

Reconstructing Al-Ghazali's Character Education Through A Tri-Center Framework: A Conceptual Response To Contemporary Moral Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study reconstructs Imam al-Ghazali's character education thought through the tri-center framework (family, school, and society) as a conceptual proposition responding to contemporary moral challenges such as digital disruption and value fragmentation. Employing qualitative library research, the study applies thematic content analysis to three primary works—*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Ayyuhā al-Walad*, and *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah*—via paragraph-level close reading, open-to-axial coding that separates pedagogical methods from core values, and interpretive mapping onto the three educational arenas. The findings identify three methods (*ta'wīd*/habituation, *uswah*/role modeling, *mujāhadah*/spiritual struggle) and two core values (*adab* and *amānah*), revealing an implicit ecological logic: the family initiates moral habituation, the school systematizes ethical instruction under the teacher as *murabbī*, and society reinforces or undermines prior moral learning. The novelty lies in systematically operationalizing al-Ghazali's classical concepts within the tri-center architecture, a mapping not previously attempted. Theoretically, this study bridges classical Islamic pedagogy and contemporary educational ecology; practically, it offers a propositional basis—pending expert validation and empirical testing—for Islamic education policy development.

Introduction

Available data indicate that adolescent moral challenges in Indonesia remain significant: the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) reported that 3.4 million Indonesians had used illicit drugs by 2023, with a notable share among students; the Ministry of Education's 2024 school-climate survey recorded over 30.000 verified cases of violence involving learners; and UNICEF's 2023 regional brief noted that one in five Indonesian adolescents had experienced some form of cyberbullying (Kurniawan et al., 2023; Ramli & Zamzami, 2022). Beyond these indicators, scholars have documented a broader erosion of ethical norms in social interactions and a perceived crisis of public role models (Ramli & Zamzami, 2022). Digital disruption compounds the situation by accelerating the spread of misinformation, normalising hedonistic content, and weakening face-to-face moral guidance (Rosmita et al., 2026; Triantoro et al., 2026).

It should be noted, however, that these phenomena are multiply determined—socio-economic inequality, platform design, education policy, and adolescent developmental factors all contribute—and cannot be attributed to a single cause. Nevertheless, a recurring observation in the literature is that character education remains fragmented across family, school, and society, with each operating in isolation rather than as a coordinated system (Romdani & Yuningsih, 2021; Widiatmaka et al., 2023). Character education is often fragmented, with families weakening; schools being formalistic in their approach; and society tending to be permissive of values that conflict with noble character (Romdani & Yuningsih, 2021). The three centers of education are understood as normative, not integrative. This is why a character education model that holistically integrates the roles of family, school, and society is crucial for in-depth study, especially in facing contemporary moral challenges (Wuryaningrum, 2024).

Research on the three centers of education has been extensively conducted using a normative-conceptual approach. Several studies confirm that family, school, and community are the three main environments that play a strategic role in shaping students' character. Laga and Kusuma (2024) demonstrate that the three centers of education serve as the foundation for children's character formation through the synergy of values among the family environment, formal educational institutions, and society. Similar findings are also confirmed in a literature study, which views the synergy of these three environments as the primary means of internalizing character values, particularly at the elementary education level (Ma'sumah et al., 2024). Furthermore, a managerial study broadens the perspective by highlighting the importance of systematically managing the three centers of education to support the success of character education (Othman, 2022). In fact, several studies have begun to link the concept of the three centers of education to a general Islamic perspective (Shafwan, 2021). However, these studies generally still place the three centers of education within a normative and descriptive framework, assuming value harmonization, and have not explicitly linked it to classical Islamic theory to address contemporary character education issues more systematically.

Meanwhile, studies on Islamic character education are developing quite rapidly, especially those based on Islamic moral and spiritual values. Several studies place Imam al-Ghazali's thoughts as the main reference in understanding character education, particularly through the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs*. Wandira et al (2023) emphasise the relevance of al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* for building modern character, while Djamaluddin et al (2025) examine character values such as sincerity, patience, and honesty in *Ayyuhā al-Walad*. Faizin et al (2023) further link al-Ghazali's educational thought to the holistic challenges facing Generation Z in the digital era. However, these studies are generally still partial, focused on the internalization of moral values, and have not been developed within the framework of an integrative educational system, especially one that involves the relationship between family, school, and society.

