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SA'ĀDAH IN IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S THOUGHT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC EDUCATION: A LIBRARY RESEARCH STUDY

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Kata Kunci:	ABSTRAK
<i>Sa'ādah</i> ; Al-Ghazālī; Tazkiyat Al-Nafs; Pendidikan Islam; Akhlak	Kajian ini membahas konsep <i>sa'ādah</i> (kebahagiaan) dalam pemikiran Imam al-Ghazālī serta relevansinya bagi pendidikan Islam kontemporer. Persoalan yang melatari kajian ini adalah kecenderungan sebagian wacana pendidikan modern mereduksi kebahagiaan pada capaian material dan kognitif, sementara dimensi spiritual dan moral kerap terpinggirkan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menguraikan struktur konseptual <i>sa'ādah</i> menurut al-Ghazālī, mengaitkannya dengan konsep jiwa (nafs, qalb, akal) dan penyucian jiwa (tazkiyat al-nafs), serta merumuskan implikasinya bagi tujuan dan praktik pendidikan Islam. Penelitian menggunakan metode kepustakaan (library research) dengan pendekatan deskriptif analitis dan hermeneutis terhadap karya primer al-Ghazālī, terutama <i>Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn</i> dan <i>Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah</i> . Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa <i>sa'ādah</i> bagi al-Ghazālī bersifat hierarkis, berpuncak pada ma'rifatullāh, dan dicapai melalui penyucian jiwa serta pembentukan akhlak mulia. Konsep ini relevan bagi perumusan tujuan pendidikan Islam yang berorientasi pada keseimbangan ilmu, akhlak, dan spiritualitas, bukan sekadar keunggulan kognitif dan material semata.

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Keywords:

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ABSTRACTS

This study examines the concept of sa'adah (happiness) in the thought of Imam al-Ghazālī and its relevance to contemporary Islamic education, in response to the tendency of modern educational discourse to reduce happiness to material and cognitive achievement while marginalizing spiritual and moral dimensions. It aims to elaborate the conceptual structure of sa'adah, relate it to the soul (nafs, qalb, and reason) and soul purification (tazkiyat al-nafs), and formulate its implications for the aims of Islamic education. The study employs a library research method with a descriptive analytical and hermeneutical approach to al-Ghazālī's primary works, particularly *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'adah*. The findings show that sa'adah for al-Ghazālī is hierarchical, culminating in ma'rifatullāh (knowledge of God), attained through soul purification and noble character. This concept is relevant for reformulating Islamic education toward a balance of knowledge, morality, and spirituality, rather than mere cognitive and material excellence.

A. INTRODUCTION

Islamic education, in its essence, cannot be separated from the fundamental question of the ultimate purpose of human life. One key concept that serves as the culmination of the entire educational process within the classical Islamic intellectual tradition is *sa'adah*, namely true happiness encompassing both worldly and otherworldly dimensions at once. Among classical Muslim thinkers, Imam al-Ghazālī (450-505 AH, or 1058-1111 CE) is recognized as one of the figures who most systematically formulated the concept of *sa'adah*, particularly in his work *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'adah*. For al-Ghazālī, happiness is not merely sensory gratification or material attainment, but rather a state of the soul that attains closeness to God through knowledge (ma'rifat) and inner purification, an understanding consistent with the assertion of a number of studies that happiness, from an Islamic perspective, always rests upon a transcendent dimension rather than mere momentary psychological satisfaction (Nasr, 2014). This view situates education not merely as the transfer of knowledge, but as a process of the soul's transformation toward perfection. As a figure titled *Hujjat al-Islam* (the Proof of Islam), al-Ghazālī is widely known for his ability to integrate various disciplines of Islamic scholarship, ranging from jurisprudence (fiqh), theology, and philosophy to Sufism, into a single coherent structure of thought, with the concept of *sa'adah* as one of the principal axes unifying all these disciplines (Al-Ghazālī, 2022).

Contemporary Islamic education discourse, on the other hand, frequently faces a problem of orientation. Modern educational systems often focus excessively on academic aspects, thereby neglecting the moral and spiritual dimensions of learners. This condition risks producing learners who are cognitively excellent yet fragile in character and spirituality. It is within this context that al-Ghazālī's idea of *sa'adah* becomes relevant to revisit as a conceptual framework capable of correcting this lopsided educational orientation, by reinstating true happiness, rather than mere academic achievement or material success, as the ultimate goal of education.

