

RECONSIDERING AL-GHAZALI'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHTS IN THE MILLENNIAL ERA

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Abstract

Al-Ghazali, through his seminal work *Ihyā' Ulūm al-Dīn*, has made enduring contributions to Islamic educational thought. However, certain aspects of his philosophy, such as the dichotomy of knowledge and the authoritative role of the teacher have sparked debate when examined in light of contemporary educational challenges. This study seeks to reassess the relevance of Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy within the context of the millennial generation, focusing on academic objectives, pedagogical approaches, epistemology, and the ethics governing educators and learners. Employing a qualitative, descriptive literature review method, the research analyzes Al-Ghazali's primary texts alongside relevant secondary sources. Findings indicate that while Al-Ghazali's educational paradigm shaped by his Sufi orientation, emphasizes character formation and spiritual development, several of his more traditional views warrant critical reevaluation. Specifically, the rigid classification of knowledge and the absolute authority of teachers may hinder adaptation to 21st-century educational demands, which prioritize creativity, collaboration, and technological integration. Nevertheless, core elements of his thought, such as the integration of moral values, the principle of gradual learning, and the emphasis on self-purification, remain pertinent to contemporary character education. Accordingly, Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy continues to offer both inspiration and a critical framework for shaping a progressive and contextually grounded model of Islamic education in the millennial era.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali; Islamic Educational Thought; Millennial Generation; Character Education; Educational Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Until now, the condition of Muslims in almost all parts of the world is still marginalized. In general, Muslim-majority countries face various complex problems such as terrorism, human rights violations, poverty, ignorance, corruption, and injustice towards gender. Abu Hamid Sulayman, as quoted by Abd. Rachman, concluded that the crisis that hit the Muslim community was caused by several main factors, namely the backwardness of the community, the weakness of the community, the intellectual stagnation of the community, the absence of *ijtihad*, the lack of cultural progress, and the disconnection of the community from the basic norms of Islamic civilization (Rusyd, 2020). This condition is exacerbated by the low level of democratization, high levels of sectarian conflict, and ongoing socio-economic inequality in many Muslim countries (Alfaruqi, 2017). In addition, poverty and social injustice are triggering factors that exacerbate the situation, leading to various complex social and political issues. Therefore, improving the conditions of Muslims requires a deep intellectual and cultural revitalization, including the reactivation of the tradition of *ijtihad* and critical thinking in the context of modern Islamic civilization (Sahrasad & Chaidar, 2017).

Some Muslims believe that one of the causes of the decline of the Muslim community is the thinking of Imam Al-Ghazali and the role of the Nizamiyah Madrasah, which is considered an agent of limiting the development of general knowledge (Rahmi et al., 2024). Al-Ghazali divides knowledge into two main categories: afterlife knowledge, which is *farḍu 'ain* (obligatory to be studied by every individual Muslim), and worldly knowledge, which is *farḍu kifayah* (sufficient to be studied by only a portion of the community). This division has an impact on weakening the motivation of Muslims to study worldly knowledge widely because it is considered not an individual obligation; therefore, the number of experts in worldly knowledge is very limited, while mastery of afterlife knowledge is more prevalent. In addition, Al-Ghazali argues that the door to *ijtihad* has been closed, resulting in a lack of generations of scholars who dare to carry out *ijtihad* and make *taqlid* the dominant attitude (Rahman et al., 2023). The transformation of Al-

Ghazali's thought, which entered the realm of Sufism intensely, as well as his attitude of rejecting and even forbidding philosophy, became, according to some authors, crucial factors that contributed to the intellectual decline of the Muslim community. The Madrasah Nizamiyah as an educational institution influenced by Al-Ghazali's thought also played a role in limiting the space for the development of general knowledge, because the orientation of its curriculum emphasized religious orthodoxy and the strengthening of the Sunni school of thought, so that it provided less space for the development of worldly knowledge and philosophy (Al-Fuadi & Ulum, 2024).

In the field of education, Al-Ghazali's thoughts emphasize the ethical aspects of educators and students, as characterized by Sufism. According to Al-Ghazali, educators and students must adhere to a series of detailed and strict ethics, which can, in practice, limit the creativity and critical attitudes of both parties. In Al-Ghazali's view, the relationship between educators and students resembles that between a *murysid* and a student in the *thariqah*, emphasizing the existence of a hierarchy and absolute obedience (Irawan & Rohman, 2025). Al-Ghazali's background as a Sufi most likely influenced this view. According to him, the most important aim of education is *taqarrub ila Allah* (getting closer to Allah), which tends to prioritize spiritual aspects and provides less space for students to develop worldly or professional aspirations (Syofrianisda & Abduh, 2017).

