Society.

Philosophy of education as an academic activity in Iran began in the twentieth century under the influence of academic developments in the western philosophy of education with the works of those Iranian scholars who graduated from Western universities. This occurrence emerged in the context of the intellectual debate over the close relationship between education, freedom and development (Menashri, 1992). In consequence, the teaching of 'principles of instruction' in *Dār ul-fonūn* (the First modern institution of higher learning in Iran, established in 1851) and then the establishment of the first school for teacher education in 1919 (*Dar-almoallemin*) and the teaching of 'elementary education' and 'philosophy of education' in the centres became the prelude to the formation of academic activities of the philosophy of education in Iran. Isa Khan Sadiq,² as the head of one of the centres, consider teacher preparation consisted of a mandatory course on 'principles of education'.

In the following years, many of the best-known works of western educational philosophers translated into Persian, especially those of French and German philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau,³ Kant,⁴ and those of Anglo- American educational philosophers such as Herman Harrell Horne⁵ and several books and articles of John Dewey including 'The School and Society' (1899), 'Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education' (1916) and so forth. Moreover, several books and articles authored by Iranian scholar such as 'Philosophy of Education' by 'Fethullah Amirhoshmand' (1947) and 'Principles of Education' by 'Mohammad Baqer Hoshyar' (1948).

The gradual spread of western contact with Iran in the 1960s, translation of western educational philosophers' works into Persia was accelerated. Examples of the translated books appeared in the works of Ali Shariatmadari⁶ and Ali Mohammad Kardan⁷ and Gholam Hossein Shokouhi⁸. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of arising out of the study of the United States and European philosophy of education in Iran. So, Shariatmadari also authored several books in this subject and published his view inspired by American pragmatic philosophy and Islamic ideology. In 1966, he attended the 22nd meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society (U.S.) and presented his idea to the international scholar. Ali Mohammad Kardan and Gholam Hossein Shokouhi also introduced European educational ideas to Iranians by translating and writing numerous books on the philosophical and psychological foundations of education.

The launch of the educational philosophy program in the 1970s is the turning point and the opening of a new era in the history of the discipline in Iran. Currently, many universities offer master and doctoral program in philosophy of education, and also a variety of curricula, including 'Philosophy of Education in Islamic Republic of Iran', 'History of Educational Thoughts: Western and Eastern', 'Policy in Religious Education', 'Islamic education', 'Philosophy of Educational Technology', 'Policy-Making in Education', 'Knowledge, Mind and Understanding', 'Philosophy of Curriculum', 'Cultural Pluralism and Education', 'Methods in Philosophy of Education' and the so forth.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), a dual effort scenario in the context of the philosophy of education could be recognized. On the one hand, we recognize efforts to revive Islamic philosophy and its influence on the education and formulation of an Islamic approach to modern education under the name of 'Islamic education'. These efforts marked the beginning of the Islamic new horizon in education along with various Muslim educationalists who dealt with aspects of Islamic education at 'the First World Conference on Muslim Education' held in 1977 (Ashraf, 1985). On the other hand, our intellectuals committed themselves to teach the continental, analytical and postmodern traditions in Iranian universities. In the meantime, overcoming the confrontation between Educational model inspired by western philosophy and Islamic approaches to education has been one of the essential academic issues of recent decades. Hence, the philosophy of education as an academic activity in Iran is still a battleground for the conflict between western philosophy including continental philosophy, analytical philosophy, and the philosophy of pragmatism, and the principles of the rest of the philosophical 'isms' with the ideas of Islamic philosophers. Therefore, the multitude of philosophies of education makes it difficult to recognize a singular theoretical foundation of education in Iran.

Philosophy of education in Iran as a social institution began with the establishment of the Philosophy of Education Society of Iran (PESI) in 2008. The society aimed to promote teaching and research philosophy of education and to begin an actual effort to influence educational practice in Iran. Therefore, the society holds annual conferences focusing on current vital issues of the country's educational system, takes advantage of international faculty exchange and invite distinguished international scholars as keynotes, publishes a high-quality journal 'journal of philosophy of education'. The society also published numerous papers and books on the philosophy of education, established several branches across the country, and made an essential contribution to developing the theoretical foundations of The Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in Iran (in 2011, Dr. Alireza Sadeghzadeh Ghamsari was the leader of the work.) to cultivate the relationship between philosophers of education and the society, and expands its social impact.