The tension between classical intellectual heritage and the needs of contemporary education is not a new issue. A number of studies show that although al-Ghazālī's educational thought emerged from a medieval social context, its overarching framework concerning the balance of knowledge and moral character remains relevant to addressing the educational challenges of today's generation, even though several of

its technical aspects require contextual adjustment. The problem is that this relevance has thus far been discussed mostly within the general framework of moral education or educational aims, without specifically examining how the structure of the concept of *sa'ādah*, as the culmination of al-Ghazālī's entire system of thought, could serve as an argumentative framework for a more comprehensive reorientation of contemporary Islamic education.

Studies on al-Ghazālī's thought within the context of Islamic education have been conducted extensively. A number of studies have focused on al-Ghazālī's concept of education in general, covering its aims, methods, and the ethics of educators and learners (Agus, 2018; Mahadhir, 2019; Putra, 2016;). These studies consistently conclude that, for al-Ghazālī, education is oriented toward forming a complete human being who balances the worldly and otherworldly dimensions.

Along another line of inquiry, a number of studies have specifically examined the concept of happiness (*sa'ādah*) in the book *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah*. Martin and Hambali examined the theological dimension of al-Ghazālī's conception of happiness and concluded that true happiness lies in the purity of the soul and heart, rather than in worldly attainment (Martin and Radea Yuli Ahmad Hambali, 2023). Rifqiya and Hosseineskandian conducted a comparative study between al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* and the notion of *ikigai* in Japanese tradition, revealing points of convergence across traditions regarding the meaning and purpose of life (Rifqiya and Abdullah Hosseineskandian, 2024). Sophia and Sari identified indicators of happiness (*al-sa'ādah*) from the perspective of the Qur'an and Hadith, reinforcing the textual basis for the study of *sa'ādah* within the Islamic tradition (Martin and Radea Yuli Ahmad Hambali, 2023).

Meanwhile, studies on *tazkiyat al-naḥs* as al-Ghazālī's method of moral education have also developed rapidly, particularly within the context of character education in the digital era. Arifin, Hariyanto, and Alsi examined the concept of soul education through *tazkiyat al-naḥs* according to al-Ghazālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (Rifqiya and Abdullah Hosseineskandian, 2024). Bayhaqi and Masnawati, as well as Hasyim, each demonstrated the relevance of *tazkiyat al-naḥs* for moral education and holistic character education amid the challenges of young generations' moral degradation and the disruptive era (Bayhaqi and Masnawati, 2024; Hasyim, 2024). Most recently, Zahari's content analysis of al-Ghazālī's selected works proposed five constitutive aspects of *sa'ādah*, its existential dimension, levels, types, causes, and signs, along with five distinct methods of its attainment, reinforcing the view that al-Ghazālī's framework remains capable of resolving conceptual confusion in present-day discussions of happiness (Zahari, 2026).

Meanwhile, studies on *tazkiyat al-naḥs* as al-Ghazālī's method of moral education have also developed rapidly, particularly within the context of character education in the digital era. Arifin, Hariyanto, and Alsi examined the concept of soul education through *tazkiyat al-naḥs* according to al-Ghazālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (Arifin, 2022). Bayhaqi and Masnawati, as well as Hasyim, each demonstrated the relevance of *tazkiyat al-naḥs* for moral education and holistic character education amid the challenges of young generations' moral degradation and the disruptive era (Bayhaqi and Masnawati, 2024; Hasyim, 2024).

This issue has become increasingly urgent given that Islamic education fundamentally possesses a textual basis that positions happiness as an inseparable part

of the purpose of human life, as affirmed in a number of Qur'anic verses and hadiths that link happiness to piety (taqwa) and closeness to God. When Islamic educational institutions instead replicate measures of success grounded in market logic and material competition, a shift in orientation occurs that risks distancing learners from the true purpose of Islamic education itself. Rereading al-Ghazālī's idea of *sa'ādah*, in this context, is not merely a historical study but a critical effort to restore Islamic education to its intended natural purpose (fitrah).

Although research on al-Ghazālī's educational thought and on *sa'ādah* has each developed considerably, studies that specifically connect the conceptual structure of *sa'ādah*, including its definition, levels, and path of attainment, with the formulation of the aims and practice of Islamic education in an integrated manner remain limited. Most prior research discusses *sa'ādah* as a standalone theme in ethics or Sufism, or discusses al-Ghazālī's educational thought without making *sa'ādah* the primary axis of analysis. As a result, a systematic relationship between al-Ghazālī's epistemology of happiness and the design of contemporary Islamic education's aims has not yet been adequately formulated.