Additionally, Al-Ghazali prohibited students from pursuing wealth and social status through the knowledge they acquired. This attitude has the potential to weaken the spirit of learning, as students must spend a significant amount of money, energy, and time, while also fulfilling the material needs of life and their family. This view is contrary to human nature, which has worldly needs and social aspirations. As a result, the spirit of Muslims in seeking knowledge becomes weak, which in turn has an impact on the decline of the Islamic world in general (Khoir, 2023).

In the author's opinion, the decline and weakness of the Muslim community were caused by various complex factors whose root causes were difficult to unravel, like a tangled thread that occurred simultaneously with the era of Al-Ghazali. Therefore, it is not surprising that Al-Ghazali is often accused of being the party most responsible for the decline. However, this accusation is neither entirely true nor false, because the decline of the Islamic world cannot be attributed solely to one figure. Al-Ghazali did critique certain

philosophical schools of thought; however, his ideas made a significant contribution to the development of Islamic education (Alwizar, 2015).

Regardless of who is wrong, Muslims should not be trapped in a prolonged conflict that will only worsen the divisions among them. Therefore, this article attempts to re-examine Al-Ghazali's educational thoughts, which are relevant for the millennial era. Al-Ghazali, a Sufi scholar and great thinker, is still widely studied in his works, such as *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, *Kimyat al-Sa'adah*, and *Bidayah al-Hidayah*, in various parts of the world, including non-Muslim countries like the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany. It shows that the legacy of Al-Ghazali's thoughts remains alive and relevant today (Mukromin, 2019).

In Indonesia, Al-Ghazali's thoughts developed rapidly, especially in universities and Islamic boarding schools, which made his works the main study material. However, the conservative nature of Islamic boarding school education has caused Islamic education in Indonesia to progress slowly or even stagnate compared to neighboring countries, such as Malaysia. Malaysia is now able to establish international Islamic educational institutions, such as the International Islamic University and the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). At the same time, Indonesia still has much to learn from Malaysia. This condition presents a challenge for Indonesian Islamic education to reconsider and adapt Al-Ghazali's thoughts to make them more relevant to the needs of the millennial era (Husniyah et al., 2023).

In the context of the millennial era, characterized by technological advances and social change, Al-Ghazali's thoughts provide a holistic educational solution that integrates worldly knowledge and religious values, prioritizing moral education as the foundation for the formation of a complete human being (Faizin et al., 2022). However, the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thoughts in current educational practices is not yet optimal, especially regarding differences in curriculum and learning methods, which are still far from ideal in his view (Lestari, 2020). Therefore, the implementation of Al-Ghazali's thoughts in millennial education requires adaptation that takes into account developments in the era, without ignoring the basic values of Islamic education, which emphasize the balance between knowledge and spirituality.

METHODS

The research method employed in this study is a qualitative approach with a library research orientation (Rosidah et al., 2023). This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to analyze and critically describe Al-Ghazali's educational thoughts and their relevance in the context of Islamic education in the millennial era. The data used are derived from primary sources, including Al-Ghazali's works and classical Islamic educational literature, as well as secondary sources such as books, scientific articles, and journals related to modern Islamic educational thought.

The data collection process involved identifying, collecting, and thoroughly reviewing relevant literature (Alaslan, 2021). The researcher examined original texts and contemporary interpretations of the concept of education, as presented by Al-Ghazali, and then compared them with educational practices in the modern era. Data analysis was conducted both descriptively and analytically, emphasizing the balance between intellectual and spiritual aspects in education, as noted by Al-Ghazali, as well as the challenges faced by modern education, including secularism and globalization.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical methodological framework to describe the phenomenon of contemporary Islamic education and examine the relevance of Al-Ghazali's educational Theory. With this method, researcher can deeply reveal Al-Ghazali's educational values that can still be applied and developed in the curriculum and learning process in the millennial era. This approach also allows researcher to provide strategic recommendations in adapting classical thinking to the needs of modern education (Satori & Komariah, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Glimpse of Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali's full name is Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Ghazali al-Thusi. He is known by the title Hujjatul Islam and is a great scholar in the Syafi'i school of thought. Al-Ghazali was born in Khurasan, in 450 AH (1058 AD). His father was a pious man who earned a living as a weaver, selling his woven products from his shop. Al-Ghazali had a brother named Ahmad, who was known as an orator, while al-Ghazali himself was known as an expert in jurisprudence and Sufism (Elvianda & Holid, 2025).

