

## **Adab in Teacher–Student Relations: An Analysis of Al-Ghazali’s Educational Thought**

**Azmi Izuddin,<sup>1\*</sup> Ahmed Nurhidayatullah Muhammad,<sup>2</sup>  
Abd. Rachman Assegaf<sup>3</sup>**

[\\*azmiizuddin@gmail.com](mailto:azmiizuddin@gmail.com)

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

### **Abstract**

*This study addresses the growing erosion of adab (ethical and moral conduct) in contemporary teacher–student relations by examining Al-Ghazali’s educational thought as a normative–philosophical framework. Employing a qualitative library research design with an analytical approach, the study draws primarily on Al-Ghazali’s Ihya’ Ulum al-Din, supported by relevant secondary literature from books and peer-reviewed journals. Data were analyzed using content analysis to reconstruct Al-Ghazali’s conceptualization of adab within educational relationships. The findings reveal that Al-Ghazali’s notion of adab is holistic and spiritually grounded, integrating ethical, pedagogical, and metaphysical dimensions. For students, adab entails reverence for the teacher, disciplined learning, and the practical embodiment of knowledge. For teachers, it is reflected in sincerity of intention, compassion, moral exemplarity, and pedagogical sensitivity to students’ intellectual capacities. This relationship is founded on a spiritual ethic in which the teacher functions as a murabbi, responsible for students’ moral and spiritual formation rather than the mere transmission of knowledge. The study argues that Al-Ghazali’s framework offers a substantive theoretical contribution to contemporary educational discourse by re-centering adab as a core principle for restoring the ethical and humanistic foundations of modern education.*

**Keywords:** *Adab, Teacher–Student Relations, Character Education, Al-Ghazali*

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary education is confronted with multidimensional challenges that extend beyond academic and technical concerns to encompass increasingly complex ethical and moral issues (Annur, Yuriska, & Arditasari, 2021). One of the most critical problems is the erosion of *adab* in educational relationships, particularly in teacher–student interactions. This phenomenon is evident in the declining respect shown by students toward teachers, manifested in discourteous behavior, disobedience to pedagogical authority, and the misuse of digital technology to undermine the dignity of educators (Muhammad Argha Edhel Nanda, Muhammad Fahmi Fatkhur, 2023). Conversely, there are also cases in which educators exceed ethical and pedagogical boundaries by engaging in verbal or physical violence against students. These conditions reflect a structural and cultural crisis within educational relationships.

Such realities indicate the limitations of modern educational paradigms that predominantly emphasize cognitive and instrumental dimensions while neglecting ethical and spiritual aspects of human formation. Education oriented primarily toward academic achievement, technical competence, and systemic efficiency often fails to cultivate holistic and morally grounded individuals. As a result, it produces generations that are intellectually capable yet morally fragile and deficient in value orientation (Muthi'ah Lathifah & Yakobus Ndonga, 2024). Therefore, there is an urgent need to reconstruct educational foundations that function not merely as mechanisms for knowledge transmission but as processes of value internalization and character formation. Ethical and spiritual foundations should not be treated as supplementary components; rather, they must serve as the central axis driving the entire educational process.

In this context, Islamic educational philosophy offers a holistic and integrative perspective. Islam positions *adab* as the core and spiritual essence of the educational process (Suhaimi, 2019). *Adab* is not merely understood as social etiquette or external manners but as the outward manifestation of noble character rooted in the purification of the soul (*tazkiyatun nafs*). As noted by Sakila, *adab* plays a strategic role in fostering a productive, harmonious, and meaningful learning environment (Sakila & Masyithoh, 2024). Through *adab*, teacher–student relationships are directed not only toward pedagogical effectiveness but also toward a transcendent orientation, namely drawing closer to Allah SWT. The classical maxim “*lā ‘ilma bilā adab*” underscores that knowledge loses its substantive meaning when detached from ethical and spiritual foundations.

The thought of Imam Al-Ghazali—an eminent Islamic scholar of the fifth century Hijri known as *Hujjat al-Islam*—provides a profound conceptual foundation for understanding *adab* in teacher–student relations. In his monumental work *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali systematically articulates the reciprocal rights and obligations of teachers and students, grounded in sincerity, compassion, and moral exemplarity. Education, in Al-Ghazali’s view, is not merely a process of knowledge transfer but a practice of spiritual and moral cultivation that positions the teacher as a *murabbi* and the student as a subject of ethical formation. Although rooted in a classical historical context, Al-Ghazali’s educational thought remains highly relevant for addressing the impasse of character education in the modern era, which often suffers from a loss of moral orientation.

