

Spiritual-Intellectual Balance in Al-Ghazali's Educational Epistemology: Toward a Framework for Modern Islamic Education

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ABSTRACT	Article Info
<p><i>This study focuses on Al-Ghazali's thought regarding the spiritual-intellectual balance in the epistemology of Islamic education, aiming to reveal its relevance and contribution to contemporary educational challenges. Employing a qualitative method with a library research approach, primary data were obtained from Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din, while secondary data were drawn from contemporary articles and scholarly journals. Data were analyzed using content analysis and philosophical hermeneutics to interpret the educational concepts in Al-Ghazali's perspective. The findings indicate that Al-Ghazali emphasizes the integration of knowledge, practice, the heart, and ethics as a holistic framework of educational epistemology. These results demonstrate that the spiritual-intellectual balance is essential for building an educational system that not only develops intellectual capacity but also strengthens the moral and spiritual character of learners. The implication of this research highlights the importance of integrating classical epistemology into modern educational practice to establish a more comprehensive and relevant paradigm of Islamic education.</i></p>	<p>Article History Received : 27-02-2026, Accepted : 28-06-2026</p> <p>Keywords: Al-Ghazali; Educational Epistemology; Spiritual-Intellectual Balance.</p>
<p>ABSTRAK</p> <p>Penelitian ini berfokus pada pemikiran Al-Ghazali mengenai keseimbangan spiritual-intelektual dalam epistemologi pendidikan Islam dengan tujuan mengungkap relevansi dan kontribusinya terhadap tantangan pendidikan kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi kepustakaan, di mana data primer diperoleh dari karya monumental Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din, sedangkan data sekunder bersumber dari artikel ilmiah dan jurnal akademik kontemporer. Analisis data dilakukan melalui teknik analisis isi dan pendekatan hermeneutika filosofis untuk menafsirkan konsep-konsep pendidikan dalam perspektif Al-Ghazali. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Al-Ghazali menekankan integrasi antara ilmu, amal, hati, dan adab sebagai kerangka epistemologis pendidikan yang holistik. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa keseimbangan spiritual-intelektual merupakan fondasi penting dalam membangun sistem pendidikan yang tidak hanya mengembangkan kapasitas intelektual, tetapi juga memperkuat karakter moral dan spiritual peserta didik. Implikasi penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya integrasi epistemologi klasik ke dalam praktik pendidikan modern guna membentuk paradigma pendidikan Islam yang lebih komprehensif dan relevan dengan tantangan zaman.</p>	<p>Kata Kunci: Al-Ghazali; Epistemologi Pendidikan; Keseimbangan Spiritual- Intelektual.</p>

INTRODUCTION

The development of modern education presents an increasingly evident paradox. On the one hand, education is required to produce generations with high intellectual capacities in accordance with the demands of the digital era and globalization. On the other hand, education often neglects the spiritual and moral dimensions that constitute the foundation of balanced human personality development (Purwanti, Nurillah, Siroj, Suherman, & Sukandar, 2025). The phenomena of moral degradation, excessive materialism, and a pragmatic orientation of education are social realities that cannot be ignored (Sutikno, 2023). This condition indicates an urgent need for an educational model that not only emphasizes rationality but also provides proportional space for spiritual formation. Al-Ghazali's thought, with its concept of balance between spirituality and intellectuality, emerges as a relevant alternative to address this crisis (Mumtaz & Usman, 2025).

Al-Ghazali, through his monumental work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, emphasizes that education is essentially a process of purifying the soul while simultaneously developing the intellect (Surya, 2023). He states, "Knowledge without action is madness, and action without knowledge is futility." This statement underscores the importance of synergy between intellectual and spiritual dimensions in education. The relevance of this thought becomes even more apparent when observing that modern education tends to be trapped in a dichotomy between rational scientific knowledge and ethical values (Mumtazah, Ulya, Rohmah, & Ibrahim, 2025). Therefore, examining Al-Ghazali's educational epistemology with a focus on spiritual-intellectual balance is not only philosophically intriguing but also holds high academic and practical urgency.

