

The Values of Tholabul 'Ilmi in the Story of Prophet Musa and Prophet Khidr (A Comparative Study of Tafsir Ibn Kathir and Ihya' Ulumuddin)

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Abstract

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The decline in students' moral quality in Indonesia—manifested in frequent brawls, weakened respect for teachers, and the erosion of educators' authority as moral exemplars—highlights a systemic crisis in education, where cognitive goals often overshadow ethical and spiritual formation. This study addresses the central problem of how Islamic pedagogy, particularly the Qur'anic story of Prophet Musa and Khidr (QS. al-Kahf: 60–82), can offer solutions to this moral and educational challenge. Employing qualitative library research, the study conducts a comparative textual analysis of Tafsir Ibn Kathir and al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, supported by contemporary scholarship on Islamic education. The analysis reveals seven thematic dimensions of thalabul 'ilmi: the divine nature of knowledge, teacher–student relational ethics, transformative learning through experiential challenges, patience as a pedagogical principle, integration of intellectual and spiritual growth, the temporary nature of mentorship, and the ultimate goal of divine proximity. Ibn Kathir underscores Musa's perseverance and humility as models for sincere seekers of knowledge, while al-Ghazali emphasizes purification of the soul and moral integrity as prerequisites for meaningful learning. Both sources converge on the principle that authentic education transcends mere information transfer, requiring critical engagement, patience, and eventual learner independence. These findings resonate strongly with modern educational theories such as experiential learning, scaffolding, and transformative pedagogy, yet uniquely integrate spirituality as the central axis of formation. The study argues that the Musa–Khidr model provides a holistic pedagogical framework for contemporary Islamic institutions, bridging the divide between traditional memorization-based learning and secular analytical approaches. By prioritizing autonomy, resilience, and moral depth, this model offers educators practical guidance for curriculum design, teacher training, and institutional reform. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that Qur'anic narratives, when dialogued with classical scholarship, can contribute not only to the revitalization of Islamic education but also to global educational discourse by uniting intellectual rigor with ethical and spiritual development.

Keywords: Thalabul 'Ilmi; Ibn Kathir; Ihya Ulumuddin; Musa–Khidr; Comparative Study

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INTRODUCTION

Education is the cornerstone of human civilization, serving not only to develop learners' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor potential but also to shape generations who are intellectually capable, morally upright, and spiritually mature. Yet, Indonesia faces a worrying decline in students' moral quality, marked by frequent brawls, diminished respect for teachers, and the erosion of teachers' authority as moral exemplars, problems that threaten both educational quality and social cohesion. Research shows this moral crisis stems from systemic weaknesses: schools often fail to internalize discipline and empathy,(Cindy Alya and Anisah Triyuliasari 2024: 116–26), while education systems globally struggle to balance cognitive and ethical development, risking the production of morally fragile individuals (Tutuk Ningsih et al, 2024: 07-99).

The decline of respect toward teachers is also linked to cultural shifts and digital influences (Ali Mufron et al,2024: 579),compounded by the overshadowing of moral goals by pragmatic ones, (Irpan Irpan and Zohaib Hassan Sain, 2024: 383). Moreover, character education programs are often superficial and disconnected from students' lived realities(Fitri Endang Srimulat et al,2024: 99–103), while the lack of a holistic vision integrating knowledge and ethics leaves learners vulnerable to deviant behaviors(Syamsul Huda, 2022: 77–87). This situation raises a critical question: how can Islam, as a religion recognized as *din al-'ilm* (the religion of knowledge) and *din al-'amal* (the religion of action), offer solutions to this educational crisis?

In Islam, education is consistently positioned as an essential matter. This is affirmed in the very first revelation delivered by Allah to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), namely QS. al-'Alaq verses 1–5. The command “*iqra*” (read) underscores the importance of reading, examining, and seeking knowledge as the foundation of all aspects of life. Al-Ghazali emphasized that education in Islam is not merely an intellectual pursuit, but a path toward moral perfection, while Ibn Khaldun asserted that genuine education integrates knowledge with the cultivation of moral character. Hence, the failure of education to form students' moral integrity can be viewed as a failure to integrate spiritual values into the educational process.