Research that specifically examines Imam al-Ghazali's thoughts in the context of education and character tends to position al-Ghazali as an individual ethical and spiritual thinker. A number of studies, both written by Aprillia et al (2023) and in national journals, have been published. Hamidi & Nurhakim (2025), emphasized that the core of character education according to al-Ghazali lies in the process of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, the habituation of *adab*, and the integration of spiritual and moral dimensions. These studies have successfully demonstrated the relevance of al-Ghazali's thoughts for modern education, especially in

responding to the moral crisis. However, the focus of research is still predominantly on the individual-ethical dimension and not many have read al-Ghazali's thoughts as an ecological and social educational framework, let alone linking them to contemporary educational structures such as the three centers of education.

Based on the literature surveyed across three streams: (1) tri-center studies (Laga & Kusuma, 2024; Ma'sumah et al., 2024; Othman, 2022; Shafwan, 2021), (2) al-Ghazali's character education (Djamaluddin et al., 2025; Faizin et al., 2023; Hamidi & Nurhakim, 2025; Wandira et al., 2023), and (3) ecological or systemic approaches to Islamic education (Kurniawati et al., 2023; Usman & Zainuddin, 2021) a clear pattern emerges. Stream 1 treats the tri-center framework normatively without grounding it in a classical Islamic epistemology. Stream 2 examines al-Ghazali's pedagogy but confines the analysis to individual-ethical or spiritual dimensions without mapping them onto institutional structures. Stream 3 gestures toward ecological thinking but does not operationalise al-Ghazali's concepts within the tri-center architecture. No study published between 2015 and 2025 in the indexed databases reviewed here systematically reconstructs al-Ghazali's educational thought as a tri-center model with explicit textual evidence, coding procedures, and stated limits of contemporary relevance. This gap motivates the present study. This gap opens up space for this study to reconstruct al-Ghazali's thought within the context of the three centers of education in order to formulate a more systemic and contextual model of Islamic character education.

Guided by this gap, the study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) What primary textual evidence in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Ayyuhā al-Walad*, and *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah* supports the identification of al-Ghazali's pedagogical methods and core moral values? (RQ2) By what interpretive procedure can these concepts be mapped onto the tri-center framework (family, school, society), and what are the rules and limits of that translation? (RQ3) To what extent, and under what boundary conditions, can the reconstructed model serve as a conceptual proposition for contemporary moral challenges such as digital disruption and value fragmentation?

Correspondingly, the study aims to (1) identify and textualise the foundational concepts of al-Ghazali's character education; (2) reconstruct these concepts within the tri-center framework through a stated and replicable interpretive procedure; and (3) formulate an integrative model that is in line with the dynamics of the modern era while maintaining the fundamental values that al-Ghazali considered indispensable for moral formation namely, *adab*, *amānah*, and the habituation of noble character. The model is proposed as a conceptual proposition to be tested in future empirical research, not as a validated intervention.

The contribution of this research can be seen from three main aspects. Theoretically, this research contributes to the enrichment of the concept of the three centers of education by integrating classical Islamic thought, particularly the thoughts of Imam al-Ghazali, in the context of character education. Conceptually, this research offers an integrative model of character education, which holistically combines the roles of family, school, and society in shaping students' character. Practically and normatively, the reconstructed model may inform future policy deliberation on Islamic education; however, because the present study is a conceptual reconstruction without empirical validation, its practical contribution is limited to offering a propositional framework. Operational indicators, expert validation, and field testing are necessary before the model can serve as a basis for policy implementation.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research to analyze and reconstruct Imam al-Ghazali's character education concepts within the framework of the three centers of education (family, school, and society). The primary data sources consist of al-Ghazali's classical works, namely *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Ayyuhal Walad*, and *Bidayatul Hidayah*, which were examined to identify the fundamental principles of his educational thought. Secondary data were gathered from peer-reviewed journal articles, Islamic education textbooks, and academic publications related to the tri-center of education and contemporary moral challenges. Data collection was carried out through text documentation, thematic classification, and indexed literature searches using databases such as SINTA and Scopus.

The data analysis in this study utilized thematic content analysis, which involved three main stages. First, data reduction was conducted to select and distill the core concepts from al-Ghazali's writings that are pertinent to character education. Second, categorization of themes was performed based on the respective roles of the family, teachers (school), and the social environment (society), thereby mapping al-Ghazali's ideas onto the tri-center framework. Third, contextual interpretation was applied to reconstruct and reinterpret al-Ghazali's classical educational concepts in light of contemporary moral issues, including digital disruption, moral crisis, and value fragmentation. Through this analytical process, the study aims to formulate an integrative character education model that is both rooted in classical Islamic thought and responsive to the demands of modern society.