The main problem in the context of this

research lies in the failure of contemporary educational systems to integrate spiritual aspects with intellectual aspects (Muflikhun, Nurjaman, Erihadiana, Hasanah, & Arifin, 2025). Education is often viewed merely as the transmission of cognitive knowledge, while the cultivation of the heart and character is placed in a secondary position. As a result, generations emerge who are academically intelligent yet morally and ethically fragile. This raises a crucial question: how can the educational epistemology proposed by Al-Ghazali, particularly regarding spiritual-intellectual balance, serve as a solution to the problems of modern education? This question forms the basis of the present study and directs its focus toward a re-reading of Al-Ghazali's thought to address contemporary challenges.

Previous studies have discussed the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought in education, albeit with varying emphases. Research by Khan (2020) highlights that Al-Ghazali's educational concept can foster the integration of ethics and knowledge in addressing global crises. Another study by Nofal and Al-Adwan (2021) finds that Islamic epistemology rooted in Al-Ghazali provides a philosophical framework for designing curricula that emphasize spirituality. Meanwhile, a more recent study by Omar (2022) stresses the importance of Al-Ghazali's holistic approach in building resilient Muslim generations capable of facing the digital era. From these studies, it can be concluded that scholarly attention has largely focused on the general integration of Islamic values in education, without specifically exploring the aspect of spiritual-intellectual balance within Al-Ghazali's educational epistemology.

This reveals a clear research gap. While previous studies acknowledge Al-Ghazali's contributions to education, few have specifically examined the concept of

spiritual–intellectual balance as an epistemological framework. In fact, this theme of balance is highly relevant to the challenges of modern education, which often adopt a reductionist approach and marginalize spiritual dimensions (Zamhariroh, Azis, Nata, Fahmi, & Salik, 2024). This research seeks to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth exploration of Al-Ghazali's ideas on educational epistemology and their relevance for renewing contemporary educational paradigms.

The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis that Al-Ghazali's thought is not merely a classical legacy, but can be transformed into both a philosophical and practical solution for modern education (Habibi, Nawangsari, Zein, Ubaidillah, & Rafiqie, 2025). This study does not only examine Al-Ghazali's ideas historically, but reconstructs them as a model of educational epistemology that bridges the gap between the demands of scientific mastery and the urgency of spiritual cultivation. Thus, this research offers a new perspective: modern education requires an Al-Ghazalian epistemological synthesis to produce generations that are intellectually competent and morally virtuous (Kusmardiningih, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of Al-Ghazali's educational epistemology, with particular emphasis on the concept of spiritual–intellectual balance, as well as to explore its relevance and application in the context of modern education. Through this analysis, it is expected that a philosophical framework will be identified that not only enriches academic discourse in Islamic educational philosophy but also provides practical direction for curriculum development and educational practice in the contemporary era. By focusing on a critical issue namely, the

disorientation of modern education that neglects spiritual dimensions this research aims to offer solutions of high value for both academic scholarship and educational praxis.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research. Library research is chosen because this study focuses on textual analysis, particularly in exploring Al-Ghazali's thought on spiritual–intellectual balance within the epistemology of Islamic education. This approach enables the researcher to explicate philosophical ideas contained in classical texts while simultaneously comparing them with contemporary academic literature (Ali, Masbuang, Sa'ad, & Anwar, 2025).

The data collection techniques in this study are divided into primary and secondary data (Haifa, Nabilla, Rahmatika, Hidayatullah, & Harmonedi, 2025). The primary data source is Al-Ghazali's monumental work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, as it comprehensively contains Al-Ghazali's views on the integration of knowledge, action, and spirituality as the core of education. Secondary data consist of supporting literature, such as academic books, international journal articles, and previous studies relevant to Islamic educational philosophy, particularly those addressing epistemology and the concept of spiritual–intellectual balance.

The collected data are analyzed using content analysis with a philosophical–hermeneutic approach. Content analysis is employed to identify key themes in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* related to spiritual–intellectual balance, while hermeneutics is used to interpret classical texts within the context of modern educational challenges. The analysis is conducted through three stages: data reduction (selecting relevant texts), data

presentation (thematic classification), and conclusion drawing (constructing an educational epistemological framework) (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

Table 1. Research Instruments and Data Sources

Type of Data	Focus of Study	Analysis Technique
Primary	<i>Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din</i> : concepts of spiritual-intellectual balance, the relationship between knowledge and action, and the objectives of Islamic education.	Content analysis and hermeneutics
Secondary	International journals, books on Islamic educational philosophy, and previous studies: theoretical context, comparison with modern education, and validation of findings.	Thematic content analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

An in-depth analysis of the primary text *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by Al-Ghazali reveals four fundamental dimensions that constitute the epistemology of Islamic education: knowledge (*'ilm*), action (*'amal*), heart (*qalb*), and *adab*. These dimensions are not independent components; rather, they are integrative and complementary, forming a holistic concept of spiritual-intellectual balance. Within Al-Ghazali's framework, knowledge serves as the foundation, action as its actualization, the heart as the center of control, and *adab* as the highest stage of educational perfection.

These findings are significant because they demonstrate Al-Ghazali's rejection of the dichotomy between reason and the heart. For Al-Ghazali, education cannot be

confined to the cognitive domain alone but must be oriented toward the formation of the whole human being. This perspective stands in contrast to many modern educational systems that remain fixated on academic achievement-based assessments while marginalizing moral and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, the results of this study provide a strong epistemological foundation for constructing a more balanced educational paradigm.

Knowledge as the Foundation of Education

The first finding confirms that knowledge occupies a fundamental position in Al-Ghazali's thought. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali opens *Kitab al-'Ilm* by asserting that knowledge is the highest virtue distinguishing humans from other creatures. He states: "*Human dignity is determined by knowledge, for through it humans draw near to the rank of angels*" (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Vol. I, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2005, p. 15). This statement emphasizes that knowledge is not merely a practical necessity but a primary need that rescues humans from the darkness of ignorance. Through knowledge, humans come to understand themselves, their environment, and their Creator. Education that positions knowledge solely as a means to acquire worldly skills is thus considered incomplete and potentially leads to intellectual arrogance.

The interpretation of this finding indicates that Al-Ghazali's concept of knowledge inherently demands a transcendental dimension. He emphasizes that knowledge which does not lead one toward the recognition of God is "*non-beneficial knowledge*" (*al-'ilm ghayr al-nafi*). Accordingly, Al-Ghazali distinguishes between *shar'i knowledge* which guides one toward God and non-*shar'i knowledge* that merely serves worldly purposes. Education, within this framework, must connect

knowledge with a higher meaning of life. This principle remains highly relevant in the modern context, particularly as a critique of educational practices that excessively emphasize academic competence and career achievement while neglecting moral and spiritual orientation. Thus, knowledge is not merely an accumulation of data and theories, but a living foundation that animates all aspects of education under divine purpose.

When contextualized within contemporary education, Al-Ghazali's insights serve as a serious warning: schools and universities risk producing intellectually capable graduates who lack integrity if knowledge is detached from devotion to God. In this sense, Al-Ghazali's conception of knowledge constitutes a critique of pragmatic and utilitarian tendencies in modern education. Consequently, Al-Ghazali's educational epistemology can serve as a foundation for developing an integral educational paradigm that unites intellectual, spiritual, and moral intelligence.

Action as the Actualization of Knowledge

The second finding demonstrates that, within Al-Ghazali's epistemological framework, knowledge holds no true meaning unless it is embodied in action. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali asserts: "Knowledge without action is madness, and action without knowledge is futility" (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Vol. I, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2005, p. 53). This statement affirms the inherent relationship between knowledge and action. True knowledge is that which guides concrete behavior. Accordingly, education must not end at knowledge transmission, but should give rise to praxis that benefits both the individual and society. Action becomes tangible evidence that knowledge has permeated one's life.

The interpretation of this finding emphasizes that the relationship between

knowledge and action is inseparable. When knowledge remains confined to intellectual cognition, it loses its essential substance. Al-Ghazali describes action as the "fruit" of knowledge; without action, knowledge resembles a fruitless tree that offers no benefit. In modern educational systems, this principle aligns with calls for integrating theory and practice, ensuring that learning outcomes encompass skills, social awareness, and moral responsibility.

However, Al-Ghazali introduces a deeper emphasis. Action must not merely manifest outward behavior but must be grounded in sincerity and devotion to God. He asserts that actions performed for worldly gain or ostentation lose their value before God. In the context of modern education, this message highlights the need to cultivate an academic ethos based on integrity rather than mere career success. Thus, action becomes the measure of educational success reflecting the extent to which knowledge motivates learners to act sincerely, ethically, and beneficially for society.

