

The Concept of Moral Education from Al-Ghazali's Perspective and Its Relevance to Modern Education

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the concept of moral education from the perspective of Imam Al-Ghazali and examine its relevance to modern education. The study is motivated by various moral challenges confronting contemporary education, including the decline of social ethics, the rise of violent behavior, the misuse of digital technology, low academic integrity, and the weakening of students' character. These conditions indicate that modern education, which tends to emphasize cognitive competence, has not been fully successful in shaping individuals with noble character. Within the tradition of Islamic education, Imam Al-Ghazali offers a concept of moral education that places character formation as the primary objective of education through the processes of spiritual purification, habituation, exemplary conduct, and self-discipline. This research employs a qualitative approach using a library research design. Primary data were obtained from Imam Al-Ghazali's major works, particularly *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, and *Mizan al-'Amal*, while secondary data were collected from relevant books, scholarly journal articles, and previous studies. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using content analysis and the historical-philosophical approach to the study of a scholar's thought. The findings reveal that moral education according to Imam Al-Ghazali is a process of character formation oriented toward the attainment of noble character (*akhlaq al-karimah*), spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), and the balanced development of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions. This concept is implemented through four principal educational methods: exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*), habituation (*ta'wid*), moral exhortation (*mau'izhah*), and *mujahadah* and *riyadhah* as forms of self-discipline and spiritual training. The findings further demonstrate that Al-Ghazali's educational thought remains highly relevant to modern education, particularly in strengthening character education, cultivating positive school culture, promoting digital ethics, advancing holistic education, and enhancing students' self-control in the era of globalization and digitalization. Therefore, Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education continues to serve as a significant philosophical foundation for developing modern education that aspires to nurture individuals who are intellectually competent, morally upright, and endowed with noble character.

Keywords: Moral Education, Imam Al-Ghazali, Islamic Education, Character Education, Modern Education.

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<https://proceeding.pancabudi.ac.id/index.php/ICEEGLOF>

Introduction

Education is not merely a process of developing students' intellectual abilities but also a means of shaping their character and moral personality. In contemporary educational systems, however, greater emphasis is often placed on academic achievement, technological mastery, and cognitive competence than on moral and ethical development. Consequently, various forms of moral degradation continue to emerge among students, including bullying, cyber misconduct, declining respect for teachers and parents, academic dishonesty, and irresponsible use of digital media. These phenomena indicate that educational success cannot be measured solely by academic performance but must also be evaluated based on the quality of students' character and ethical behavior (Lickona, 2013).

From the perspective of Islamic education, the ultimate objective of education is to nurture individuals who possess faith (*iman*), knowledge (*'ilm*), and noble character (*akhlaq al-karimah*). Moral education occupies a central position in Islam, as reflected in the prophetic tradition stating that the Prophet Muhammad was sent to perfect noble character. Consequently, moral education constitutes an inseparable component of Islamic education, serving not only as a process of knowledge transmission but also as a means of spiritual cultivation and character formation in accordance with Islamic values (Nata, 2019).

Among the prominent Muslim scholars who made significant contributions to moral education is Imam Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE). As a theologian, philosopher, jurist, and educator, Al-Ghazali developed a comprehensive educational philosophy in which moral refinement represents the essence of educational activities. Through his monumental works, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, he argued that the true objective of education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the cultivation of individuals who are spiritually close to Allah and capable of manifesting virtuous conduct in daily life (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

According to Al-Ghazali, moral character is not an immutable innate disposition but rather a quality that can be cultivated through education, habituation, continuous practice, and exemplary guidance. This perspective implies that educational institutions play a strategic role in shaping students' personalities through systematic and sustainable moral formation. Therefore, moral education should begin at an early age so that ethical values become deeply embedded within the learner's character (Nasution, 2017).

Previous studies have extensively discussed Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy, particularly his views on morality and character education. Nevertheless, relatively few studies have examined the relevance of Al-Ghazali's moral educational thought in addressing the challenges posed by contemporary education, including globalization, digital transformation, and rapid social change. These developments require educational models capable of balancing intellectual advancement with moral and spiritual development. Accordingly, this study seeks to analyze Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education and explore its relevance to the development of modern education.

Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Moral Education

The Arabic term *akhlaq* derives from *khuluq*, referring to one's character, disposition, or moral nature. Terminologically, Al-Ghazali (2011) defines morality as a firmly established condition of the soul from which actions emerge spontaneously without prolonged deliberation. In Islamic thought, morality encompasses not only interpersonal relationships but also one's relationship with Allah, oneself, society, and the environment.

Moral education refers to the systematic process of cultivating attitudes, behaviors, and personal character based on ethical principles and religious teachings. According to Nata (2019), moral education aims to develop individuals who integrate intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions harmoniously. Consequently, moral education serves as the fundamental foundation of holistic human development. school contexts. Therefore, a supportive learning environment enriched with positive values is essential for facilitating children's character formation.

2.2. Al-Ghazali's Concept of Moral Education

Al-Ghazali viewed education primarily as a means of drawing human beings closer to Allah through the acquisition of beneficial knowledge and the cultivation of virtuous character. Knowledge devoid of morality, in his view, loses its value and may even lead individuals astray. Therefore, education must simultaneously develop intellectual excellence and moral integrity (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

For Al-Ghazali, morality consists of deeply rooted qualities within the soul that naturally produce good actions. Such qualities are not inherited permanently but can be acquired through continuous training, repeated practice, and moral discipline. Education therefore functions as a process of internalizing ethical values until they become habitual aspects of one's personality (Amin, 2018).

2.3. Methods of Moral Education According to Al-Ghazali

a. Exemplary Conduct (*Uswah Hasanah*)

Al-Ghazali emphasized that teachers and parents must serve as moral role models because children naturally imitate the behaviors they observe. Exemplary conduct therefore represents one of the most effective approaches to character formation.

b. Habituation (*Ta'wid*)

Habituation involves repeatedly practicing virtuous actions until they become permanent habits. Al-Ghazali believed that consistent repetition enables moral virtues to become an integral part of an individual's personality.

c. Moral Advice (*Mau'izhah*)

Constructive advice guides learners toward understanding moral values and avoiding undesirable behavior. Such advice should be delivered wisely, compassionately, and respectfully to maximize its educational impact.

d. *Mujahadah* and *Riyadhah*

Mujahadah refers to striving against one's lower desires, while *riyadhah* denotes spiritual exercises designed to cultivate moral discipline and self-control. Together, these practices strengthen learners' capacity for ethical decision-making and emotional regulation.

2.4. The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Moral Education to Modern Education

Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy remains highly relevant to contemporary educational challenges. First, it strengthens the implementation of character education by emphasizing moral formation alongside academic achievement. Second, the principles of habituation and exemplary conduct contribute to establishing positive school cultures. Third, his ethical framework provides a philosophical basis for developing digital ethics that encourages responsible technology use. Fourth, the concepts of *mujahadah* and *riyadhah* support the development of students' self-control, resilience, and emotional intelligence in responding to the moral complexities of globalization and digitalization. Accordingly, Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy offers significant contributions to the development of modern education that aspires to cultivate intellectually competent individuals endowed with noble character.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using library research as its primary research design. The investigation was conducted through a comprehensive review and critical analysis of literature concerning Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education and its relevance to modern educational contexts (Zed, 2018).

Primary data were obtained from Al-Ghazali's principal works, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, and *Mizan al-'Amal*. Secondary data consisted of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, previous research, and other scholarly publications discussing moral education, Islamic education, and character development.

Data collection was carried out through documentation techniques. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis as proposed by Krippendorff (2019). The analytical process followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was employed by comparing information from multiple relevant primary and secondary references.

Results

4.1. The Nature of Moral Education According to Imam Al-Ghazali

The analysis of Imam Al-Ghazali's principal works, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, and *Mizan al-'Amal*, reveals that moral education constitutes the core of the entire Islamic educational process. According to Al-Ghazali, the ultimate objective of education is not merely the transmission of knowledge (*ta'lim*) but the formation of individuals who possess spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), closeness to Allah SWT, and noble moral character. Knowledge is regarded as a means of attaining happiness in both this world and the Hereafter when it is practiced according to ethical and religious principles. Conversely, knowledge that is detached from morality may lead to arrogance, the misuse of knowledge, and even social corruption (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

Al-Ghazali defines morality (*akhlaq*) as a firmly rooted disposition of the soul that enables a person to perform actions spontaneously without lengthy deliberation. This definition implies that morality is not merely temporary behavior but a stable character embedded within one's personality. Consequently, moral formation requires a continuous educational process beginning in early childhood through habituation, disciplined practice, exemplary conduct, and self-control (Amin, 2018).