This study offers novelty by making the concept of *sa'ādah* the axis of analysis for reformulating the aims of Islamic education, rather than treating it merely as a peripheral theme within discussions of al-Ghazālī's Sufism or ethics. Through a systematic reading of the structure of the soul and the stages of *sa'ādah* in al-Ghazālī's thought, this study formulates concrete implications for the reorientation of the aims, curriculum, and methods of Islamic education that fully integrate the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions.

It is important to state at the outset that this study distinguishes between two analytical levels that are often conflated in normative Islamic educational literature. The first level concerns *sa'ādah* as al-Ghazālī himself formulated it within his own theological, ethical, and mystical framework, that is, as it is textually presented in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah*, and *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*. The second level concerns the authors' contemporary educational interpretation, namely the inferences drawn from that textual structure for the purpose of reformulating the aims, curriculum, and methods of present-day Islamic education. Throughout this article, claims of the first kind are presented as direct textual exposition, while claims of the second kind are explicitly marked as interpretive implications, so that al-Ghazālī's own thought is not conflated with the authors' contemporary application of it.

Based on the above discussion, this study formulates two central questions. First, what is the conceptual structure of *sa'ādah* in the thought of Imam al-Ghazālī, including its definition, levels, and path of attainment? Second, what is the relevance of this concept for formulating the aims and practice of contemporary Islamic education? This study aims to systematically elaborate al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* by referring to his primary works, to relate this concept to the structure of the soul (nafs, qalb, and reason) and the method of tazkiyat al-nafs, and to formulate its implications for contemporary Islamic education, particularly within the context of critiquing an educational orientation that tends toward materialism. Thus, this study is expected to provide a conceptual contribution to the development of more holistic aims for Islamic education, one that does not merely pursue cognitive excellence but also cultivates learners' spiritual and moral maturity as a path toward true happiness. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of Islamic philosophy of education that places

the concept of happiness as its primary analytical framework. Practically, this study is expected to serve as a reference for designing curricula and learning methods oriented toward forming a personality balanced among intellect, morality, and spirituality.

B. METHOD

This study is a qualitative library research study employing a descriptive-analytical and hermeneutical approach. The hermeneutical approach is used to interpret al-Ghazālī's primary texts contextually, while the descriptive-analytical approach is used to systematically organize and analyze the data. The primary data sources for this study are al-Ghazālī's own works, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah*, which directly discuss the concepts of the soul, morality, and happiness, along with *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* as an autobiographical record of al-Ghazālī's intellectual journey.

Secondary data sources include accredited scholarly journals, books, and book chapters discussing al-Ghazālī's thought on happiness, *tazkiyat al-nafs*, and Islamic education, written by both domestic and international researchers. To keep al-Ghazālī's own statements analytically distinct from the authors' contemporary interpretation, secondary sources were used in two separate ways: first, to corroborate or contest a given reading of the primary text itself, and second, to supply the educational literature against which the contemporary implications of that reading were formulated. Data analysis was conducted through the stages of data reduction, thematic categorization (the definition of *sa'adah*, the structure of the soul, and its relevance to education), narrative data presentation, and critical interpretation to formulate the linkage between the concept of *sa'adah* and the aims of Islamic education.

The validity of the data was reinforced through source triangulation, understood here not as the cross-verification of empirical observations but as the cross-checking of textual interpretation, namely by comparing (a) the primary passages themselves across al-Ghazālī's different works, (b) how various secondary scholars have independently read the same primary passages, and (c) how classical and contemporary Islamic educational literature has translated that reading into educational implications. Convergence across these three points of comparison was treated as a stronger basis for a given interpretive claim than reliance on a single source, so that the resulting interpretation does not rest on a single perspective alone.

The overall research procedure followed the sequence set out below.



Figure 1. Research Procedure of the Study

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of *Sa'ādah* in al-Ghazālī's Thought

Etymologically, the term *sa'ādah* in Arabic means good fortune or favorable opportunity, a meaning also reflected in its counterparts across various languages and traditions that link happiness with good fortune in life. In *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, al-Ghazālī explains happiness as comprehensive knowledge of the true nature of life, attained through ma'rifatullah, namely a profound knowledge of God (Al-Ghazālī, 2022). For al-Ghazālī, happiness is not a subjective and momentary psychological state, merely a feeling of pleasure or joy, but rather an objective attainment concerning the

development of the entirety of human potential, encompassing moral, social, emotional, and spiritual aspects at once.

