Analysis of Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's Thoughts on the Ethics of Seeking Knowledge from the Perspective of Modern Education

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Abstract

Modern education faces a serious challenge in the form of a decline in the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the learning process. An educational orientation that tends to emphasize cognitive aspects and academic achievement has marginalized the values of morality and character of students. In this context, classical Islamic educational thought, particularly the concept of the ethics of seeking knowledge put forward by Sheikh Az-Zarnuji in his book Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Thariq al-Ta'allum, is crucial for reexamination. This study aims to analyze Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thoughts on the ethics of seeking knowledge and examine their relevance from a modern educational perspective. This study employed a qualitative approach with library research. Data were obtained from primary sources, including Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's book Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, as well as secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and scholarly works relevant to Islamic and modern education. Data collection was conducted through documentation, while data analysis employed content analysis with a descriptiveanalytical approach. The research results show that Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thought places the ethics of seeking knowledge as the primary foundation of education. Principles such as sincere intention, sincerity in learning, respect for teachers, discipline, time management, and maintaining good morals and avoiding sin are the primary requirements for blessings and success in seeking knowledge. These values have strong relevance to modern education, particularly in the development of character education, values- based education, and the holistic formation of student personalities. Thus, Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thought can serve as a normative and inspirational foundation for building a modern education system that focuses not only on intellectual competence but also on the development of students' character and morals.

Keywords: Sheikh Az-Zarnuji, Ethics of Seeking Knowledge, Islamic Education, Modern Education.

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Introduction

Education, in the Islamic perspective, is not merely a process of transferring knowledge, but rather the formation of the whole person intellectually, morally, and spiritually. In this regard, Islam places ethics (adab) as the primary foundation for seeking knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized the importance of adab before knowledge with his statement: "Addabani Rabbi fa ahsana ta'dibi" (My Lord has educated me and beautified my education) (Narrated by al-Bayhaqi). This means that education in Islam emphasizes a balance between intellectual intelligence and moral maturity (Al-Attas, 1999).

One of the great figures who elaborated on the concept of learning ethics in the classical Islamic tradition was Sheikh Az-Zarnuji, author of the book Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Thariq al-Ta'allum. This book has been widely used in Islamic boarding schools and Islamic educational institutions throughout the Indonesian archipelago for centuries (Arifin, 2018). Az-Zarnuji wrote this book to guide students in understanding the true purpose of seeking knowledge, proper etiquette toward teachers, and moral responsibility in practicing it. In his view, knowledge should be sought with sincere intentions for the sake of Allah, not merely for worldly gain or social status (Az-Zarnuji, n.d.).

However, current developments in modern education indicate a shift in orientation. Education places greater emphasis on cognitive aspects and academic achievement, while the moral and spiritual dimensions are often neglected (Tilaar, 2011). This paradigm has led to a values crisis in education, characterized by rampant dishonesty in exams, weak study discipline, a lack of respect for teachers, and a declining spirit of sincerity in seeking knowledge (Nasir, 2020). In this context, classical thinking, such as that put forward by Sheikh Az-Zarnuji, becomes highly relevant for reexamining and actualizing.

According to Az-Zarnuji, a student's success is determined not only by intellectual intelligence but also by good manners and good intentions. He emphasized six important aspects in seeking knowledge: intention, choosing knowledge and teachers, sincerity, study time, respect, and avoiding sin (Hidayat, 2019). These principles align with the concept of character education, which is now a primary focus in modern education. Thus, the values of classical Islamic education actually have strong relevance to the idea of 21st-century education which emphasizes character building and moral education (Mulyono, 2021).

Furthermore, in the context of Islamic religious education (PAI), discussing the ethics of seeking knowledge is crucial because PAI aims not only to teach Islamic knowledge but also to shape a civilized Muslim personality (insan adabi). Integrating the Islamic ethical values of Ta'lim al-Muta'allim with the principles of modern education can provide a solution to the dehumanization of education, which tends to position students as objects of learning, rather than as spiritual and ethical subjects (Fadillah, 2020).

Therefore, this study seeks to analyze Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thoughts on the ethics of seeking knowledge and explore their relevance to modern education, so that noble Islamic values can be revived in contemporary educational practices. This research is expected to contribute to strengthening the moral and spiritual foundations of the modern education system, particularly in the context of Islamic religious education in Indonesia.

Literature Review The Educational Thoughts of Sheikh Az-Zarnuji

Sheikh Az-Zarnuji was a great scholar who lived around the 6th AH/12th century CE. He is widely known for his monumental work, Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Thariq al-Ta'allum, which translates as "Education for the Learner and the Path to Learning." This work became one of the most influential books in the classical Islamic educational tradition, especially in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Arifin, 2018).