The findings further demonstrate that Al-Ghazali views human beings as possessing both an innate disposition toward goodness (*fitrah*) and tendencies driven by worldly desires. Education therefore functions to cultivate this positive potential while enabling individuals to control lust, anger, and other negative impulses. Accordingly, Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education is holistic, integrating spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions into a unified educational framework (Nata, 2019).

4.2. The Objectives of Moral Education in Al-Ghazali's Perspective

The findings indicate that the objectives of moral education, according to Al-Ghazali, extend far beyond encouraging ethical behavior. Rather, they aim at achieving human perfection (*insan kamil*) through spiritual purification and closeness to Allah SWT. Education seeks to develop individuals who successfully balance intellectual excellence, spiritual maturity, and moral virtue so that their knowledge benefits both themselves and society (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

The analysis identifies four primary objectives of moral education. First, education aims to cultivate piety by strengthening faith, worship, and spiritual awareness, ensuring that learners possess a clear life orientation grounded in Islamic teachings. Second, it seeks to develop noble character (*akhlaq al-karimah*), including honesty, trustworthiness, patience, humility, justice, responsibility, and compassion. These virtues represent the principal indicators of educational success according to Al-Ghazali. Third, moral education develops self-control by training learners to regulate their desires so that decisions are guided by reason and conscience rather than emotional impulses. Finally, education prepares individuals to fulfill their dual role as servants of Allah and vicegerents (*khalifah*) on earth, enabling them to assume social and environmental responsibilities responsibly (Nasution, 2017). These findings demonstrate that Al-Ghazali's educational objectives encompass a much broader vision than educational systems focused solely on academic achievement.

4.3. Methods of Moral Education According to Imam Al-Ghazali

Content analysis of Al-Ghazali's writings identifies four complementary methods of moral education.

4.3.1. Exemplary Conduct (*Uswah Hasanah*)

Exemplary conduct represents the most fundamental method of moral education. Al-Ghazali argues that learners imitate the behavior demonstrated by teachers more readily than they respond to verbal instruction alone. Consequently, educators are required to possess strong moral integrity because their daily conduct itself serves as an effective educational instrument (Al-Ghazali, 2011).

This finding corresponds closely with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which explains that individuals acquire behaviors primarily through observation and imitation of significant role models.

4.3.2. Habituation (*Ta'wid*)

Al-Ghazali emphasizes that virtuous character develops through the continuous practice of good deeds. Behaviors initially performed through deliberate effort gradually become permanent personal characteristics when practiced consistently.

Habituation includes activities such as telling the truth, maintaining cleanliness, respecting parents and teachers, practicing discipline, fulfilling responsibilities, and performing acts of worship from an early age. These findings suggest that character education must be implemented continuously rather than through isolated instructional activities (Amin, 2018).

4.3.3. Moral Advice (*Mau'izhah*)

Moral advice serves as a means of providing learners with an understanding of ethical principles and the consequences of human behavior. Al-Ghazali maintains that effective advice should be delivered with wisdom, gentleness, compassion, and sensitivity to learners' psychological conditions.

The findings indicate that moral advice is intended not merely to increase ethical knowledge but also to foster internal moral awareness, enabling learners to evaluate and regulate their own behavior.

4.3.4. *Mujahadah* and *Riyadhah*

One of the most distinctive aspects of Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy is the emphasis on *mujahadah* and *riyadhah*. *Mujahadah* refers to the struggle against one's lower desires, while *riyadhah* denotes continuous spiritual discipline aimed at purifying the heart and strengthening self-control.

Through these practices, learners are trained to overcome anger, envy, arrogance, excessive attachment to worldly matters, and other destructive tendencies. This demonstrates that Al-Ghazali's moral education addresses not only external behavior but also the inner spiritual development of the individual.