Before the date of establishment of the society, two disparate patterns of response to the contribution of philosophy to education in Iran could be distinguished; Iranian education was left without the involvement of educational philosophers, and several documents produced by philosophers of education without a clear picture of the education system and so any severe effect. Therefore, we can only pursue primarily tacit philosophical underpinnings of the Iranian education system during the pre-history and the first period of the history of Iranian philosophy of education which embraces the years between the early twentieth century and the establishment of the society.

Thus, the document 'theoretical foundations of The Fundamental Reform Document of Education in Iran'⁹ is the starting point of the explicit philosophy of education in Iran from which fundamental issues related to the foundations of education, Educational goals, vision, mission, the curriculum, teaching, learning, evaluation, and assessment in the Iranian education system must be addressed. It is thriving in the Islamic approach to education, which has distinguishable features.

This document is the most significant attempt at indigenizing philosophy of education in Iran and the starting point for the shift from Westernization and sketches the contours of the

Islamization in Iranian education. It is the most important document that determines educational policy and educational practice in Iran in the light of Islamic philosophy. Accordingly, education reform enacted under 'FRDE', required to refine the educational goals, policies, curriculum and outcomes based upon the Islamic philosophy inspired by Sadra's philosophical system (*Al-hikmah Al-muta'aliyah*) and the contemporary reputable Islamic scholars such as Allameh Tabatabai (the founder of Neo-Sadraean philosophy). Although six significant dimensions of education including 'economic', 'ethical and religious', 'social and political', 'biological and physical', 'aesthetic and artistic', 'economic and professional', and 'scientific and technological' are recognized under the FRDE, the religious approach to all these aspects is in the dominant interest.

Current developments in the Iranian philosophy of education mostly include discussion and critique of the National Education Document and its theoretical foundations, and also the issues and challenges of the Iranian educational system in the light of the document and some more philosophy and theory of education and world experiences as well. In this regard, the central theme of the fourth conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Iran (PESI), held in 2013, was 'The Philosophical Discourses of Educational Change in Iran' and the theme of the tenth PESI conference, held in 2020, was 'Iranian Educational Reforms in Action: Philosophical Considerations'. The most significant result of the Iranian educational philosophers' critique of the National Education Document strongly supports the concept of ideologicalization of education and its practicality in the new millennium. Therefore, the critics believe that there is somewhat a crisis related to the tripartite of Iranian identity; national-religious-modern, as described in the document. They contend that the overemphasizing weight and importance given to Islamic identity in defining the national identity can lead to ideological closure that is very controversial and does not address the fundamental issues facing the educational reform in Iran today. However, it is not easy to trace the Islamic philosophy of education in practice and demonstrate its social potentials in the context of the education system in Iran. Therefore, schools in the centralized system still do not follow the formal philosophy of education. Some schools are working under the Islamic principles and others conducting underpinning of western theory of education or even on an alternative interpretation of Islamic ideas. Thus, we recognize the Iranian philosophy of education in a cross-road: Islamization of modern education and Modernization of Islamic education. This journey points to the development of the Iranian philosophy of education is part of the Persian-Islamic intellectual history and the development of western philosophy of education. However, as an academic discipline, it has not taken root in Iran and so no surprise that Iranian philosophers of education have made a minor contribution to the history of the field of study.

Despite the theoretical and practical challenges, the contribution of Iranian intellectuals to the philosophy of education as an intellectual pursuit, as an academic activity, and as a social institution, is inspiring and nurturing the next generation. Iranian university faculties and students are more engaged in the philosophical tradition in their research and academic works. Also, the universities offer a variety of curricula, including Philosophy of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran, History of Educational Thoughts in Islam, Western and Eastern. The universities are recruiting philosophers of education for the specialized department and also for the kindred departments, including philosophy, curriculum studies, educational psychology, educational administration, and educational technology. Nowadays, several universities offer master and doctoral program in philosophy of education. Furthermore, the Philosophy of Education Society of Iran (PESI) as one of the large professional organization has more than five hundred members across the country. They are enthusiastic about promoting the knowledge of educational philosophy and involving in educational policy and practice. So, we argue that the Iranian philosophy of education is still alive and flourishing in the context of the Iranian academic community. The optimistic conclusion also could be more successful in the world's new conditions, the days we are transitioning into a new era, generating an innovative digitized architecture in response

to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the time of developing online collaboration between people and organizations across the globe.