According to Az-Zarnuji (n.d.), seeking knowledge is a very noble act of worship and requires special etiquette. In his book, he systematically discusses matters related to the process

of seeking knowledge, from the intention to learn, the selection of teachers and friends, sincerity in learning, respect for teachers, and the application of knowledge. All of this demonstrates that the learning process is not only intellectual, but also spiritual and moral. Az-Zarnuji emphasized that correct intention is the primary foundation of seeking knowledge. He wrote: “Knowledge will not be obtained except with six things: intelligence, enthusiasm, patience, provisions, guidance of a teacher, and a long time.” (Ta‘lim al-Muta‘allim, Chapter II).

Furthermore, Az-Zarnuji emphasized the importance of avoiding sin and disobedience, as sin can hinder the acquisition of knowledge. This thinking demonstrates that, in the classical Islamic educational paradigm, knowledge and morality are inseparable. Education, for Az-Zarnuji, is the process of developing civilized individuals (insan adabi) who apply their knowledge for the benefit of the community, not merely a means of attaining social status or worldly gain (Rahman, 2021).

The Ethics of Seeking Knowledge from an Islamic Perspective

Ethics, or etiquette, in seeking knowledge has been an essential part of Islamic scholarship since its inception. Scholars placed etiquette even above knowledge. Imam Malik once said, "Learn etiquette before knowledge." (in Al-Ghazali, Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din). This etiquette encompasses sincere intentions, humility, sincerity, patience, and respect for teachers (Al-Attas, 1999). In Islam, the primary goal of education is to achieve happiness in this world and the hereafter through self-knowledge and knowledge of God (Al-Ghazali, 2005). Therefore, the educational process must produce individuals who possess a balance between intellectual, spiritual, and moral intelligence.

The concept of ethical learning is also closely related to the goal of Islamic education, which is to develop perfect human beings with divine awareness. In this context, seeking knowledge is an act of worship that must be carried out with sincerity and moral responsibility (Hidayat, 2019). The Ta'lim al-Muta'allim book is a concrete representation of this spirit, because it contains universal values such as honesty, perseverance, responsibility, and respect for teachers values that are also relevant to the modern education system (Fadillah, 2020).

Modern Education and Its Relevance to Az-Zarnuji's Thought

Modern education developed based on a rational and empirical paradigm that emphasizes intellectual aspects, skills, and technological advancement. This model has succeeded in bringing about scientific advancement, but on the other hand, it often creates a moral and spiritual crisis due to the marginalization of the ethical dimension in education (Tilaar, 2011). According to Nasir (2020), the greatest challenge in modern education is balancing knowledge and values. When education focuses solely on academic competence, the goal of developing individuals with character becomes obscured. Therefore, a recontextualization of classical values is necessary to ensure that modern education does not lose its human spirit.

Az-Zarnuji's educational values, such as sincerity, discipline, respect for teachers, and moral responsibility, align closely with the principles of modern character education developed by Thomas Lickona (1991) and adapted into Indonesia's national education policy. In fact, these values align with the vision of 21st-century education, which emphasizes learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together (Delors, 1996). Thus, Az-Zarnuji's thinking can serve as a normative and inspiring basis for building a modern education system oriented toward the formation of civilized individuals. The integration of classical thought and modern approaches can produce a holistic educational paradigm, balancing reason and morals, knowledge and practice, and the world and the afterlife (Mulyono, 2021).

From the various descriptions above, it can be concluded that Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thinking is rooted in the classical Islamic educational paradigm, which views knowledge as a means of developing morals and closeness to God. Meanwhile, modern education focuses on

developing intellectual and social potential. By integrating the two, an educational model can be created that emphasizes intellectual competence grounded in moral and spiritual values. This study seeks to examine this relationship and demonstrate how the ethical learning values taught by Az-Zarnuji remain relevant and even crucial in addressing today's educational challenges.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research. Library research was conducted by reviewing various relevant literature sources, including classical texts, scholarly books, journal articles, and other academic papers (Zed, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand the meaning contained in the texts and the ideas of figures, rather than quantitatively measuring phenomena. Therefore, the analysis is descriptive-analytical, describing the content of Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thoughts and analyzing their relevance to modern education.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary source in this study is Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's original work, Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Thariq al-Ta'allum. This book will be the focus of the text analysis to explore Az-Zarnuji's thoughts on the ethics of seeking knowledge. Secondary sources include literature related to: classical and modern Islamic educational thought, the concept of learning ethics in Islam, and studies on the relevance of classical ulama's thought to contemporary education. These secondary sources are in the form of scientific books, journal articles, theses, and credible academic online sources such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, and the Garuda portal.

Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation and literature review. According to Sugiyono (2019), documentation is a method of collecting data by tracing written documents related to the research object. In this context, researchers collected, read, and recorded important data from various literatures that discussed: Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thoughts on learning ethics, the principles of classical Islamic education, and the characteristics of modern education. The steps included: Identifying relevant literature sources, Classifying data according to themes, recording main ideas, quotations, and concepts, Organizing data into thematic units for analysis.

Data obtained from various sources were analyzed using content analysis. According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis is a systematic method for understanding the meaning, values, and messages contained in a text. In this study, the researcher will: Describe the content of Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thoughts in Ta'lim al-Muta'allim; Interpret the ethical values of seeking knowledge contained in the text; Compare these values with the principles of modern education; Draw conclusions regarding the relevance of Az-Zarnuji's thoughts to today's world of education. The analysis was conducted descriptively-analytical, meaning that the data is not only presented, but also interpreted in the context of modern education to find deeper meaning (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher used source triangulation techniques and diligent observation. Triangulation was carried out by comparing various literature discussing similar themes so that interpretation of the text was not subjective (Moleong, 2017). In addition, the researcher also maintained logical consistency between the contents of the Ta'lim al-Muta'allim book and the results of the modern literature review. In general, this research flow includes four stages: Identification of the problem and formulation of research objectives. Collection of literature data from primary and secondary sources. Content analysis and interpretation of the Ta'lim al-Muta'allim text and supporting data. Drawing conclusions and compiling research results.

Results The Ethical Concept of Seeking Knowledge in the Thoughts of Sheikh Az-Zarnuji

Based on an analysis of the book Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Thariq al-Ta'allum, it was found that Sheikh Az-Zarnuji's thoughts on the ethics of seeking knowledge are built on an Islamic educational paradigm that positions knowledge as a means of worship and moral development. For Az-Zarnuji, knowledge is worthless without good manners; in fact, good manners are the primary prerequisite for the blessings of knowledge (Az-Zarnuji, n.d.).

The study shows that the ethics of seeking knowledge according to Az-Zarnuji encompass the following key principles:

1. Sincere Intention as the Foundation for Seeking Knowledge
   Az-Zarnuji emphasized that intention is the most fundamental element in the educational process. Knowledge should be sought solely to seek God's pleasure, eliminate ignorance from oneself and society, and uphold religion. Seeking knowledge for worldly interests such as position, popularity, or wealth is seen as diminishing the spiritual value of knowledge (Az-Zarnuji, Chapter I). This principle demonstrates that education, according to Az-Zarnuji, is oriented toward developing transcendental awareness, not merely cognitive achievement. Sincere intention serves as a moral guide that guides students' learning behavior consistently and responsibly.
2. Selection of Knowledge, Teachers, and Study Partners
   Research results show that Az-Zarnuji strongly emphasized the importance of selecting beneficial knowledge ('ilm al-nafi'), pious and moral teachers, and study partners with good character. Teachers are viewed not merely as transmitters of knowledge, but as moral and spiritual figures who serve as role models (Az-Zarnuji, Chapter III). This thinking demonstrates that the educational process is relational and ethical, where learning success is greatly influenced by the social environment and the quality of the relationship between teacher and student. This aligns with the classical Islamic educational perspective, which positions teachers as murabbi (guides) and uswah hasanah (guides to success) (AlGhazali, 2005).
3. Sincerity, Discipline, and Patience in Learning
   Az-Zarnuji stated that knowledge cannot be acquired without sincerity (jidd), patience (shabr), and continuous perseverance. He emphasized the importance of time management, consistent learning, and mental readiness to face difficulties in the educational process (Az-Zarnuji, Chapter IV). This aspect demonstrates that learning ethics, according to AzZarnuji, require internal discipline, not external coercion. Education is understood as a long-term process that requires moral and spiritual commitment from students.
4. Respect for Teachers and Knowledge
   One of the significant findings of this study is Az-Zarnuji's strong emphasis on proper conduct (adab) toward teachers and knowledge. He asserts that the blessing of knowledge is highly dependent on the student's attitude of respect, humility, and obedience toward the teacher (Az-Zarnuji, Chapter V). This respect is not merely symbolic; rather, it reflects an attitude of humility and ethical awareness that knowledge is a trust (amanah) that must be safeguarded and practiced with full responsibility.
5. Avoiding Sin and Maintaining Moral Integrity
   Az-Zarnuji emphasizes that sins and immoral behavior can obstruct the acquisition of knowledge and extinguish the light of knowledge from the heart. Therefore, maintaining moral integrity and personal purity constitutes an integral part of the ethics of seeking knowledge (Az-Zarnuji, Chapter VI). This finding indicates that, within Az-Zarnuji's paradigm, education is not solely an intellectual activity but also a process of tazkiyat al-nafs (purification of the soul), in which knowledge and morality are closely and inseparably intertwined.