In a more detailed framework, al-Ghazālī outlines four fundamental forms of knowledge that underpin the attainment of *sa'ādah*. First, knowing oneself (*ma'rifat al-nafs*), namely awareness of the soul's true nature as a spiritual substance originating from the divine realm, rather than merely a perishable body. Second, knowing God (*ma'rifatullah*), the pinnacle of knowledge that constitutes the ultimate goal of the entire human spiritual journey. Third, knowing the world (*ma'rifat al-dunya*), namely the awareness that worldly life is a field or a temporary waystation toward eternal life, rather than an end in itself. Fourth, knowing the hereafter (*ma'rifat al-akhirah*), namely belief in life after death, which constitutes the ultimate orientation of all human deeds in this world. These four forms of knowledge are interwoven with one another, such that a deficiency in one aspect will affect the overall attainment of *sa'ādah*.

Such a structure of knowledge shows that *sa'ādah*, for al-Ghazālī, cannot be reduced to a single dimension, whether cognitive, affective, or spiritual alone, but rather demands the integration of all three. The implication is that the pursuit of happiness that touches only one dimension, for instance, mastery of knowledge without purification of the soul, or ritual worship without deep understanding, will not lead a person to true *sa'ādah*. This holistic view is one of the distinguishing features that sets al-Ghazālī's epistemology of happiness apart from a number of philosophical traditions that tend to reduce happiness to rational perfection alone. al-Ghazālī explicitly distinguishes between worldly happiness (*sa'ādah duniawiyah*), which is temporary, and otherworldly happiness (*sa'ādah ukhrawiyah*), which is eternal and constitutes the ultimate goal of human life. According to interpretations of al-Ghazālī's thought, a person who bases his happiness solely on worldly matters will ultimately fall into disappointment in the form of inner emptiness, because worldly things are transient and incapable of satisfying the soul's longing, which is in truth divine in nature. This view affirms that true *sa'ādah* can only be attained through the purification of the soul and heart, not through the accumulation of bodily pleasures or material possessions.

To attain pure and perfect happiness, al-Ghazālī formulates a number of stages that a person must pass through. These stages are intended to direct a person toward the development of the potential of the heart and soul, while at the same time securing a person's well-being both in this world and in the hereafter. Among the fundamental forms of knowledge that al-Ghazālī emphasizes are knowing oneself, knowing God, knowing the world, and knowing the hereafter, as an integrated whole that underpins the attainment of happiness. This staged structure shows that, for al-Ghazālī, happiness is not an instantaneous event but a continuous process of the soul's education.

It is important to note that al-Ghazālī's epistemology of *sa'ādah* is rooted in three intellectual traditions at once: *falsafah* (rational philosophy), *tasawwuf* (mysticism), and *kalam* (theology). al-Ghazālī's own intellectual journey, as he recounts in his autobiographical account (Al-Ghazali, 2001), traversed four paths in the quest for truth, *kalam*, philosophy, the *ta'lim* doctrine of the Batini sect, and the path of Sufism, before

he arrived at the conclusion that the path of Sufism, combined with the discipline of reason and religious law (shari'ah), is the most convincing path toward truth and happiness. This synthesis renders al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* comprehensive in nature: neither purely rationalistic, as with the Peripatetic philosophers, nor purely intuitive, as with extreme Sufis, but rather one that combines rational argumentation with spiritual experience validated by revelation.

The comparative study by Rifqiya and Hosseinieskandian shows that this mode of thinking, which links happiness with the discovery of meaning and purpose in life, bears a structural resemblance to the concept of *ikigai* in Japanese tradition (Rifqiya and Abdullah Hosseinieskandian, 2024), even though it proceeds from a different theological framework. Arroisi and colleagues' textual study of al-Ghazālī's theory of human nature reinforces this reading, showing that happiness for al-Ghazālī is inseparable from self-purification and from knowledge that is ultimately traced back to God, rather than to sensory or worldly gratification (Arroisi, Mulyana, and Da'i, 2023). From a textual perspective, the indicators of happiness formulated by al-Ghazālī are also consistent with the affirmations of the Qur'an and Hadith regarding happiness as the fruit of piety, patience, and closeness to God, rather than as a result of mere material possession. Thus, al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* does not stand alone as philosophical speculation, but rests upon a solid Islamic textual foundation, while also demonstrating al-Ghazālī's skill in weaving rational argumentation, spiritual experience, and the authority of revelation into a single, coherent structure of thought.