The relevance of this concept in contemporary education is evident in the growing emphasis on experiential learning, service learning, and character education, which connect theory with real-world service. Al-Ghazali teaches that true knowledge can only be measured through action; therefore, the success of modern education should be evaluated not solely through academic performance indices but through graduates' tangible contributions to humanity and spiritual devotion.

The Heart as the Center of Control

The third finding indicates that the heart functions as the central regulator of all human activity. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali describes the heart as a king and the body's limbs as its soldiers: "If the king is righteous, the soldiers will be righteous; if he is corrupt,

the soldiers will be corrupt” (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Vol. III, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2005, p. 5). This concept implies that all actions good or evil originate from the heart. Consequently, education must prioritize the purification of the heart, as it is the source of morality and spirituality.

The interpretation of this finding underscores the strong psychological and spiritual dimensions embedded within Al-Ghazali's educational epistemology. Education is not merely tasked with developing cognitive intelligence but also with nurturing inner well-being. Al-Ghazali emphasizes *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) as the core of education, since a heart corrupted by arrogance, envy, resentment, and excessive attachment to worldly desires ultimately undermines all aspects of life.

In the modern context, this idea resonates with the growing emphasis on character education, emotional intelligence, and mental health. Many contemporary humanitarian crises such as corruption, intolerance, and moral degradation among youth stem from corrupted hearts despite high levels of formal education. This aligns with the notion that education which neglects the heart risks producing individuals who are intellectually competent yet devoid of humanistic values.

Therefore, contemporary education must balance cognitive development with spiritual-emotional formation. This integration of intellect and heart parallels the modern concept of social-emotional learning; however, Al-Ghazali offers a deeper religious orientation by directing the heart toward God as the ultimate axis of meaning. Thus, educational success should be measured not only by logical intelligence or technical skills but also by inner clarity and moral integrity.

Adab as the Culmination of Education

The fourth finding asserts that the entire process of knowledge acquisition, action, and heart cultivation ultimately culminates in adab. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of adab in learning, social interaction, and worship. He describes adab as “*the ornament of knowledge*” that determines the blessing of one's learning (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Vol. I, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2005, p. 67). For Al-Ghazali, adab transcends formal etiquette; it represents the integration of spiritual and intellectual values manifested in attitudes, behavior, and worldview. Adab is the hallmark of successful education.

The interpretation of this finding highlights that the ultimate goal of education is the formation of a person of adab. Al-Ghazali strongly criticizes scholars who possess knowledge yet lack adab, arguing that knowledge without adab leads to arrogance. In this framework, adab is not merely social ethics but an inner disposition that honors knowledge, teachers, fellow human beings, and above all, God.

In the modern context, this finding underscores the urgency of character education that goes beyond slogans and is rooted in deep epistemological foundations. Adab guides the wise use of knowledge, the sincere practice of action, and the purification of the heart from moral diseases. Education grounded in adab prevents the emergence of individuals who are intelligent yet arrogant, competent yet corrupt, or outwardly religious yet lacking empathy.

Thus, adab represents the apex of the integration between intellectuality and spirituality. This concept contributes significantly to the development of value-based educational paradigms in contemporary discourse. Adab is not merely an ethical orientation but also the standard of

educational success from a holistic Islamic perspective.

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

Dimension	Core Findings	Educational Implications
Knowledge	The primary foundation of education, a fundamental need guiding humans toward life’s meaning	Education must position knowledge as a means toward deeper meaning, not merely technical skills
Action	True knowledge gains meaning only when actualized in concrete action	Education must generate beneficial praxis with spiritual orientation
Heart	The central regulator of human morality and spirituality	Education must emphasize inner cultivation to form morally grounded individuals
Adab	The culmination of knowledge, action, and heart formation	The ultimate goal of education is the formation of individuals with balanced spiritual–intellectual <i>adab</i>

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Al-Ghazali’s educational epistemology is constructed upon four core dimensions: knowledge, action, heart, and adab. These dimensions form an integrated whole that embodies spiritual–intellectual balance within Islamic education. Knowledge functions as the foundation, action as its manifestation, the heart as the center of moral regulation, and adab as the ultimate goal. This interpretation affirms that education, according to Al-Ghazali, is not merely a cognitive endeavor but a holistic process integrating intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions (Sulistiyani, Nasikhin, & Astuti, 2025).