This study’s urgency and originality lie precisely at this juncture. While discussions on character education have proliferated, many existing studies tend to adopt normative–pragmatic approaches and fail to engage deeply with the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of education. Al-Ghazali’s approach offers a fundamental reorientation of the nature of knowledge, the purpose of education, and the structure of educational relationships themselves. The integration of intellect (knowledge), heart (spirituality), and behavior (morality) that he proposes is not an additive or fragmented approach

but a coherent and comprehensive educational framework (Jalil, 2024). According to Al-Ghazali, educational models that separate these dimensions produce fragmented individuals and ultimately fail to achieve the true aims of education (Bahri et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of *adab* in teacher–student relations within Al-Ghazali’s educational thought and to articulate its relevance as a theoretical contribution to addressing ethical and existential crises in contemporary education.

## **Method**

This study adopts a qualitative library research design aimed at systematically reconstructing Al-Ghazali’s educational thought on *adab* in teacher–student relations. A qualitative approach is employed because the object of the study is normative–philosophical in nature, focusing on concepts, meanings, and ethical principles rather than empirical measurement. Library research is particularly appropriate for examining classical Islamic texts, as it enables in-depth engagement with authoritative sources and facilitates conceptual interpretation within their intellectual and historical contexts.

Primary data were drawn from Al-Ghazali’s seminal work *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, with specific emphasis on *Kitāb al-‘Ilm*, which articulates foundational principles of knowledge, ethics, and educational relationships in his thought. Secondary data were obtained from relevant scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and academic studies addressing Islamic education, moral philosophy, and character formation. Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation procedures, including source identification, critical and repeated reading, textual categorization, and the selection of key passages directly related to the concept of *adab* and educational ethics.

Data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis integrated with a hermeneutic interpretative framework (Syaifullah, 2022). This analytical choice was grounded in the assumption that Al-Ghazali’s texts are not merely doctrinal statements but layered discourses requiring contextual and conceptual interpretation. The analytical process consisted of three stages. First, data reduction was undertaken to identify core themes and conceptual units related to *adab*, knowledge, morality, and the teacher–student relationship. Second, these concepts were systematically organized and presented in an analytical narrative that highlighted their interconnections. Third, an interpretative synthesis was conducted to reconstruct Al-Ghazali’s educational framework as a coherent whole, examining the internal consistency of his ideas and their normative implications. This stage also involved reflecting on the relevance of Al-Ghazali’s conceptualization of *adab* in responding to moral degradation and ethical challenges in contemporary educational contexts.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Al-Ghazali's Intellectual Biography as an Educational Foundation**

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali al-Tusi (450 H/1058 CE), widely known as Imam Al-Ghazali, occupies a central position in Islamic intellectual history due to the integrative character of his thought. His intellectual journey reflects a sustained quest for epistemic certainty and authentic knowledge. In his early formation, Al-Ghazali studied Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*) under Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni in Nishapur, where he demonstrated exceptional intellectual aptitude. His scholarly reputation led to his appointment as a professor at the Nizamiyyah Madrasah in Baghdad, one of the most prestigious centers of learning in the medieval Islamic world (Artika et al., 2023).

Al-Ghazali's intellectual orientation was shaped by the dominant currents of his time—philosophy, *batiniyyah*, theology, and Sufism. Initially, his approach was strongly rational, as reflected in his engagement with philosophy and *kalam* (Assya'bani, 2020). However, at the height of his academic career, he experienced a profound epistemological and spiritual crisis, which he recounts in *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. This crisis led him to question the sufficiency of sense perception and rational inquiry as sources of ultimate truth. In 488 H/1095 CE, Al-Ghazali withdrew from public life and embarked on an extended period of asceticism and spiritual retreat lasting nearly a decade (Defriono et al., n.d.).

This transformative experience marked a decisive shift in his epistemology, culminating in the conviction that authentic knowledge must illuminate the heart, purify the soul, and lead the knower closer to God rather than merely accumulating intellectual data (Ilham et al., 2024). This insight became the animating spirit of his magnum opus, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, an encyclopedic work aimed at reviving religious sciences by reintegrating ethical and spiritual dimensions. *Kitāb al-'Ilm* within this work serves as the primary textual foundation for Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy and underpins his conception of *adab* in teacher–student relations.

### **The Philosophical Foundations of Knowledge and Adab**

Al-Ghazali's conception of teacher–student relations is inseparable from his philosophical understanding of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and *adab*. For Al-Ghazali, knowledge is not merely cognitive or instrumental but a divine light (*an-nūr*) infused by God into the human heart. True knowledge is transformative: it enlightens the intellect, purifies the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), and orients the learner toward God (*taqarrub ilā Allāh*) (Yusuf, 2024). Consequently, the ultimate aim of learning is *ma'rifatullah*, a form of epistemic certainty that culminates in spiritual submission (Aziz et al., 2020).