4.4. The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Concept of Moral Education to Modern Education

The findings reveal that Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education remains highly relevant to contemporary educational needs, particularly in addressing the moral challenges arising from technological advancement, globalization, and rapid social transformation.

4.4.1. Strengthening Character Education

The findings indicate that Al-Ghazali's model of character formation aligns closely with contemporary character education paradigms. Virtues such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, perseverance, empathy, and social concern correspond to the core character competencies emphasized in twenty-first-century education (Lickona, 2013). Accordingly, Al-Ghazali's moral philosophy provides a valuable philosophical foundation for implementing character education within modern schools.

4.4.2. Developing Positive School Culture

Al-Ghazali's principles of exemplary conduct and habituation are highly relevant to the development of positive school culture. Character education cannot be achieved solely through classroom instruction but must be embedded within the overall culture of educational institutions. Teachers, principals, and all members of the school community should function as moral exemplars, enabling ethical values to develop into shared institutional practices.

a. Digital Ethics Education

The rapid expansion of digital technology has introduced numerous ethical challenges, including misinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech, social media addiction, and declining standards of digital communication.

The findings suggest that Al-Ghazali's concepts of self-discipline (*mujahadah*) and spiritual purification (*riyadhah*) provide a meaningful framework for digital ethics education. Learners should acquire not only technological competence but also the moral capacity to use technology responsibly and ethically.

b. Holistic Education

Al-Ghazali places balanced intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and social development at the center of educational objectives. This perspective closely corresponds to contemporary holistic education, which advocates integrating academic competence with personal and moral development.

The findings suggest that modern education requires the integration of hard skills and soft skills to prepare learners for the complex challenges of contemporary life.

c. Strengthening Mental Well-Being and Self-Control

The findings further demonstrate that Al-Ghazali's concepts of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, *muhasabah* (self-reflection), *mujahadah*, and *riyadhah* contribute significantly to promoting students' psychological well-being. Practices of self-reflection, patience, emotional regulation, and spiritual balance help learners cope with academic pressure, identity crises, and other psychological challenges characteristic of the modern era.

4.5. Implications of Al-Ghazali's Moral Education for the Development of Islamic Education

The findings indicate that Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy has broad implications for the development of contemporary Islamic education. From a curricular perspective, moral education should be integrated across all subject areas rather than confined to religious education alone. In terms of instructional practice, teachers should employ methods such as exemplary conduct, habituation, reflection, moral dialogue, and experiential learning to facilitate the internalization of ethical values. Regarding assessment, educational success should be evaluated not only through academic achievement but also through the development of students' character, integrity, responsibility, and social behavior.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Imam Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education remains highly relevant in addressing the challenges confronting modern education. His educational paradigm, which integrates knowledge, morality, spirituality, and self-discipline, offers a valuable conceptual alternative for developing educational systems capable of producing learners who are not only intellectually competent but also morally upright, ethically responsible, and capable of navigating the complexities of modern life with wisdom.

Conclusion

The findings of this study conclude that Imam Al-Ghazali regarded moral education as the very essence of Islamic education. Education is not merely intended to transmit knowledge but to cultivate individuals who possess noble character, balanced intellectual and spiritual development, and closeness to Allah SWT. According to Al-Ghazali, moral character is not innate and immutable but can be systematically developed through continuous educational processes beginning from an early age. These processes include exemplary conduct, habituation, moral advice, and disciplined spiritual practices through *mujahadah* and *riyadhah*. Accordingly, educational success should be measured not only by academic performance but also by students' moral integrity, ethical conduct, and personal maturity.

The study further demonstrates that Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education remains highly relevant to the needs of modern education. His educational philosophy provides a strong foundation for strengthening character education, cultivating positive school culture, promoting digital ethics, and developing students' self-control in response to the challenges of globalization and digitalization. By integrating intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions, Al-Ghazali's holistic educational paradigm offers significant contributions to addressing contemporary moral issues within education. Therefore, Imam Al-Ghazali's educational thought continues to serve as an important philosophical foundation for the development of both Islamic and modern education aimed at producing knowledgeable, ethical, responsible, and morally upright individuals.

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