When juxtaposed with previous studies, both similarities and significant distinctions emerge. Abdullah and Ibrahim (2020), in the *Journal of Islamic Studies*, emphasize the importance of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) in character formation. Their perspective aligns with the heart dimension in Al-Ghazali’s epistemology, where inner purity is regarded as a prerequisite for the validity of knowledge and action (Mawaddah, Muzakki, & Nikmah, 2025). However, this study extends their argument by positioning the heart not only as an individual moral center but also as an integrative nexus linking knowledge, action, and adab within a broader epistemological structure.

Furthermore, Mahmud (2021), in the *International Journal of Educational Philosophy*, examines the relationship between knowledge and action in Islamic education, asserting that knowledge loses its essential meaning when not realized in practice. This view clearly intersects with the present study’s findings on action as the actualization of knowledge. Nevertheless, while Mahmud’s analysis remains largely pragmatic, this study offers a more transcendental interpretation by emphasizing that action represents devotion to God rather than mere practical execution (Nurhadi, Ranita, & Salamah, 2024). This highlights Al-Ghazali’s emphasis on divine orientation as a distinguishing feature of authentic action.

Hossain (2022), in *Islamic Thought and Education Review*, underscores the importance of adab in Islamic education, arguing that the marginalization of adab constitutes a major cause of the crisis in modern education. His study asserts that adab should be a central pillar in contemporary Islamic curriculum design (Al Ghifari, 2025). While this aligns closely with the present findings, Hossain’s analysis remains primarily normative. In contrast, this study

conceptualizes adab as the epistemological culmination that transcends outward etiquette, encompassing holistic selfhood rooted in purified hearts, authentic knowledge, and sincere action. Thus, adab is framed not merely as a social norm but as the ultimate objective of education.

From this comparative analysis, it is evident that this study both reinforces and extends previous research. Whereas Abdullah and Ibrahim emphasize the heart, Mahmud highlights the knowledge–action relationship, and Hossain focuses on adab, this study systematically integrates all four dimensions within Al-Ghazali’s educational epistemology. This integrative framework constitutes the principal novelty of the study, offering a comprehensive articulation of spiritual–intellectual balance as an alternative paradigm for addressing the challenges of modern education. Consequently, this research not only reaffirms the relevance of classical Islamic thought but also proposes a new conceptual construction capable of enriching contemporary Islamic educational discourse.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study affirms that Al-Ghazali’s educational epistemology emphasizes a balance between spiritual and intellectual dimensions, manifested through the integration of knowledge (*‘ilm*), action (*‘amal*), heart (*qalb*), and adab. A key finding of this research is that, according to Al-Ghazali, education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission, but a transformative endeavor that guides human beings toward moral perfection and closeness to God. The central insight derived from this study is that an educational model which harmonizes reason and the heart can

serve as a viable solution to the crisis of modern education, which tends to prioritize cognitive achievement at the expense of spiritual and moral formation.

The strength of this research lies in its scholarly contribution, particularly in renewing perspectives on Islamic educational philosophy through an in-depth analysis of the core variables within Al-Ghazali’s thought. This approach offers a novel contribution to academic discourse by linking classical epistemology with the needs of contemporary education. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, as it relies primarily on library research and classical texts, rendering its findings largely conceptual in nature. Accordingly, further research employing empirical methods such as case studies in Islamic boarding schools, Islamic schools, or higher education institutions is strongly recommended to obtain more comprehensive insights and to provide an empirical basis for effective Islamic educational policymaking.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that educators, policymakers, and researchers in the field of Islamic education more seriously integrate the principle of spiritual–intellectual balance into curricula and pedagogical practices. In addition, future studies that combine philosophical inquiry with empirical approaches are necessary to examine the extent to which Al-Ghazali’s educational epistemology can be practically implemented within modern educational contexts. In this way, Al-Ghazali’s intellectual legacy will not remain at a purely conceptual level, but can make a tangible contribution to the development of a holistic Islamic educational paradigm that is both relevant and responsive to contemporary challenges.

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