Notes

1. Most of the Persian philosophers; works in the post-Islamic Iran were written in Arabic.
2. Isa Khan Sadiq (1894–1978) was a Columbia University graduated educator whose doctoral dissertation was entitled 'Modern Persia and her Educational System' (Sadiq, 1931). He was minister of education in Iran and the third president of the University of Tehran.
3. *Emile, or On Education* (1762).
4. *Lectures on Pedagogy* (1803).
5. *The Philosophy of Education* (1904).
6. Ali Shariatmadari (1923–2017) was a graduated philosopher and educator from University of Tennessee and the first Minister of culture and higher education in Iran after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and President of the Iranian Academy of Sciences from 1990 until 1998.
7. Ali Mohammad Kardan (graduated from University of Geneva) was one of the founders of the faculty of psychology and education of the University of Tehran and a permanent member of the Academy of Sciences of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1990–2007).
8. Gholam Hossein Shokouhi (graduated from University of Geneva) was the first Minister of education in Iran after the Iranian Revolution.
9. The theoretical foundations of the document include three main topics: 'Philosophy of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran', 'Philosophy of Formal Public Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran' and 'A guideline for the Formal Public Education System in the Islamic Republic of Iran'. In the first topic, the ontological, anthropological, epistemological, axiological, and theological foundations of education are expounded and justified. In the second one, the political, legal, psychological, and sociological foundations of education are explained. And in the third one, based on nature, meaning, inspiration, strategies, and challenges of education influenced by the first two theoretical foundations, developed an action-theoretical model of leadership, curriculum development, teacher training, funding and allocation methods, and design of learning environments for formal public education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Bakhtiar Shabani Varaki is a Professor of philosophy of education in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. He also was president of the philosophy of education society of Iran (2013–2019). He is chair of the Department of Foundations of Education and also editor of the *Journal of Foundations of Education*. He was a visiting scholar at OISE/University of Toronto (2002–2003) and Michigan State University (2010) and Visiting professor at University of Warsaw (March 2015–April 2015) Western Sydney University (2015–2016). His research interests are the history of philosophy of education in Iran and the philosophy of educational research methodology, and his current research focuses on neuro-phenomenological issues in education.

Reza Mohammadi Chaboki is an assistant professor of philosophy of education in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. He also serves on the board of trustees of the Philosophy of Education Society of Iran. His research interests are the history of philosophy of education in Iran and philosophical counselling. His current research focuses on complexity and education.

ORCID

Bakhtiar Shabani Varaki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9071-3298>

Reza Mohammadi Chaboki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7809-3396>

References

- Ashraf, S. A. (1985). *New horizons in Muslim education*. Hodder & Stoughton.
- Clark, J. A. (2015). Does philosophy of education have a future? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(9), 863–869. doi: [10.1080/00131857.2015.1035153](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1035153)
- Frye, R. (2000). *The golden age of Persia*. Phoenix Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2001). *The philosophy of history* (J. Sibree, Trans.). Batoche Books.
- Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. Marion Boyars.
- Kaminsky, J. S. (1992). A pre-history of educational philosophy in the United States: 1861 to 1914. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(2), 179–198. doi: [10.17763/haer.62.2.g387n7j15n70x180](https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.62.2.g387n7j15n70x180)
- Menashri, D. (1992). *Education and the making of modern Iran*. Cornell University Press.
- Nakosteen, M. (1965). *The history and philosophy of education*. The Ronald Press.
- Nasr, S. H. (1990). *Traditional Islam in the modern world*. Kegan Paul International.
- Nasr, S. H. (1996). *The Islamic intellectual tradition in Persia* (M. A. Razavi, Ed.). Curzon Press.
- Sadiq, I. K. (1931). *Modern Persia and her educational system*. Columbia University.
- Xenophon. (1914). *Cyropaedia: The Education of Cyrus* (F. M. Stawell, Ed.; H. G. Dakyns, Trans.). Macmillan.

Bakhtiar Shabani Varaki 

*Department of Foundations of Education, Faculty of Education and Psychology,
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran*

 bshabani@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir

Reza Mohammadi Chaboki 

*Department of Educational Science, Faculty of Education and Psychology,
Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran*