



# The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Thought to Modern Education: A Literature Review on Ethics, Morals, and Character Development

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the relevance of Imam Al-Ghazali's thoughts to the modern education system, particularly in shaping the ethics, morals, and character of students. Amidst the current of globalization marked by technological advances and a moral crisis, Al-Ghazali's ideas have strategic value as a philosophical and spiritual basis for developing holistic education that focuses not only on intellectual aspects but also on moral and spiritual development. This study uses a qualitative approach, using the literature research method, through a study of Al-Ghazali's main works such as *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, and *The Scale of Action*, as well as secondary literature in the form of books, scientific journals, and relevant research findings from the past decade. The study's findings indicate that Al-Ghazali viewed education as a process of purifying the soul (tazkiyat al-nafs) and developing noble morals through the integration of knowledge, faith, and good deeds. Teachers serve as both moral role models and guides, while students are required to seek knowledge with intention, sincerity, and proper etiquette. Al-Ghazali's concept of ideal education is one that balances intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions. This finding confirms that Al-Ghazali's ethical educational thinking remains relevant in the context of modern education, as it can provide a solution to the moral crisis and encourage the formation of a generation that is knowledgeable, devout, and has noble morals and plays an active role in community life.

## INTRODUCTION

Modern education focuses not only on cognitive achievement but also emphasizes the development of character, ethics, and morals in students (Nwachukwu et al., 2024; Purwaningsih, 2024). In this context, the thoughts of classical Islamic figures still have strong relevance as a source of values and inspiration in building a holistic education system (Khan & Ahmed, 2025; Moslimany et al., 2024; Yulifar & Aman, 2023).

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One important figure who has had a significant influence on Islamic educational thought is Imam Al-Ghazali (Gunawan & Lestari, 2021; Gyagenda, 2021; Khasawneh et al., 2022). Al-Ghazali is known as a scholar, philosopher, and Sufi who successfully integrated science, spirituality, and morality within the framework of Islamic education (N. Lubis & Rahman, 2025). Through his works, such as *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali emphasized that the primary goal of education is to draw closer to God through purifying the soul, cultivating noble morals, and developing human potential as a whole (Mohd Asri et al., 2025). His views on education are rooted in the concept of balance between reason, heart, and deeds, which is the foundation for the formation of a complete human being.

Al-Ghazali stated that the goal of education is not merely to acquire worldly knowledge, but rather, it plays a crucial role in shaping noble morals and bringing humans closer to the creator (Abuzar et al., 2024; Nazalia & Fitria, 2024). He emphasized that knowledge without moral and ethical values will lose its meaning and can even cause harm to individuals and society (Anggadwita et al., 2021). Therefore, the educational process should be directed towards purifying and perfecting the human soul, so that students can achieve prosperity and happiness, both in this world and the hereafter (Pasaleron et al., 2024).

Al-Ghazali's thoughts on education are deeply relevant to the challenges facing the education system in the modern era (Gyagenda, 2021; Indana & Mustofa, 2024). Amidst the increasingly rampant moral crisis that is occurring in various aspects of life, such as corruption, violence in education, and the decline of human values, Al-Ghazali's ideas emerge as a solution by strengthening the spiritual and ethical dimensions in the teaching and learning process (Adnan et al., 2025; Jenuri et al., 2025). Concepts such as *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), strengthening etiquette toward teachers and knowledge, and developing morals are essential foundations for creating character-based education (Mukhlis et al., 2025; Syahrizal, 2022). These values align with the current direction of education, which places character education at the core of shaping students' personalities and morals (D. S. Lubis, 2025).

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali emphasized the crucial role of teachers as role models for students in both moral and spiritual aspects (Indana & Mustofa, 2024). In his view, an educator's task extends beyond imparting knowledge, but also to guiding and shaping students' souls to ensure they remain on the path of goodness and achieve moral perfection (Engkizar Engkizar et al., 2021). This view remains highly relevant today, where the role of teachers is often viewed as merely teaching without any effort to instill moral values (Cassar et al., 2023). By implementing Al-Ghazali's educational principles, it is hoped that the modern education system can refocus on ethical and moral aspects as a central component of the learning process.

Based on the explanation above, it is important for us to conduct a study on the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thoughts to the modern education system. Using a literature study method, this paper attempts to comprehensively describe Al-Ghazali's thoughts on ethics, morals, and character formation, and explores their relationship to contemporary educational practices (Azwar et al., 2024). The hope is that this research can contribute to strengthening holistic education, namely education that emphasizes not only the development of intellectual abilities but also focuses on the development of good personality, morals, and character (Nasir et al., 2024).