The Relevance of Az-Zarnuji's Ethics of Seeking Knowledge to Modern Education

The findings of this study demonstrate that although Az-Zarnuji's thought emerged within the context of classical Islamic education, the ethical values he articulated regarding the pursuit of knowledge remain highly relevant to the principles of modern education, particularly in the development of character education.

1. Integration of Ethics and Academic Competence
   Modern education tends to emphasize academic achievement, competencies, and technical skills, often at the expense of ethical and spiritual dimensions (Tilaar, 2011).
   Az-Zarnuji's thought provides a corrective to this paradigm by asserting that educational success should not be measured solely by intellectual intelligence, but also by the moral quality of learners. Values such as sincerity, discipline, responsibility, and honesty emphasized by Az-Zarnuji align with contemporary character education theories, such as Lickona's (1991) framework, which highlights moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action.
2. Character-Based Education and Exemplary Conduct
   In modern education, teachers' exemplary conduct plays a crucial role in shaping students' character. Az-Zarnuji's emphasis on respect for teachers and the moral integrity of educators corresponds with humanistic pedagogy and value-based education approaches (Nasir, 2020). Teachers are not merely facilitators of learning, but moral agents who shape an ethical and civilized academic culture.
3. Relevance to 21st-Century Education
   Az-Zarnuji's ethical values in learning are also relevant to the principles of 21st-century education, particularly in the dimensions of learning to be and learning to live together (Delors, 1996). Ethical awareness, social responsibility, and personal integrity are essential competencies for learners in responding to the challenges of globalization and technological advancement. Thus, Az-Zarnuji's thought can serve as a normative foundation for developing modern education that produces not only competent individuals but also morally grounded and dignified persons.

Implications of Az-Zarnuji's Thought for Islamic Religious Education (PAI)

Based on the research findings, Az-Zarnuji's thought has strategic implications for the development of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), particularly in the aspect of students' character formation. Integrating the ethics of seeking knowledge into the curriculum and instructional practices of PAI can strengthen the affective and spiritual dimensions of education. PAI should function not merely as a normative subject, but as a medium for cultivating civilized human beings (insan adabi) who possess moral awareness, ethical learning attitudes, and social responsibility.

Values such as sincere intention, discipline, respect for teachers, and the application of knowledge can be internalized through habituation, exemplary conduct, and self-reflection within the learning process (Mulyono, 2021). Accordingly, Shaykh Az-Zarnuji's thought offers a strong conceptual contribution to addressing the dehumanization of modern education and presents a holistic, integrative, and character-oriented model of Islamic education.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussion presented in this study, it can be concluded that Shaykh Az-Zarnuji's thought on the ethics of seeking knowledge constitutes a comprehensive Islamic educational concept oriented toward the formation of civilized human beings (insan adabi). In Az-Zarnuji's view, seeking knowledge is not merely an intellectual activity, but an act of worship that requires purity of intention, discipline, perseverance, as well as moral and

spiritual responsibility. Ethical principles such as sincere intention, careful selection of teachers and companions, respect for teachers, effective management of study time, and the maintenance of moral integrity by avoiding sinful behavior are fundamental elements in the success of the educational process.

This study also concludes that the ethical values of learning taught by Shaykh Az-Zarnuji possess strong relevance to the principles of modern education, particularly in the context of character education. Amid the tendency of modern education to prioritize cognitive aspects and academic competence, Az-Zarnuji's thought offers a holistic educational framework that integrates intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions. These principles align with value-based education, humanistic education, and 21st-century education paradigms that emphasize character formation, integrity, and social responsibility.

Therefore, Shaykh Az-Zarnuji's thought can serve as an important conceptual reference for the development of Islamic Religious Education and modern educational systems more broadly. Integrating the ethics of seeking knowledge into curricula and learning practices is expected to strengthen the moral and spiritual foundations of education, ensuring that education produces not only intellectually capable individuals but also persons of noble character, moral integrity, and social responsibility.

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