Al-Ghazali began his education by studying *fiqh* with Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Radzakani. After that, he continued his studies in Naisabur and studied with Imam al-Haramain al-Juwaini. Al-Ghazali was known to be very diligent in his studies, mastering various fields, including *fiqh*, *khilafiah*, debate (*jadal*), logic (*mantiq*), and philosophy. He was also known for writing scientific works that were neatly arranged and substantial. After the death of his teacher, Imam al-Juwaini, al-Ghazali went to the palace of Nizam al-Mulk, a prime minister of the Seljuk Dynasty. In the assembly of knowledge held by Nizam al-Mulk, al-Ghazali's intelligence and skill in debating earned him the respect of other scholars. In 484 AH (1091 AD), al-Ghazali was appointed head of the Nizamiyah Madrasah in Baghdad. In 488 AH, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca and asked his brother to replace him teaching in Baghdad while he was away (Syafri, 2017).

After returning from the pilgrimage, al-Ghazali traveled to Damascus in 489 H, then to Basrah, Baitul Maqdis, and returned to Damascus. At the Madrasah al-Aminah, he heard a teacher teach his opinion, so he was worried that a sense of *ujb* would arise in him and chose to leave Damascus. He then visited Egypt, Alexandria, and returned to Khurasan, where he taught again at the Madrasah Nizamiyah in Naisabur, before finally settling in Tus. There, he founded a madrasah and pondok for experts in *fiqh* and Sufism. Every day, his time was filled with reading the Qur'an, deepening his knowledge, and worshiping, until he passed away on Monday, 14 Jumadil Akhir 505 H (19 December 1111 AD) at the age of 55 (Syafri, 2017).

Al-Ghazali differs from other philosophers because he not only studied philosophy, but also law, theology, and Sufism. According to Harun Nasution, al-Ghazali tends to be more of a Sufi than a philosopher. In the field of philosophy, he is known as a sharp critic of the thoughts of philosophers, especially in three things that he thinks lead to disbelief: (1) the belief that this world is eternal (without beginning), (2) God does not know in detail what happens in the world, and (3) the absence of physical resurrection in the afterlife. In the field of Sufism, al-Ghazali's influence is substantial because he successfully integrated Sufism into Islamic teachings, making it a non-conflicting aspect that has developed widely in the Islamic world (Subakti, 2019).

Al-Ghazali's Educational Thoughts

The primary goal of education, according to al-Ghazali, is *taqarrub ila Allah* (drawing closer to Allah). He emphasized that education should not be used as a means to seek wealth, position, or worldly glory. This spiritual orientation views education as a means to improve oneself and achieve true happiness in the afterlife, rather than just pursuing worldly interests.

In general, al-Ghazali's educational thoughts can be mapped into three main aspects:

1. The Importance of Knowledge

Al-Ghazali places knowledge in a very high position. According to him, knowledge is the main means to achieve happiness in this world and the Hereafter. Knowledge becomes a tool to get closer to Allah, because true deeds can only be done with knowledge. Al-Ghazali stated that a person's glory, honor, and authority in the world are obtained through knowledge, and even other creatures respect those with knowledge. Thus, knowledge becomes the key to happiness in this world and the Hereafter (Hidayati & Aisyah, 2021).

2. Classification of Science

Al-Ghazali divides knowledge into two main categories, namely *fardhu 'ain* knowledge and *fardhu kifayah* knowledge. *Fardhu 'ain* knowledge is knowledge that must be learned by every Muslim individual, especially those related to the implementation of worship, such as prayer, fasting, and other religious obligations. Meanwhile, *fardhu kifayah* knowledge refers to knowledge that is sufficient to be learned by only a few Muslims, such as medicine, pharmacy, engineering, and various other worldly sciences that benefit the wider community (Mubarok, 2020).

In addition to the division, according to Fathiyah Hasan Sulaiman, al-Ghazali also grouped science into three groups. First, science that is reprehensible, whether a little or a lot, such as magic, fortune telling, and astrology. Second, commendable science, whether little or much, for example, linguistics and grammar (*nahwu*). Third, science is laudable to a certain extent, but upon closer examination, it becomes reprehensible, much like philosophy (Hobir, 2011).