Results and Discussion

The Basic Concept of Character Education in al-Ghazali's Thought

Imam al-Ghazali, one of the greatest figures in Islamic intellectual history, offered a profound perspective on character education that focuses not only on the teaching of knowledge but also on the moral and spiritual development of individuals. In his view, character education plays a crucial role in guiding individuals to return to their natural state of purity (*fitrah*), because the human being is born with an innate disposition toward goodness that must be preserved and cultivated through deliberate educational effort (Nurhikmah, 2024).

In *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Vol. 3, *Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs*, al-Ghazali states: "*The soul is not created with good character; rather, good character is acquired through practice and habituation, just as the soul acquires knowledge through learning*". Elsewhere, in the same volume, he writes: "*Whoever wishes to purify his soul must first accustom it to the opposite of its desires, then persist in that practice until it becomes natural*".

Al-Ghazali emphasizes that the primary goal of education is to cultivate noble morals (*akhlaq karimah*) through the integration of knowledge, character formation, and soul purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), as education should transform both the heart and behavior rather than merely develop intellectual knowledge (Hamidi & Nurhakim, 2025). To achieve this goal, he proposes three interconnected methods: habituation (*ta'wīd*), exemplary behavior (*uswah*), and spiritual struggle (*mujahadah*) (Hidayat et al., 2025; Nasril et al., 2025; Wandira et al., 2023). Habituation develops virtues such as honesty, patience, humility, and responsibility through continuous practice from an early age until they become ingrained in daily conduct (Aprillia et al., 2023; Firmansyah, 2025; Nurhikmah, 2024).

Exemplary behavior requires parents, teachers, and leaders to model both ethical conduct and spiritual closeness to God (Rangkuti, 2025), while *mujahadah* involves continuous self-discipline to resist worldly temptations, purify the heart, and maintain behavior in accordance with religious and moral values. The integration of these three methods provides a comprehensive approach to character education that remains relevant in addressing increasingly complex moral challenges in the modern era (Aprillia et al., 2023).

Table 1. Three Methods of Character Education according to Imam al-Ghazali

Method	Arabic Term	Core Principle	Educational Implication
Habituation	<i>Ta'wīd</i>	Repetition of good deeds until they become second nature	Moral training must begin early and be practiced consistently at home and school
Role modeling	<i>Uswah</i>	Educators embody the values they teach	Parents and teachers must align words with actions
Spiritual struggle	<i>Mujahadah</i>	Continuous resistance to base desires and self-improvement	Students are trained in self-discipline, reflection, and moral resilience

Table 1 demonstrates that al-Ghazali's methods of character education move from external practice toward internal awareness. Habituation supplies behavioral repetition, role modeling supplies a concrete figure for imitation, and *mujahadah* supplies the inner commitment that sustains moral consistency. The integration of the three methods indicates that character, for al-Ghazali, is not formed by a single intervention but by a continuous and layered educational process, a point that becomes the analytical basis for mapping the roles of family, school, and society in the subsequent findings.

The Family as the Primary Center of Character Formation

Imam al-Ghazali placed the family in a very central position in the formation of a child's character. In his view, parents not only function as providers of physical and material needs for children but also as the first educators responsible for guiding their children towards the formation of good morals. Al-Ghazali emphasized that moral and spiritual education begins while a child is still in the womb, with parental influence starting from the environment they create at home, so that the family becomes the first and most formative setting of moral life (Hepni et al., 2022).

Al-Ghazali does not explicitly discuss prenatal education in the modern sense. However, in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Vol. 2, *Kitāb Ādāb al-Nikāḥ*, he advises parents to select a righteous spouse and to maintain a spiritually wholesome household, arguing that the moral environment preceding the child's birth shapes the conditions of upbringing. We interpret this not as a claim about prenatal pedagogy but as an emphasis on the pre-conditions of moral education: the parents' own character and the domestic climate they establish before and during the child's earliest years. The phrase "education begins in the womb" is thus a loose paraphrase of al-Ghazali's broader concern with parental preparation, not a direct quotation.