Within this framework, Al-Ghazali distinguishes between praiseworthy knowledge (*al-'ilm al-maḥmūd*) and blameworthy knowledge (*al-'ilm al-madhūm*), as well as between *fard 'ayn* and *fard kifāyah*. This classification

underscores that knowledge is ethically value-laden and must be evaluated based on its moral and spiritual consequences. *Adab*, therefore, emerges as the ethical embodiment of knowledge that has been internalized at the level of the heart (Sucipto et al., 2024). It is not superficial etiquette but the outward expression of inward moral character (*khuluq*) (Aryanti et al., 2022).

The classical maxim “*lā ‘ilma bilā adab*” finds its deepest justification in this epistemology. For Al-Ghazali, knowledge devoid of *adab* is sterile and potentially destructive, fostering arrogance and moral deviation rather than wisdom (Muhammad, n.d.). Thus, *adab* functions as both an epistemological and ethical prerequisite for acquiring, internalizing, and applying knowledge. This integration of knowledge and *adab* forms the foundation of an educational system oriented toward moral integrity and spiritual excellence rather than mere intellectual achievement.

### **Students’ Adab toward Teachers**

In Al-Ghazali’s educational framework, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of information (*mu‘allim*) but a spiritual figure who inherits the prophetic mission (*warathat al-anbiyā’*). Consequently, the most fundamental form of *adab* required of students is reverence toward their teachers. This reverence encompasses both outward conduct—such as respectful speech and demeanor—and inward conviction that honoring the teacher is inseparable from honoring knowledge itself (Alhaib & Alsandi, 2024). Al-Ghazali emphasizes that the blessings and depth of knowledge remain inaccessible to students who demean or trivialize their teachers.

Al-Ghazali further insists that learning must be grounded in seriousness and psycho-spiritual readiness (*al-jidd wa al-isti’dād*) (Fitria Cinta & Maulana, 2023). Students are required to purify their inner dispositions from vices such as arrogance, ostentation, and envy, which obstruct the reception of knowledge. Learning intentions must be oriented toward divine pleasure rather than worldly recognition or status. This ethical seriousness is reflected in patience, perseverance, and prioritizing essential knowledge (*farḍ ‘ayn*) before pursuing auxiliary disciplines (Sambodo & Ali, 2025).

Learning, for Al-Ghazali, is neither passive nor mechanical. Students are encouraged to engage critically and systematically with knowledge while maintaining humility and respect. Intellectual inquiry and questioning are permissible—and even necessary—provided they are conducted within the bounds of ethical decorum. Crucially, Al-Ghazali places strong emphasis on the practical application of knowledge (*al-‘amal bi al-‘ilm*). Knowledge that is not enacted in behavior is considered spiritually futile and morally burdensome (Yakub, 2015). Finally, students bear responsibility for disseminating knowledge responsibly, with humility and pedagogical sensitivity, ensuring that teaching follows intellectual maturity and ethical preparedness (Aryanti et al., 2022).

### **Teachers' Adab toward Students**

Corresponding to students' obligations, Al-Ghazali assigns teachers a profound ethical and spiritual responsibility. The foundation of teaching is sincerity (*ikhlas*), whereby instruction is undertaken solely for God's sake rather than for prestige or material gain (Annisa Darma Yanti, 2024). Teaching, in this view, is an act of worship and moral stewardship. Without sincerity, knowledge risks becoming spiritually corrosive rather than illuminating.

Teachers are also required to embody compassion (*rahmah*) and parental care toward students. Al-Ghazali likens the teacher–student relationship to that of parent and child, emphasizing patience, gentleness, and emotional attentiveness (Abuzar et al., 2024). Harshness and authoritarianism undermine trust and obstruct understanding. Beyond instruction, teachers function as living exemplars (*qudwah hasanah*), whose moral integrity serves as the most effective pedagogical method (Soussi, 2016).

Pedagogically, Al-Ghazali advocates instructional wisdom (*muḥādathah bi ḥasab qadr 'uqūlihim*), urging teachers to tailor content to students' intellectual capacities and to proceed gradually from foundational knowledge to advanced concepts (Khadijah, 2019). Teachers must also provide spiritual counsel (*tarbiyah rūḥiyyah*), guiding students toward self-discipline, ethical awareness, and God-consciousness beyond formal curricular boundaries (Olfah, 2024).

### **Teacher–Student Relations as a Spiritual Bond**

For Al-Ghazali, teacher–student relations transcend pedagogical interaction and constitute a spiritual bond (*al-rābiṭah al-rūḥiyyah*) (Jemeela & Al-Hidabi, 2025). Knowledge transmission is understood as the conveyance of divine illumination (*nūr al-'ilm*) from heart to heart. Teachers act as mediators (*wasīlah*) of guidance, assuming the role of *murabbi* who cultivates both intellect and soul (Syiful Rijal, 1907).