Al-Ghazali proposed detailed ideas for the technical implementation of education for students, encompassing 15 main principles (Syauqy, 2019). First, children's education must begin from birth and be entrusted to pious women, because if children are neglected from childhood, they have the potential to develop bad morals, such as lying and despicable behavior. Second, children should be accustomed to living simply, including in terms of food, clothing, and bedding. It is even recommended that they not sleep on a thick mattress, as this helps keep their muscles strong. Third, children need to be taught the Qur'an, selected hadiths, and biographies of great figures to instill respect for these individuals. Reading poetry or indecent literature is prohibited because it can damage children's morals and souls. Fourth, children should be allowed to play after studying to refresh themselves, as prohibiting continuous play can harm their mental well-being and trigger deceptive behavior to avoid pressure. Fifth, it is important to instill good manners, courage, fortitude, respect for parents, and keep children away from the habit of saying indecent words.

Sixth, children must be kept away from bad friends because bad morals are easily transmitted like diseases. Seventh, children need to be given rewards for good character to stimulate Goodness. Eighth, do not criticize or curse children too much when they make mistakes. Ninth, the main points of religion are taught to children when they are teenagers, and Sharia knowledge is taught to them when they are adults, through the development of their minds.

Tenth, students must distance themselves from worldly activities and relocate away from their families and hometowns to focus on their studies. Eleventh, students must not underestimate teachers; they must submit matters to teachers and listen to their advice, just as patients obey doctors, because the teacher's mistakes are often more beneficial than the truth of their own opinions. Twelfth, in the early stages, students must avoid differences of opinion so as not to be confused. Thirteenth, students must not abandon a science until they truly understand the intent and purpose of the science. Fourteenth, learning must start from the most basic things. Fifteenth, students must beautify their souls with virtue and draw closer to Allah, without aspiring to seek position, wealth, or worldly splendor.

Al-Ghazali's thoughts on human nature can be classified as part of the Tabularasa school. According to him, al-Ghazali does not believe in the existence of

instincts and inherited traits in humans. Still, al-Ghazali does not reject the existence of instincts and inherited traits. Al-Ghazali's appreciation for educators who apply their knowledge is so great that, according to him, humans can attain the most honorable degree or position among the creatures on the earth and in the sky due to their teaching and education, which stems from their knowledge and practice (Duryat, 2021).

According to Al-Ghazali, the teaching profession is very honorable and is a high level of intelligence, based on two arguments: naqli and aqli. The naqli argument posits that the Prophet Muhammad prioritized the assembly of knowledge over the assembly of prayer because he was sent as a teacher to instruct humans, and the person who revives the sunnah and teaches it is the caliph of Allah. While the aqli argument assesses intelligence based on its place value, just as a goldsmith is more noble than a leathersmith because dealing with gold is more valuable, so is teaching considered noble because teachers deal with the spiritual aspect of humans, the most noble creatures on earth.

According to Al-Ghazali, since teachers are responsible for attending to the spiritual aspects of humans, they must love and care for their students as if they were their children. Teachers should not teach for wages or human praise, but only expect the pleasure of Allah and to draw closer to Him. In addition, teachers must continue to advise students on the correct way and purpose of learning. If students misbehave, teachers must use subtle sarcasm to maintain their authority and not inadvertently encourage students to behave oppositely. The relationship between teachers must also be maintained by not badmouthing each other. In teaching, the material must be tailored to the students' abilities so that it is easily understood. Finally, teachers must apply their knowledge in everyday behavior, because expertise is acquired with the heart, while actions are judged with the eyes; the inconsistency between the two will erode the students' trust (Yuliyanti, 2017).

The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Educational Thought in the Millennial Era

Al-Ghazali's educational thinking is known to be conservative and oriented towards traditional values, as evident in his educational goals, which primarily focus on taqarrub ila Allah (drawing closer to Allah). This goal is narrow and less able to answer

the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic era. For example, Al-Ghazali emphasizes education as a purely spiritual means, in contrast to contemporary Muslim educational figures such as Ibrahim Ishmat Muthowi, who views education as an effort to maintain culture, regulate social relations, develop intelligence, and foster a balanced personality. This opinion aligns with the views of Omar Muhammad al-Toumy al-Syaibany, who emphasizes the importance of adjusting educational goals to ongoing societal changes (Khairani, 2013).