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study type (Usman et al., 2025). A qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to deeply understand the concepts or phenomena being studied through descriptive and interpretative methods (Engkizar et al., 2022; Furidha, 2023). This type of literature study was conducted by collecting and reviewing various library sources, such as books, scientific journals, articles, and relevant research. And focuses on a conceptual analysis of Al-Ghazali's thoughts in the context of ethics, morals, and character development (Syaiful & Anam, 2024). Primary data sources were obtained from Al-Ghazali's main works such as *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, *Mizan al-Amal*, and *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, while secondary data came from books, journal articles, and relevant scientific research within the last ten years (Langsa, 2023). Data analysis was conducted through a hermeneutic approach to interpret the philosophical, historical, and spiritual meanings contained in the text in depth (Azizah & Abidin, 2025).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Basic Concepts of Education in Al-Ghazali's Thought

The concept of education according to Al-Ghazali is based on the belief that the highest goal of the learning process is the formation of noble morals and drawing closer to Allah SWT, not just the acquisition of knowledge or material success (Indana & Mustofa, 2024). For Al-Ghazali, knowledge only has intrinsic value if accompanied by sincere intentions and used for good (Jenuri et al., 2025). He sees education as a process of purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and at the same time, developing human potential so that they can understand their true nature and know God. Therefore, learning focuses not only on intellectual mastery but also on spiritual and moral development (Fathan et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025).

In this view, teachers function as spiritual guides who instill true values through exemplary behavior, while students are required to pursue knowledge with due respect and humility (Mulang & Putra, 2023). Thus, according to Al-Ghazali, education is a path to human perfection, where the elements of knowledge, faith, and morality are interwoven in a balanced and comprehensive manner (Syahrizal, 2022). The purpose of education in his thinking is very different from the pragmatic orientation of the modern world, which tends to emphasize utilitarian aspects and work competence. Al-Ghazali explicitly rejects the use of knowledge for purely worldly purposes such as popularity, power, or wealth, because it would damage the purity of intention and obscure the essence of knowledge itself. According to him, the pinnacle of education is the attainment of *ma'rifatullāh*, namely the knowledge of God through the medium of knowledge put into practice.

Beneficial knowledge, in al-Ghazali's view, is knowledge that fosters fear and submission to God, not knowledge that makes one arrogant and preoccupied with self-aggrandizement. Education must be rooted in etiquette and morals as the primary foundation before one embarks on the path of knowledge. Without etiquette, knowledge can be dangerous and misleading (Sibawaihi, 2021). He even described the process of education without instilling etiquette as like planting seeds in barren soil. In his view, spiritual education is not only related to the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and worship, but also involves developing inner awareness so that humans constantly feel God's presence in all their activities. Thus, according to al-Ghazali, education is not simply a process of imparting knowledge, but rather a process of self-transformation from a human being dominated by lust to one aware of the Divine presence within oneself.

Thus, it can be concluded that Al-Ghazali's concept of education emphasizes that the primary goal of learning is to develop noble character and draw closer to Allah SWT, not merely to pursue knowledge or worldly success. He views education as a process of purifying the soul and developing human potential to understand the true nature of oneself and God. Knowledge is considered valuable only if accompanied by sincere intentions, rooted in good manners, and practiced for good. Teachers serve as spiritual role models, while students must learn humbly. Thus, education, according to Al-Ghazali, is a process of unifying knowledge, faith, and morality that leads humans toward perfection and an awareness of the divine presence (Azizah & Abidin, 2025).

### **Character Education in a Modern Perspective**

Contemporary character education emerges as a response to global challenges that have led to a decline in moral values and an education system that focuses solely on intellectual intelligence (Iksal et al., 2024). Essentially, character education is defined as a systematic effort to instill and integrate universal, noble values, thus forming a solid foundation that informs an individual's personality and behavior. Thomas Lickona, one of the foremost figures in this field, defines it as a deliberate activity to help individuals understand, care about, and act based on core ethical values (Wadhvani & Viebig, 2021).

Lickona emphasizes three main interrelated components, namely *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action* (Prasetiya, 2020). This means that effective character education not only teaches what is right and wrong, but also builds a love of doing good and the ability to translate it into concrete actions. Globally, various models and approaches have been developed to implement this vision. In the Western world, models such as *Character Education Partnership (CEP)* in the US emphasizes the creation of caring communities where values such as respect, responsibility, and fairness are integrated into the entire school culture, curriculum, and social relationships (Hidayati & Nihayah, 2025).

Other approaches, such as *Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)*, focusing on developing basic competencies such as self-awareness, emotional management, and social skills, which form the foundation for character-based behavior. Meanwhile, from the Eastern world, Japanese models such as "*tokkatsu*" and moral education emphasize habit formation, group discipline, and a sense of responsibility to society. Likewise, Singapore has implemented a comprehensive approach through its *Character and Citizenship Education (CCE)*, which are designed to instill core national values and build a good citizen identity. These various models show that although the context and emphasis may differ – the West tends to focus on the individual and social-emotional skills, while the East often emphasizes group harmony and social obligations – the ultimate goal remains the same: to form individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also possess integrity and moral responsibility (Ikeda, 2023).

In the modern perspective, character education has evolved into a more dynamic and transformative approach, adapting to the complexities of an era marked by technological advancement, globalization, and increasingly diverse social challenges (Dewi & Alam, 2020; Hidayati & Nihayah, 2025; Iksal et al., 2024). One of the key dimensions that has gained significant attention is the integration of character education with digital literacy (Khairunisa & Sundawa, 2023; Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022). Amid the rapid flow of information and virtual interactions, learners must be equipped with critical thinking skills, media ethics, and awareness of digital footprint

and cybersecurity (Afan et al., 2024; Hafida, 2025). Character education also plays a strategic role in shaping global citizenship, where individuals not only understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens but also develop empathy and accountability toward global issues such as climate change, social inequality, and world peace (Ma'ruf & Marzuki, 2022).

A transdisciplinary approach has become essential in the implementation of modern character education, embedding moral values across various subjects and cross-disciplinary activities to make learning more contextual and meaningful (Budwig & Alexander, 2020). Furthermore, contemporary character education emphasizes the importance of developing an authentic personal identity, social awareness, and the ability to contribute actively to the community. Thus, character education is no longer positioned as a separate subject, but rather as the spirit that permeates the entire educational process, fostering a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also resilient, inclusive, and oriented toward the greater good.

### **Ethics as the Foundation of Education**

Ethics in Al-Ghazali's thought, ethics is the main foundation in the entire educational process because it serves as a moral guide for every intellectual and spiritual activity. Al-Ghazali (1983) emphasized that knowledge without adab will lose its intrinsic value and can even lead humans to intellectual arrogance (University & Kirabaev, 2024). In his monumental work, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, he stated that the main purpose of seeking knowledge is not to gain position or power, but rather to draw closer to Allah and improve morals and self. This view is in line with the thinking of Noddings, who believes that education must be based on moral values such as empathy, justice, and compassion so that students grow into individuals who are responsible for others. Thus, ethics does not merely function as a complement, but becomes the core that combines knowledge and practice in the Islamic education system.

In modern education, Al-Ghazali's ethical teachings remain strongly relevant in addressing the moral crisis arising from the influence of materialism and pragmatism (Jalaldeen & Al-Hidabi, 2025). When education focuses solely on academic achievement and career success, it can produce a generation that excels intellectually but lacks moral integrity (Wahab, 2025). This condition is evident in the various misuses of knowledge for personal gain, which negatively impact society. Al-Ghazali emphasized that intention is the first element that must be improved in the learning process; with sincere intentions, a person will acquire knowledge that brings benefits (*'ilm nafi'*) (Soleh et al., 2023). This idea is reinforced that values-based education plays an important role in shaping students' moral identity (Abadi & Kamil, 2024; Ansori et al., 2024; Gomez, 2024; Hang, 2025).

Furthermore, ethics play a central role in creating a harmonious relationship between teacher and student. Al-Ghazali viewed teachers not merely as instructors of knowledge, but also as spiritual guides who instill good values through exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*) (Jalaldeen & Al-Hidabi, 2025). Teachers with high ethics will have a more profound influence on students' character than formal teaching alone (Icka & Kochoska, 2024). This view is in line with the hidden curriculum theory which states that moral values are often instilled through teachers' daily behavior and interactions (Zaman et al., 2023) (Abdurrahman et al., 2025). Therefore, a teacher's professionalism is measured not only by their pedagogical abilities but also by the

depth of their morals and the exemplary behavior they display (Azizah & Abidin, 2025).

Thus, Al-Ghazali's thinking emphasizes that ethics is the primary foundation of every aspect of education (Syaiful & Anam, 2024). According to him, knowledge without proper etiquette loses its true value and can even lead to intellectual arrogance. For Al-Ghazali, the true purpose of seeking knowledge is not to pursue position or worldly gain, but rather to draw closer to God and improve one's morals (Poya & Rizapoor, 2023; Soleh et al., 2023). This idea aligns with the views of modern thinkers such as Noddings, Lovat, and Toomey, who emphasize the importance of the moral dimension in education (Indana & Mustofa, 2024).