From al-Ghazali's perspective, parents are children's first educators and primary role models, so their everyday actions, rather than words alone, strongly shape children's attitudes, values, and future conduct (Rangkuti, 2025). Character education therefore requires not only knowledge about right and wrong but also continuous habituation (*ta'wīd*) from an early age, including behavioral and emotional habits such as politeness, honesty,

patience, empathy, and responsibility, until these values become part of the child's character and identity (Djamaluddin et al., 2025; Munawir et al., 2025). Conversely, parental negligence, permissiveness toward negative behavior, and insufficient attention to children's moral and spiritual development may leave them without clear moral guidance and make them more vulnerable to negative external influences (Ubaidillah & Hulbat, 2026). Thus, families should create a supportive environment characterized by emotional closeness while consistently practicing faith, discipline, honesty, and other moral values in daily life. For al-Ghazali, character education is therefore a shared responsibility that cannot be delegated entirely to schools or society, because the family is the primary institution for cultivating morally upright and socially beneficial individuals (Tarmizi et al., 2023).

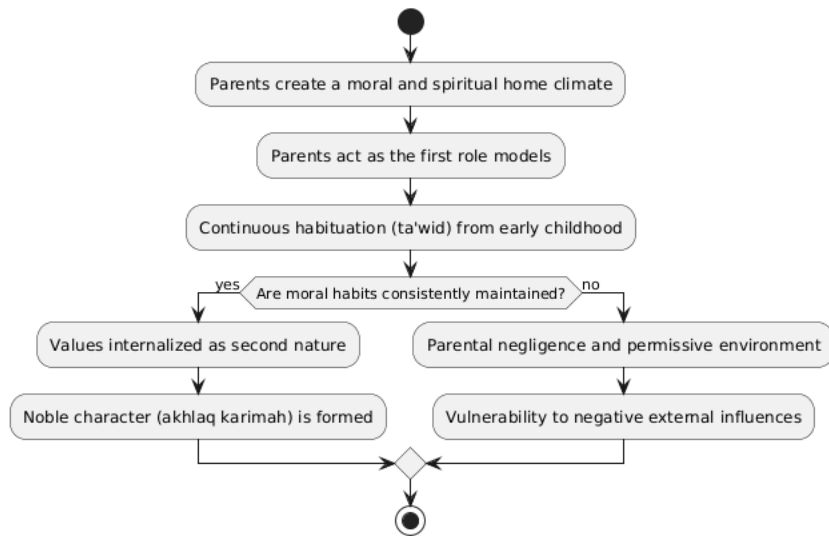


Figure 1. Process of Family-Based Character Formation in al-Ghazali's Perspective

Figure 1 illustrates that family-based character formation follows a sequential and conditional process in al-Ghazali's view. The home climate and parental example serve as the entry point, followed by continuous habituation that determines whether moral values are internalized or lost. The branching in the diagram emphasizes al-Ghazali's warning that negligence at any stage opens the door to moral deviation and vulnerability to negative external influences, so that the family is not merely a supporting actor but the primary center that determines the success or failure of the entire character education system.

Teachers and Educational Institutions as Moral Guides

The principle of *adab* before knowledge is articulated in *Ayyuhā al-Walad*, where al-Ghazali addresses his student: "O youth, of all the counsels I give you, the first is that you should not speak unless it is beneficial... and the second is that you should learn *adab* before knowledge". This counsel positions ethical formation as a prerequisite for intellectual development, a principle we read as foundational to the school's role as the second educational center. The designation of teachers as *warathat al-anbiyā'* (heirs of the prophets) is drawn from the Prophetic hadith frequently cited by al-Ghazali in *Ihyā'*, Vol. 1, Kitāb al-'Ilm: "The scholars are the heirs of the prophets". Al-Ghazali invokes this tradition to elevate the teacher's moral responsibility beyond mere instruction. We note that this is a theological-

moral designation, not an institutional role in the modern sense. Mapping it onto "school as the second center" is an analogical extension.

In Imam al-Ghazali's thought, teachers play a central role in character education as *murabbi* who not only transmit knowledge but also guide students' moral and spiritual development. As *warathatul anbiya'* (heirs of the prophets), teachers are expected to embody noble character and serve as living examples, giving the teaching profession a moral responsibility that extends beyond technical instruction (Indana & Mustofa, 2024; Ma'rufi, 2021; Rahmawati & Hang, 2025). Al-Ghazali also prioritizes *adab*—courtesy, ethics, and moral conduct—before the acquisition of knowledge, arguing that knowledge without proper character may lose its value or be misused; therefore, schools should function as moral communities that cultivate self-discipline, respect, and ethical behavior (Pratama & Al Hamat, 2021; Sulaiman et al., 2021). Furthermore, teacher–student relationships should be grounded in mutual respect, sincerity, integrity, and honesty, with teachers acting not merely as authorities but as sources of inspiration and moral guidance (Usman & Zainuddin, 2021). Thus, from al-Ghazali's perspective, teaching is simultaneously an intellectual, ethical, and spiritual process in which teachers become key agents of students' character formation.