The conceptual structure outlined above can be summarized as follows.

Dimension	Concept	Educational Meaning
Self-knowledge	<i>Ma'rifat al-Nafs</i>	Self-awareness
Divine knowledge	<i>Ma'rifatullāh</i>	Spiritual orientation
World knowledge	<i>Ma'rifat al-Dunyā</i>	Proper relationship with worldly life
Hereafter knowledge	<i>Ma'rifat al-Ākhirah</i>	Eschatological orientation
Purification	<i>Tazkiyat al-Nafs</i>	Moral and spiritual development
Character	<i>Akhlāq</i>	Behavioral manifestation
Ultimate happiness	<i>Sa'ādah</i>	Integrated human flourishing

Table 1. The Conceptual Structure of Sa'ādah in al-Ghazālī's Thought

The Structure of the Soul (Nafs) and the Path toward Sa'ādah

Al-Ghazālī's understanding of *sa'ādah* cannot be separated from his theory of the soul (nafs). In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazālī employs a number of interrelated terms to explain the true nature of the human being, al-nafs, al-qalb, al-'aql, and al-ruh, which fundamentally refer to one and the same spiritual essence, namely the subtle, divinely-originated substance that constitutes the true nature of humanity (Al-Ghazali, n.d.). al-Ghazālī uses these terms in two senses at once: a biological, physical sense also possessed by other living creatures, and a subtle spiritual sense, the locus of thinking, feeling, and knowing, that is distinctively human.

Among these four terms, *qalb* (the heart) occupies a central position within the framework of human self-leadership according to al-Ghazālī. The study by Razali and colleagues on *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* shows that al-Ghazālī formulates a number of noble qualities centered on the *qalb* as the basis of leadership, both leadership over oneself and social leadership, affirming the central role of the *qalb* in directing the entirety of human spiritual potential (Razali, 2020). A healthy and pure *qalb* is a prerequisite for the rectitude of all human conduct, whereas a *qalb* afflicted by various spiritual maladies will drag a person toward conduct far removed from true happiness.

This graduated structure of the soul affirms the importance of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, that is, the purification of the soul, as the principal path toward inner happiness and closeness to God. Arifin, Hariyanto, and Alsi show that both al-Ghazālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah position soul education through *tazkiyat al-nafs* as a prerequisite for the formation of noble character, although the two differ in methodological emphasis, with al-Ghazālī placing greater emphasis on the dimension of *mujahadah*, the struggle against base desires, as the primary path of soul purification (Arifin, 2022). Bayhaqi and Masnawati reinforce this finding by affirming that al-Ghazālī's conception of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which encompasses the purification of intention and the habituation of good character, remains relevant as a framework for addressing the problem of moral degradation among today's younger generation (Bayhaqi and Masnawati, 2024).

More technically, al-Ghazālī details the process of *mujahadah al-nafs* through the treatment of various spiritual maladies, such as excessive anger, excessive love of wealth (*hubb al-mal*), pride (*kibr*), and *riya'* (seeking praise in worship), each of which requires its own method of healing, just as different bodily ailments require different treatments. This framework for healing the soul shows that *tazkiyat al-nafs* is not merely an abstract moral exhortation, but a structured method that can be adapted into contemporary Islamic educational guidance and counseling practice, while also affirming that the education of the soul requires a careful diagnosis of each learner's psychological condition before determining the appropriate method of guidance.

From a more contemporary vantage point, the study by Rizayanti and Suyadi attempts to read al-Ghazālī's concepts of *nafs* and *qalb* through the lens of neuroscience, finding a number of points of convergence between al-Ghazālī's explanation of the functions of the heart and reason and modern scientific understanding of human emotional regulation and cognition, without reducing its spiritual dimension to a merely biological process (Rizayanti, 2023). This finding is significant because it shows that al-Ghazālī's psychological framework, although formulated more than nine centuries ago, retains explanatory power when reread through contemporary scholarly approaches. Fuad affirms that human happiness, from a psychological standpoint, is closely related to the capacity for self-management and the acceptance of life's meaning (Fuad, 2015), a theme substantially consistent with al-Ghazālī's emphasis on the ordering of the soul as a path toward *sa'adah*.