In the era of modern education, which is often oriented towards materialism and pragmatism, Al-Ghazali's ethical thinking remains highly relevant as a solution to the moral crisis and as a guideline for developing knowledgeable individuals with integrity (Jalaldeen & Al-Hidabi, 2025; Özkan, 2022). Ethics also plays a crucial role in building a harmonious relationship between teachers and students, where teachers function not only as instructors but also as moral and spiritual role models (Engkizar et al., 2025). Therefore, education based on ethical values as taught by Al-Ghazali is able to unite knowledge, practice, and morals, thus producing a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also noble in character.

### **Morality as the Purpose of Education**

The primary goal of education, according to Al-Ghazali, is the formation of noble morals. He argued that true knowledge is not merely memorized or mastered intellectually, but rather knowledge that can transform behavior and guide humans towards goodness (E. Engkizar et al., 2025; Poya & Rizapoor, 2023). Al-Ghazali stated that knowledge without morals and good deeds can lead humans astray (Kirabaev, 2023). Therefore, education must function to balance intellectual intelligence and moral development. A teacher, in Al-Ghazali's view, not only acts as a transmitter of knowledge but also must be a role model in attitude, behavior, and sincerity (Abuzar et al., 2024; Cinta et al., 2023; Yanti et al., 2024). By instilling noble moral values, students are expected to possess not only intellectual intelligence but also a pure heart, humility, and good behavior towards others.

Morality reflects human perfection as a rational and faithful being. Therefore, education must be directed toward improving the heart, controlling desires, and accustoming oneself to commendable actions. Good morality does not emerge naturally, but rather through a process of habituation and continuous practice. Through proper moral education, a person will be able to improve themselves and contribute to building a civilized society in accordance with Islamic values (Maidugu & Isah, 2024). Therefore, the primary goal of education, according to Al-Ghazali, is to produce individuals who are not only knowledgeable and faithful, but also possess noble morals (Fauzi, 2024; Mukti et al., 2021; Syaiful & Anam, 2024).

Based on Al-Ghazali's thinking, it can be concluded that the primary goal of education is to develop individuals with noble character, not merely intellectual intelligence (Farhana et al., 2021; N. Lubis & Rahman, 2025; Yunita, 2022). Education must be able to unite knowledge, faith, and good deeds as a whole, guiding humans toward true goodness and happiness. Teachers play a crucial role as moral educators and role models, not merely as transmitters of knowledge. The educational process, according to Al-Ghazali, must emphasize purification of the heart, self-control, and the cultivation of praiseworthy behavior (Arliya, 2020; Sholeh et al., 2022). Therefore, an ideal education is one that produces individuals with

knowledge, faith, and noble character, capable of building themselves and society in accordance with Islamic teachings (Abbas et al., 2021; Khasanah, 2023; Pamuji & Mulyadi, 2024; Suyadi et al., 2021).

Al-Ghazali's thoughts on education emphasized not only moral aspects but also positioned education as a means of establishing balance between the physical and spiritual dimensions (Fitrianto, 2023; Irawan & Rohman, 2025; Sulistiyani et al., 2025). He saw that humans possess dual potential: the potential of reason, which enables the mastery of knowledge, and the potential of the heart, which serves as the center of spiritual values. Ideal education he argued, must be able to direct these two potentials so that they function in harmony, thus producing a well-rounded person (Hamim, 2021). Thus, education is not simply a process of transferring knowledge, but rather a process of developing a person with a balance between intellectual, spiritual, and emotional intelligence (Andrei, 2023).

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of intention in the learning process (Habibi et al., 2025). Knowledge learned with the right intention, namely to draw closer to God and benefit others, will be a source of blessings. Conversely, knowledge learned solely for worldly interests or personal pride can lead to arrogance. Therefore, education must be directed towards fostering an awareness that knowledge is a trust to be used for good, not merely a tool to gain position or power.

Al-Ghazali also highlighted the role of the environment in moral formation. He argued that cultivating good behavior will not succeed without the support of a conducive environment. Schools, families, and communities must be spaces that foster good values through real-life examples, healthy interactions, and a culture that encourages honesty and responsibility. Thus, moral education takes place not only in the classroom but also in everyday life, filled with practical experiences (Kusmardiningsih, 2023; Nur, 2025).