Table 2. Dimensions of the Teacher's Role and Ethical Principles in al-Ghazali's Perspective

Dimension	Description	Implication for Educational Institutions
Teacher as <i>murabbi</i>	Guides the character and soul of students, not only the intellect	Schools must place character formation at the core of the curriculum
Heir of the prophets (<i>warathatul anbiya'</i>)	Bears moral and spiritual responsibility for education	Teacher competence must include moral and spiritual exemplarity
<i>Adab</i> before knowledge	Manners precede and condition the acquisition of knowledge	Ethical formation must come before the transfer of academic content
Ethical teacher-student relationship	Based on mutual respect, sincerity, and integrity	School culture must nurture harmonious and beneficial interaction

Table 2 clarifies that the teacher's role in al-Ghazali's thought is multidimensional, combining the functions of instructor, moral exemplar, and spiritual guide. Each dimension carries institutional implications, indicating that schools as the second center of education must be designed as ethical communities rather than mere sites of instruction. The principle of *adab* before knowledge, in particular, offers a corrective to contemporary education systems that prioritize academic achievement over character, and taken together these dimensions demonstrate that the success of the school center depends above all on the moral quality of its teachers.

The Social Environment as the Reinforcing Center of Character

The social environment and society play a crucial role in shaping an individual's character, particularly in the formation of morals. Imam al-Ghazali, in his works, emphasized that the environment has a significant influence on a person's moral and spiritual development, and he argued that a person's character is shaped not only by formal education at school or home but also by the social interactions and relationships they experience in their daily lives (Arhas et al., 2022). A negative environment, filled with reprehensible behavior, can damage morals and lead a person to develop bad habits, while a positive

environment, adorned with noble moral and ethical values, will strengthen the formation of good morals in that individual. Therefore, the social environment functions as a supporting or inhibiting factor in the process of developing good character, which positions society as the third center that either confirms or negates prior moral learning (Azahra, 2022).

In al-Ghazali's framework, *al-'ādah* (habit) denotes the repeated practice of moral acts until they become a stable disposition (*malakah*) of the soul (*Ihyā'*, Vol. 3, Kitāb Riyādat al-Nafs). This concept bears a structural resemblance to Bourdieu's *habitus*—both describe durable, embodied dispositions acquired through repetition within a social field. However, the two terms are not interchangeable. Al-Ghazali's *al-'ādah* is teleologically oriented toward the soul's purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and ultimate nearness to God, whereas Bourdieu's *habitus* is a sociological mechanism of class reproduction without a normative spiritual telos. In this study, we retain the term *al-'ādah* and avoid importing *habitus* unless the specific sociological mechanism of field, capital, and class reproduction is under discussion. Where we use the English word "habituation," it translates *ta'wīd*, not Bourdieu's *habitus*.

In al-Ghazali's thought, *al-'ādah* (habit) is fundamental to character formation because consistently practiced behaviors gradually shape an individual's disposition and morality; positive habits foster noble character, whereas negative habits can weaken moral development (Cahyaningsih et al., 2022). Consequently, character education requires not only moral instruction but also the cultivation of good habits across family, school, and community settings, making the social environment an active force in shaping moral dispositions (Kurniawati et al., 2023). Al-Ghazali also warned against harmful social associations, arguing that frequent interaction with people who engage in immoral behaviors can influence individuals to adopt similar conduct and hinder the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) (Azahra, 2022). Thus, character formation depends on the interaction between moral education and a supportive social environment, emphasizing the need to cultivate positive surroundings that consistently reinforce noble and responsible behavior.