Furthermore, al-Ghazālī emphasizes that the purification of the soul is not a one-time process, but a gradual habituation that demands patience and guidance, as shown in

the medical metaphor he frequently employs: just as a physician does not prescribe the same medicine for every ailment, an educator of the soul must likewise adapt the method of training to each individual's inner condition. This principle of methodological individuation constitutes one of al-Ghazālī's important contributions to educational thought, as it affirms that the cultivation of the soul toward *sa'ādah* cannot be carried out uniformly, but requires a careful reading of each learner's psychological and spiritual condition.

In a more detailed framework, al-Ghazālī also outlines the levels of the *nafs* that a person must pass through in their spiritual journey, ranging from *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the soul inclined toward evil), *al-nafs al-lawwamah* (the soul that begins to reproach itself for its faults), to *al-nafs al-mutma'innah* (the soul that is tranquil and at peace due to its closeness to God). It is the attainment of this final level that is identified with the true condition of *sa'ādah*, namely an inner tranquility no longer shaken by the fluctuations of worldly circumstances. The significance of this structure of the soul for the question of *sa'ādah* lies in its affirmation that happiness is not a state that comes from outside the self, but rather the result of the management and ordering of the soul itself. A person who allows animalistic and bodily impulses to dominate the *qalb* and reason will be submerged in the fulfillment of desire that never yields true satisfaction, whereas a person who succeeds in subduing the *nafs* through *tazkiyah* will attain the tranquility that serves as the gateway to *sa'ādah*. Thus, al-Ghazālī's psychology of the soul functions simultaneously as the methodological foundation of his concept of happiness, and at the same time as a direct bridge to the question of education, because the ordering of the soul is, in essence, a pedagogical process requiring guidance, training, and continuous habituation, rather than merely a one-way transfer of information from educator to learner.

***Sa'ādah*, Ma'rifatullah, and Moral Character**

The apex of *sa'ādah* in al-Ghazālī's thought lies in *ma'rifatullah*, namely true knowledge of God. Najib affirms that, according to al-Ghazālī in *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah*, happiness must have as its ultimate goal a return to God, and that Islamic education is essentially an effort to guide learners to become human beings who are sound in soul, spirit, and reason all at once (Mohd. Noor Najib, 2024). *Ma'rifatullah*, in this view, is not merely conceptual, cognitive knowledge, but an inner experience that permeates and thoroughly transforms the orientation of one's life.

According to al-Ghazālī, the concrete manifestation of closeness to God through *ma'rifatullah* is reflected in a number of moral virtues that he consistently emphasizes in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*: *ikhlas* (sincerity of intention solely for God), *sabr* (steadfastness in facing trials), *shukr* (awareness and gratitude for blessings), and *tawakkul* (complete reliance on God after exerting one's best effort). These four virtues are not merely standalone ethical exhortations, but the direct fruit of the depth of one's *ma'rifatullah*, and at the same time serve as practical indicators of a person who has attained true happiness. The more firmly these four qualities are embedded within a person, the more stable the inner tranquility they experience, regardless of the fluctuations of the worldly

conditions they face. Fuad adds that, from the perspective of the psychology of happiness, the capacity to accept one's life circumstances with gratitude, as emphasized by al-Ghazālī, correlates closely with overall life satisfaction, a finding that reinforces the relevance of al-Ghazālī's ethical framework for the cross-disciplinary discussion of happiness (Fuad, 2015).

The relationship between *ma'rifatullah* and moral character in al-Ghazālī's thought is organic in nature, rather than a mere coincidental correlation. The study by Bayhaqi and Masnawati shows that, for al-Ghazālī, moral education that emphasizes the purification of intention, the habituation of virtue, and exemplary conduct is the logical consequence of true knowledge of God, because noble character is, in essence, a reflection of the soul's closeness to the divine attributes. The closer a person draws to *ma'rifatullah*, the more their character aligns with universal values of goodness, such that spiritual piety and social piety merge into a single, integrated personality (Bayhaqi and Masnawati, 2024).