Al-Ghazali saw education as the path to true happiness. This happiness is not merely worldly pleasures, but rather a happiness that stems from closeness to God and the ability to live life according to religious guidance (Aulianda, 2024; Fitridah & Asqalani, 2023). True education will guide humans to understand their purpose in life, control their desires, and direct all their activities toward goodness (Wendry, 2021; Zainurohmad, 2020). In this way, education becomes a means to achieve human perfection as both a servant of God and a caliph on earth (Affrezi, 2024; Ikhsan et al., 2023).

### **Character Education According to Al-Ghazali**

According to him, character is a trait embedded in the soul from which actions grow easily and without deliberation (Herawati et al., 2022). Al-Ghazali's definition of character education terms character as morality, namely good morality and bad morality. Imam al-Ghazali's educational theory is a balanced unification of worldly and afterlife interests, and culminates in morality (character), with the ultimate goal being submission to Allah SWT (Jalaldeen & Al-Hidabi, 2025).

Definition Al-Ghazali's character education refers to character as morality, namely good morality and bad morality. Imam Al-Ghazali argued that human morality can change. Through learning and strong spiritual motivation, morality can change for the better (Azizah & Abidin, 2025; Maidugu & Isah, 2024; Syaiful & Anam, 2024). Imam al-Ghazali combined character education with Sufism and Islamic law. Based on a correct understanding, it is hoped that good relationships will

be created not only between fellow humans but also with God (Suseno et al., 2025; Taja et al., 2022).

Imam Al-Ghazali's educational concept is to pass on the cultural values of society to everyone so that they can live side by side with culture (Farham, 2025; Hadziq & Abror, 2025). Meanwhile, in developing education, teachers and students cannot be separated, where a teacher plays a vital role in shaping students' personalities to be better with several emphases, while Imam Al-Ghazali's teaching method is a balance between religion and worldly life (Aslam et al., 2024)(Iqbal et al., 2024). Meanwhile, there are four methods offered, namely: the method of exemplary behavior, advice (*'ibrab*), stories or narratives, and role models.

Based on the thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali, it can be concluded that character education is the core of the educational process itself, because its main goal is to form humans who have noble morals and get closer to Allah SWT (Alhaib & Alsandi, 2022; Karima et al., 2025). Al-Ghazali viewed character or morals as traits embedded in the soul, from which actions naturally emerge without the need for lengthy deliberation. This character is not fixed, but can be shaped and improved through education, habituation, and consistent spiritual encouragement (Karimullah et al., 2022; Nursobah et al., 2025; Wandira & Muharam, 2022).

Education must be able to integrate worldly and hereafter aspects in a balanced manner, and combine sharia teachings with Sufi values to achieve moral and spiritual perfection (Fadilah, 2025; "Unveiling Islamic Educational Values in Tembang Sorong Serah Aji Krame: A Cultural and Religious Perspective," 2025). In this process, teachers play a crucial role not only as transmitters of knowledge, but also as role models and spiritual guides for students (Jumatullailah et al., 2024; Saifannur, 2025; Tibo & Lumban Tobing, 2022).

The character education methods offered by Al-Ghazali include role models, giving advice (*'ibrab*), conveying inspiring stories or tales, and cultivating the habit of doing good deeds (Fauzi, 2024; Nurhikmah, 2024). Through the application of these methods, education is expected to shape individuals who are knowledgeable, devout, have noble morals, and are able to establish harmonious relationships with other humans and with God Almighty (Nurhikmah, 2024).

## CONSLUSSION

From this description, it can be concluded that Al-Ghazali's view of education is based on harmony between knowledge, faith and morals as a path to human perfection and closeness to Allah SWT. According to him, education is not merely a process of transferring knowledge, but also a process of purifying the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), which aims to shape individuals with noble morals, civility, and profound spiritual awareness. Al-Ghazali rejected the concept of education that focuses solely on worldly interests, as this can obscure the true meaning of knowledge. Therefore, according to him, ideal education should be a medium for developing individuals with knowledge, faith, and noble morals, capable of making personal and societal contributions.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali emphasized that character education is the core of the entire educational process. In his view, teachers serve as moral role models and spiritual guides, while students are required to pursue knowledge with sincere intentions and accompanied by respect and good manners. Ideal education, according to Al-Ghazali, is one that balances intellectual, moral, and spiritual aspects, by applying various methods such as role models, wise advice, inspiring storytelling, and the habituation of good deeds. Al-Ghazali's ethical educational thinking remains

strongly relevant in the context of modern education, especially in the face of the moral crisis and the weakening of human values. By being based on ethical and moral principles, education is expected to produce a generation that is intelligent, spiritually strong, and has noble morals, in line with Islamic values and universal humanity.

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