Reinterpretation of al-Ghazali's Thought within the Tri-Center Framework

Imam al-Ghazali's thought on character education can be interpreted through the framework of the three centers of education—family, school, and society—as interconnected environments that collectively shape moral development. In this ecological reading, education is not confined to the classroom or family but functions as an ecosystem in which character develops through the dynamic interaction of these contexts (Kurniawati et al., 2023). The concept of *al-'ādah* (habit) reinforces this perspective, as good or bad habits formed in the family and reinforced by schools and society gradually shape individual behavior and character. Accordingly, the family provides the initial moral foundation through example and habituation, teachers continue this formation through knowledge and moral guidance, while society provides social conditions that may either support or undermine character development (Usman & Zainuddin, 2021). This interpretation also highlights the relevance of al-Ghazali's warning about harmful social influences to contemporary challenges, particularly consumerism, promiscuity, and digital disruption, which can expose young people to negative influences (Khasanah et al., 2023).

However, describing al-Ghazali as an “ecological educational thinker” should be understood only as a limited, analogical interpretation inspired by Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory. Al-Ghazali did not explicitly conceptualize family, school, and society as three distinct educational institutions; rather, his discussions of parental

responsibilities, teacher–student relationships, and companionship are embedded within ethical and theological writings. Moreover, his notion of society (*al-nās*, *al-ṣuḥbah*) primarily concerns immediate social relationships rather than the complex institutional and digital environments of contemporary society. His framework is also fundamentally theological and normative, oriented toward *sa'ādah* (felicity in the hereafter), whereas modern ecological theories are primarily descriptive and developmental. Thus, the ecological perspective serves as a heuristic lens for understanding the interconnected contexts of character formation in al-Ghazali's thought, rather than suggesting historical or theoretical equivalence.

The Relevance of al-Ghazali's Concept to Contemporary Moral Challenges

Imam al-Ghazali's thought on character education remains highly relevant to contemporary moral and social challenges, particularly digital disruption, moral crises, weakened educational authority, and value fragmentation. The rapid spread of uncontrolled information, cyberbullying, and increasingly permissive social interactions has intensified moral challenges in the digital era (Marstiyantingtiyas et al., 2026; Muttaqin et al., 2023). In response, al-Ghazali's emphasis on *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), *ta'wīd* (habituation), exemplary behavior, and *mujāhadah* (struggle against desire) provides a framework for strengthening moral and spiritual resilience amid technological and social change (Wandira et al., 2023). His view also addresses the weakening of educational authority by emphasizing that education should not prioritize academic achievement and technical skills at the expense of character, but should integrate moral and spiritual development as its central purpose (Hamidi & Nurhakim, 2025). Furthermore, through *tahdzib al-akhlaq* (moral development), al-Ghazali offers a holistic approach that integrates moral, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions, helping individuals navigate tensions between traditional and contemporary values and reducing identity confusion among younger generations (Faizin et al., 2023). Thus, al-Ghazali's character education provides a coherent framework for addressing contemporary challenges by placing habituation, role modeling, spiritual discipline, and integrated values at the heart of educational practice.

Reconstruction of the Integrative Character Education Model

To address contemporary challenges in character education, an integrative model is proposed that positions family, school, and society as interconnected arenas with shared and complementary moral responsibilities. The family provides the initial foundation of values such as honesty and responsibility, the school deepens moral and intellectual development through formal and informal education, and society reinforces these values through everyday social practices. The model is structured across three analytical levels: (1) arenas—family, school, and society; (2) mechanisms—*ta'wīd* (habituation), *uswah* (role modeling), and *mujāhadah* (spiritual struggle); and (3) core values—*adab* and *amānah*. In this framework, *uswah* is treated as a pedagogical mechanism rather than a moral value, while *ta'wīd* facilitates the repeated practice and internalization of moral values until they become habitual dispositions (Aprillia et al., 2023). The reconstructed model is presented as a conceptual proposition and working hypothesis whose coherence depends on the consistency of values and mechanisms across the three arenas; however, its practical effectiveness in improving moral behavior, reducing cyberbullying, or mitigating value fragmentation remains empirically untested. Therefore, operational indicators, expert validation, and field

studies are required before the model can be applied to policy or educational practice (Ma'sumah et al., 2024).