This perspective reveals both a parallel with and an important divergence from the rationalist ethical current that also influenced classical Muslim thought, particularly through Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*. Alwy Ahmed Mohamed and Andhim's recent comparative reading of Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī shows that Miskawayh emphasizes a rational and philosophical approach to moral education, centered on intellectual discipline and the balance of human faculties, whereas al-Ghazālī's approach centers on spiritual purification, giving primacy to faith, self-discipline, and religious practice in shaping character; the two methodologies differ, yet both alike direct the individual toward moral excellence and social harmony (Mohamed and Andhim, 2026). This divergence reflects two currents within classical Islamic ethics, a rationalist and philosophical current associated with Miskawayh, and a mystical and spiritual current associated with al-Ghazālī, although both converge on the conviction that noble character is the path toward human perfection and happiness. Shahidullah and Abdul Manaf's comparative study of Islamic and Western philosophies of happiness reinforces this reading from a different angle, showing that where Aristotelian philosophy confines happiness to the present, sublunary life, the Islamic tradition traced through al-Ghazālī consistently situates happiness in both this present life and the eternal life after death, so that virtue is necessary but not sufficient without the transcendent, God-oriented horizon that al-Ghazālī's framework supplies (Shahidullah and Abdul Manaf, 2022).

Effendi's study on the philosophy of happiness across figures, Plato, Aristotle, al-Ghazālī, and al-Farabi, reinforces this reading by showing that although all four figures alike position happiness as the ultimate end of life (*telos*), al-Ghazālī is the only one who explicitly links the highest happiness to a personal knowledge of and closeness to God, rather than merely rational contemplation of the First Cause as in the Peripatetic philosophical tradition (Effendi, 2017).

For al-Ghazālī, noble character born of *ma'rifatullah*, in turn, becomes both the evidence and the path for the attainment of *sa'ādah*. A person of noble character not

only attains personal inner tranquility but also confers benefit upon their social environment, such that *sa'ādah*, in al-Ghazālī's view, always possesses two inseparable dimensions: a vertical dimension in the form of closeness to God, and a horizontal dimension in the form of social virtue. This unity of the two dimensions sets al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* apart from hedonistic notions of happiness that pursue merely individual pleasure, because for al-Ghazālī, true happiness in fact grows out of self-mastery and an orientation toward benefiting others (Safitri and Al-Kaf, 2021). This fundamental distinction also explains why moral education within al-Ghazālī's framework cannot be separated from spiritual education, since both stem from one and the same root: the soul's closeness to God. The implication is that efforts to form character that rely solely on behavioral habituation without reinforcing the spiritual dimension, within al-Ghazālī's framework, risk producing an outward compliance that is fragile and easily shaken when confronted with temptation or situational pressure, rather than a robust and consistent character born of deep God-consciousness. This finding serves as an important bridge to the following discussion of how this framework of *sa'ādah* can be concretely translated into the aims, curriculum, and practice of contemporary Islamic education (Arroisi et al., 2023; Mainuddin, Tobroni, and Nurhakim, 2023; Pransiska, 2017).

The reading developed across the two preceding subsections can be drawn together into a single conceptual chain that constitutes the article's central theoretical contribution and provides the bridge to the following discussion of contemporary Islamic education.



Figure 2. Al-Ghazālī's *Sa'ādah*-Based Conceptual Framework

The Relevance of the Concept of *Sa'ādah* for Contemporary Islamic Education

al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* carries significant implications for reformulating the aims of contemporary Islamic education. As affirmed by Najib, Islamic education ought to guide learners to become human beings who are sound and happy in soul, spirit, and

reason all at once, rather than merely cognitively excellent or technically skilled. This view demands a reorientation of educational aims away from the mere attainment of academic competence and toward the formation of an integrated personality that balances the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions, an idea al-Ghazālī laid down long ago as the foundation of his philosophy of education (Najib, 2023).

First, with regard to educational aims, the concept of *sa'ādah* demands that educational success no longer be measured solely by cognitive indicators such as examination scores or academic achievement, but also by the maturity of learners' souls and character. Maisarah and colleagues affirm that integrating al-Ghazālī's educational values, such as Sufism, character formation, and the strengthening of spirituality, is crucial for building a well-rounded and competitive generation, particularly amid modern education's tendency to focus excessively on academic aspects alone (Maisarah, 2025). This reorientation is consistent with the findings of Rasiani, Lubis, and Sari, who show that although several aspects of al-Ghazālī's educational thought, such as the dichotomy of knowledge and the absolute authority of the educator, require contextual adjustment, the overarching framework of his thought on the balance of knowledge and character remains relevant for addressing the educational challenges of the millennial generation (Rasiani, 2024).