Al-Ghazali's conservative attitude is also reflected in his views on the relationship between teacher and student, where the student must completely submit his affairs to the teacher without question, even if the teacher's mistakes are considered more beneficial than the student's truth. This approach reflects the Qadiriyyah tarekat system, which emphasizes absolute obedience to the mursyid. However, in the context of modern education and the millennial era, which demands a critical, creative, and dynamic attitude, this view is considered unrealistic. It has the potential to hinder the intellectual development of students who must be active and proactive in the learning process (El-Mawa, 2020). Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on absolute obedience and passive learning has the potential to hinder the achievement of educational goals in the millennial era. This era demands an interactive and dynamic learning process, where students play an active role in building knowledge and skills through interaction with the environment. On the other hand, Al-Ghazali's approach, which tends to be static and hierarchical, is not suited to the needs of modern education, which prioritizes the development of individual potential as a whole (Fabriar, 2024).

However, not all of Al-Ghazali's thoughts should be abandoned. Some aspects, such as the importance of teachers gently advising students, teachers must love students like their own children, and tailoring teaching to students' abilities, remain relevant and can be further developed in contemporary Islamic education. This approach fosters a harmonious relationship between teachers and students, which remains essential in the context of modern education (Subakri, 2020).

On the other hand, Al-Ghazali's thoughts, which overly emphasize traditional practices, are still widely developed in Islamic boarding schools and institutions based on Islamic education. It causes changes in Islamic boarding schools to be slow and tend to be static, in contrast to modern universities and educational institutions that

are more open to innovation and change. In the context of the Theory of Continuity and Change proposed by Zamakhsyari Dzofier, Islamic boarding schools tend to maintain traditional practices rather than adopt new ones. Therefore, Al-Ghazali's thoughts from the millennial era must be adapted to avoid hindering the progress of Islamic education (Wirayanti et al., 2024).

Al-Ghazali's conservative attitude in education is seen in point 15, which states that "students should not aspire to seek position, wealth, and splendor." This view reflects spiritual and ethical values that emphasize sincerity in seeking knowledge without material motivation. However, in the current millennial era, this opinion seems less realistic because modern society generally seeks knowledge as an investment for the future. Knowledge and skills are considered important capital to face life's challenges and achieve prosperity. Therefore, Al-Ghazali's attitude needs to be reviewed in the context of today's needs so that education remains relevant and able to answer the aspirations of the millennial generation (Rasiani et al., 2024).

In reality, the increasingly expensive cost of education is one of the primary factors influencing people's interest in learning. The emergence of international schools, which are more accurately referred to as international schools, demonstrates that education today requires not only knowledge but also substantial financial resources. If students are prohibited from seeking wealth and positions, this will weaken the spirit of learning and the ability of parents to finance their children's education. Economic conditions that are mediocre or underprivileged will further worsen access to quality education, thereby impacting the decline of the education sector in general (Rizali, 2009).

In contrast to Al-Ghazali's view, modern educational thinkers, such as Ibrahim Ismat Muthowi, emphasize that one of the goals of education is to produce wealth, or, in other words, to view education as an investment for the future. Muthowi's can see the development of the era where seeking wealth and position through education is not only permitted, but also becomes a reasonable and even strategic demand. The paradigm of sincerity in seeking knowledge has also experienced a shift in meaning, adjusting to the current social and economic dynamics (Fadhilah & Hudaidah, 2025).

Therefore, Al-Ghazali's thoughts still have important noble values, especially in shaping the character and morals of students. However, the relevance of his teachings

needs to be adjusted to the context of the millennial era, which demands a balance between spirituality and pragmatism. Today's education must be able to accommodate material needs without compromising ethical values and sincerity, thereby producing a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also moral and highly competitive (Firdasari & Bakar, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Al-Ghazali was a renowned scholar who had a profound influence on philosophy, Sufism, and Islamic education through his works, including *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* and Ayyuh al-Walad. His educational thinking emphasized moral Sufism, with a focus on the sciences of the afterlife, including the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and monotheism, as well as worldly knowledge to a limited extent. His conservative attitude is evident in his adherence to the naqli arguments and traditions of his time, which are sometimes less relevant to the dynamics of modern millennial-era education and advanced technology. However, Al-Ghazali's spiritual and moral values remain important as the foundation of holistic education that integrates intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects. The concept of purification of the soul (*taṣkiyah*) serves as a counterbalance to the materialistic nature of education, ensuring that Islamic education maintains its moral integrity amidst globalization and modernization. This concept enables Islamic education to adapt to the needs of the current era while preserving its spiritual essence.

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