Table 3. Integrative Model: Matrix of Arena, Mechanism, Value, Indicator, and Feedback

Component	Family (Arena 1)	School (Arena 2)	Society (Arena 3)
Primary actor	Parents / guardians	Teacher as <i>murabbī</i>	Community, peers, media
Primary function	Initiate moral habituation; provide emotional security	Systematise ethical instruction; model <i>adab</i> before knowledge	Reinforce or undermine prior moral learning
Mechanisms deployed	<i>Ta'wīd</i> (habituation); <i>Uswah</i> (parental modeling)	<i>Uswah</i> (teacher modeling); <i>Ta'wīd</i> (structured practice)	<i>Uswah</i> (peer/community modeling); <i>Mujāhadah</i> (self-regulation amid temptations)
Core values transmitted	<i>Adab</i> (basic manners, respect); <i>Amānah</i> (trust, responsibility)	<i>Adab</i> (intellectual and social ethics); <i>Amānah</i> (academic and moral integrity)	<i>Adab</i> (civic courtesy); <i>Amānah</i> (social responsibility)
Proposed indicators (<i>pending validation</i>)	Consistency of moral messaging at home; frequency of shared ethical practices	Integration of <i>adab</i> into curriculum; teacher–student ethical covenant	Community norms supporting honesty; peer accountability
Expected output (<i>proposition, not finding</i>)	Foundational moral disposition	Systematised ethical knowledge and practice	Sustained moral behaviour in unstructured settings
Feedback loop	Family observes whether school values align with home values → adjusts reinforcement	School monitors whether family habituation is maintained → communicates with parents	Society's moral climate feeds back to family and school as confirmation or disruption
Conflict resolution	When family and school values conflict: dialogue between parents and teachers; <i>adab</i> as common reference	When peer pressure contradicts school teaching: <i>mujāhadah</i> training; mentoring	When digital media contradicts community norms: mediated discussion; digital <i>adab</i> literacy

Conclusion

This study set out to reconstruct Imam al-Ghazali's character education thought within the tri-center framework (family, school, and society) and to assess its conceptual relevance to contemporary moral challenges. The principal finding is a theoretical proposition, not a validated intervention: al-Ghazali's pedagogical ideas, when read through the modern analytical lens of three educational arenas, yield a working hypothesis that moral formation is most coherent when family, school, and society transmit consistent values (*adab* and *amānah*) through aligned mechanisms (*ta'wīd*/habituation, *uswah*/role modeling, *mujāhadah*/spiritual struggle). The specific contribution of this study is threefold: it separates three analytical levels—arenas, mechanisms, and core values—that prior literature tends to conflate; it operationalises al-Ghazali's classical concepts within the tri-center architecture, a systematic mapping not previously attempted in the literature reviewed (2015–2025); and it identifies the limits of the analogy, acknowledging that al-Ghazali's "society" (*al-ṣuḥbah*) is not equivalent to the complex institutional and digital environment

of the twenty-first century, and that his normative-theological telos differs from the descriptive orientation of modern ecological theories.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The corpus is restricted to three works, and the analysis depends on the authors' interpretation of Arabic primary texts; although a hermeneutic protocol was applied to mitigate presentism, the risk of reading modern structures into medieval texts cannot be entirely eliminated. No expert validation, field observation, or empirical testing has been conducted. In light of these limitations, the practical implications take the form of a research and development agenda rather than policy prescriptions: (1) expert validation of the tri-center model by specialists in Islamic education and developmental psychology; (2) operationalisation of indicators translating values and mechanisms into observable measures for each arena; (3) case-study implementation examining how the model functions in specific school–family–digital-community configurations, including pesantren, public schools, and online learning environments; and (4) outcome evaluation assessing whether consistency of moral messaging across the three arenas produces measurable differences in students' moral behaviour. Until such steps are undertaken, the model should be regarded as a promising conceptual framework awaiting empirical corroboration, not as a proven solution to contemporary moral challenges.

Declarations

Author contribution

Ahmad Iqbal Fathoni conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted primary data collection from Imam al-Ghazali's classical works, performed thematic content analysis, and drafted the original manuscript. Ahmad Barizi contributed to the methodology design, supervised the contextual interpretation process, and provided critical revision of the discussion section. Nur Syam was responsible for validating the research findings and providing scholarly input on the ecological and systemic dimensions of the tri-center framework. Mohammad Gresma Assegaf Rizqi Alhazami assisted in secondary data collection through indexed literature searches (SINTA and Scopus), contributed to the literature review on contemporary moral challenges, and ensured citation accuracy. Anas Musthofa contributed to the practical and normative implications of the study, particularly regarding educational policy recommendations, and assisted in final editing and manuscript preparation. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information or supplementary data is available for this paper, as this study is a conceptual library research based entirely on the analysis of publicly available classical texts and academic literature.

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