Second, with regard to curriculum and method, the relevance of *sa'ādah* demands that *tazkiyat al-nafs* no longer be treated as supplementary content separate from the academic curriculum, but rather systematically integrated into the entire learning process, just as al-Ghazālī himself emphasized the importance of integrating the teaching of knowledge (*ta'lim*) with the habituation of character (*ta'dib*) in his own educational practice. Hasyim shows that integrating the values of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, such as honesty, integrity, compassion, and care for others, into the curriculum can serve as a robust foundation for forming learners' character with the mental resilience needed amid the acceleration of change in the present age (Hasyim, 2024). Such integration demands the development of innovative learning methods, the strengthening of the teacher's role as an exemplar, the involvement of parents and the community, and the wise use of technology in character education (Warsito, 2022).

Institutionally, traces of the principle of integrating knowledge and character bequeathed by al-Ghazālī can be found in the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) educational tradition in Indonesia, which places the formation of character and spiritual closeness to God on an equal footing of importance with the mastery of knowledge, through a combination of teaching classical texts, habituating worship, and the exemplary conduct of the *kiai* as a central figure. Such a model is, in essence, an institutional articulation of al-Ghazālī's principles of *ta'lim* and *ta'dib*, in which the teaching of knowledge is always accompanied by continuous character formation and moral oversight. The relevance of this model for contemporary Islamic education lies in its affirmation that an educational institution is not merely a place for the transfer of knowledge, but a space for the formation of an integrated personality.

The role of the educator within this framework likewise undergoes a shift in meaning, from a mere transmitter of information to a living exemplar (*uswah hasanah*) who guides learners in finding the path toward *sa'ādah*. Azhari and Mustapa affirm that, for al-Ghazālī, a good educator is one who prioritizes purifying themselves before guiding others, because the influence of exemplary conduct is far more effective than mere verbal advice (Azhari, 2021). This shift in role demands that Islamic educational institutions likewise attend to the spiritual and moral maturity of their educators, not merely their pedagogical competence and mastery of subject matter.

Third, with regard to the learning approach, the principle of individuation emphasized by al-Ghazālī, as shown in the metaphor of the physician who tailors the medicine to the patient's condition, demands that educators treat each learner according to their respective psychological and spiritual condition, rather than through a uniform approach. This principle is relevant to the challenges of contemporary education, which is increasingly aware of the importance of learner-centered instruction that is responsive to the diversity of individual character.

Fourth, and no less important, al-Ghazālī's concept of *sa'ādah* offers a constructive critique of the materialistic orientation in education, which measures life success solely by the accumulation of wealth and social status. Bayhaqi and Masnawati affirm that spiritual reinforcement through *tazkiyat al-nafs* constitutes an important framework for addressing the problem of moral degradation among the younger generation, which arises from the rapid pace of digitalization unaccompanied by an adequate moral and spiritual foundation (Bayhaqi and Masnawati, 2024). Thus, al-Ghazālī's idea of *sa'ādah* is not merely an intellectual legacy of the past, but a conceptual framework that remains pertinent for formulating an aim of Islamic education that truly humanizes human beings, an education that leads learners toward a balance of intellectual acumen, moral maturity, and spiritual depth as the path toward true happiness, both in this world and in the hereafter.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the concept of *sa'ādah* in the thought of Imam al-Ghazālī is a hierarchical state of happiness culminating in *ma'rifatullah*, attained through the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the formation of noble character, rather than through the mere accumulation of worldly pleasures. The structure of the soul, comprising the *nafs*, *qalb*, and reason, serves as the methodological foundation for the attainment of this happiness, while at the same time affirming that *sa'ādah* is a pedagogical process requiring continuous guidance and habituation, rather than an attainment that arrives on its own. This study offers a conceptual contribution in the form of a framework for reorienting the aims of Islamic education, away from an orientation that tends toward the cognitive and materialistic and toward an education that balances the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions, with *tazkiyat al-nafs* as an integral part of a curriculum and learning method that respects learners' individuation and positions the educator as a living

exemplar. This study has limitations in that it is purely a library-based study and does not yet incorporate empirical data from educational practice in the field, such that its conclusions are conceptual in nature and require further testing. Further research is recommended to empirically test the implementation of this framework of al-Ghazālī's *sa'ādah* in contemporary Islamic educational institutions, whether through institutional case studies or the development of a tazkiyat al-nafs-based curriculum model.

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