This spiritual relationship is grounded in love (*maḥabbah*) and reverence (*ta'zīm*), enabling moral internalization and epistemic receptivity (Putra, 2024). The ultimate aim of this bond is the attainment of *ma'rifatullah*, wherein learning becomes a form of spiritual discipline (*riyāḍah rūḥiyyah*) leading to ethical transformation and divine proximity (Kholili Hasib, 2025).

### **Contemporary Relevance and Educational Implications**

Al-Ghazali's framework gains heightened relevance amid contemporary educational crises characterized by moral fragmentation and instrumental rationality. Modern systems often equate educational success with cognitive outputs and labor-market readiness, neglecting ethical and spiritual formation. Al-Ghazali's insistence that knowledge without *adab* is deficient offers a corrective paradigm oriented toward holistic human development.

His approach calls for a comprehensive reorientation of educational philosophy through the integration of knowledge, morality, and spirituality. This entails repositioning teachers as *murabbi*, embedding *adab* as a core curricular principle, and fostering institutional cultures grounded in respect, compassion, and ethical accountability. In this sense, Al-Ghazali's legacy constitutes not merely a historical reference but a normative framework capable of addressing dehumanization in modern education and restoring its moral and spiritual purpose.

The novelty of this study lies in its normative–philosophical reconstruction of *adab* as an epistemological and spiritual foundation of teacher–student relations in Al-Ghazali's educational thought. Unlike much of the existing literature that treats *adab* as a component of character education or ethical conduct in a descriptive and fragmented manner, this study positions *adab* as a unifying principle that integrates knowledge (*'ilm*), morality (*akhlaq*), and spirituality (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) within a coherent educational framework. By systematically analyzing *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, particularly *Kitāb al-'Ilm*, this research advances an interpretative synthesis that conceptualizes teacher–student relations not merely as pedagogical interactions but as spiritually grounded ethical bonds. This integrative reading offers a deeper theoretical articulation of *adab* that moves beyond pragmatic character education models toward a holistic educational ontology.

This study contributes theoretically by enriching contemporary educational discourse with a value-based epistemology that challenges instrumental and technocratic paradigms of modern education. Al-Ghazali's framework, as reconstructed in this study, provides a robust conceptual alternative that re-centers education on moral formation, spiritual awareness, and relational ethics. Practically, the findings offer a principled foundation for reimagining teacher professionalism, curriculum design, and educational culture through the lens of *adab*. By articulating the teacher's role as *murabbi* and framing learning as both intellectual and spiritual cultivation, this study offers actionable insights for integrating ethical and spiritual dimensions into contemporary educational systems. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing global debates on character education, educational ethics, and the humanization of learning in the twenty-first century.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that Al-Ghazali's concept of *adab* in teacher–student relations constitutes a holistic and spiritually grounded educational framework capable of addressing fundamental crises in contemporary education. The findings demonstrate that *adab* is not a superficial ethical code but an integrative manifestation of knowledge (*'ilm*), moral character (*akhlaq*), and spiritual cultivation (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), embodied through reciprocal relationships founded on sincerity, reverence, compassion, and moral exemplarity. Within this framework, students' *adab* is reflected in disciplined

learning, ethical humility, and the practical enactment of knowledge, while teachers' *adab* is realized through their role as *murabbi*—educators who guide not only intellectual development but also moral and spiritual formation.

Theoretically, Al-Ghazali's educational thought offers a paradigmatic reorientation that challenges the dominant instrumental and technocratic models of modern education. By positioning teacher–student relations as spiritually infused ethical bonds rather than merely functional pedagogical interactions, this framework provides a substantive response to moral degradation and the dehumanization of learning. The study thus contributes to contemporary educational theory by re-centering *adab* as a foundational epistemological and ethical principle, capable of restoring education's humanistic, moral, and transcendental purposes.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of revitalizing the teacher's role as a moral exemplar and spiritual guide, alongside curricular strategies that embed *adab* as a core educational principle rather than a peripheral program. This implies the need for teacher education curricula that extend beyond pedagogical and professional competencies to include ethical-spiritual formation grounded in Islamic educational philosophy. At the policy level, the study highlights the necessity of creating supportive educational environments that prioritize relational ethics, such as reasonable teacher–student ratios and evaluation systems that recognize moral exemplarity and ethical leadership. Future research is encouraged to extend this conceptual framework through empirical and experimental studies that examine the effectiveness of *adab*-based teacher–student relational models across diverse educational contexts.

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