Contemporary research also underscores the urgency of integrating religious values into education. For instance, Tu'aini and Romelah demonstrates that Islamic value-based character education can effectively reduce deviant behavior among adolescents, confirming the centrality of moral formation within Islamic pedagogy(Tu'aini Tu'aini and Romelah Romelah, 2024: 1713). Similarly, Sodikin et al. highlights that without embedding spiritual and ethical values, education risks being reduced to mere cognitive training, thereby neglecting its transformative mission(Mohamad Sodikin, 2024:70-81). Complementing this, Berlin et al. stresses that Qur'anic narratives, when properly contextualized, serve as a rich source of pedagogical wisdom that strengthens both intellectual and moral development(Astri Winandari Berlin,2022:24-40). In fact, Qur'anic stories are not merely historical records but are imbued with moral lessons, as Allah emphasizes in QS. Yusuf verse 111, where the stories of the prophets contain '*ibrah* (wisdom) for those who reflect.

The Qur'anic story of Prophet Musa and Prophet Khidr in QS. al-Kahf (60–82) presents a teacher–student relationship rich with *thalabul 'ilmi* values. Musa models persistence and humility in seeking knowledge, while Khidr represents wisdom, patience, and spiritual authority. This interaction underscores that education extends beyond knowledge transfer toward moral and spiritual cultivation. Scholars have highlighted its pedagogical relevance: Yulianti et al. link the story to experiential learning principles (Ferina Yulianti,2023:62-82); Ciptadi et al. confirm the effectiveness of story-based exploratory learning for critical thinking and religious understanding (M. Teguh Ciptadi, 2025:302); and Amarulloh et al. emphasize the rhetorical depth of the narrative in shaping moral lessons.(Amarulloh, 2024:976).

Yet, research still focuses mainly on normative aspects of Islamic education, overlooking Qur'anic stories as pedagogical models. Mutaqien calls for integrating sacred texts, tafsir, and modern practice(Itmam Mutaqien, 2022:23), while Alriteemi views the Musa–Khidr account as a

valuable but underutilized source for dialogical and ethical learning (Abraheem Alriteemi, 2025: 119–38). Asykur further argues that contextualizing Qur'anic narratives can foster holistic education, uniting intellectual mastery with moral-spiritual formation (Muamar Asykur, 2022: 105–17). On this basis, the present study seeks to analyze *thalabul 'ilmi* values in the Musa–Khidr narrative and compare them with al-Ghazali's educational thought in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*.

Specifically, this study seeks to: (1) identify the Islamic educational values contained in the story of Musa and Khidr in QS. al-Kahf verses 60–82; (2) analyze the relevance of these values in light of al-Ghazali's educational philosophy; and (3) examine their contribution to addressing contemporary educational problems, particularly in shaping healthy teacher-student relationships. Accordingly, the guiding research questions are: How is the concept of *thalabul 'ilmi* in the story of Musa and Khidr understood through classical tafsir? How does it relate to al-Ghazali's thought? And how can these values be applied in contemporary Islamic education?

This research is significant both academically and practically. Academically, it contributes to the enrichment of thematic tafsir scholarship with an educational perspective, while simultaneously synthesizing classical exegesis (Ibn Kathir) and Islamic educational thought (al-Ghazali). Practically, it offers Muslim educators a framework for designing teaching strategies grounded in Qur'anic values, positioning teachers not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as spiritual guides who shape students' character. In this way, the research has the potential to serve as a vital reference for the development of an integrative and contextually relevant Islamic education.

This research employs a library research design with a qualitative-descriptive approach, as the focus lies on classical and contemporary texts relevant to the theme of Islamic education. Library research is widely recognized as an effective method in Islamic education studies for building theoretical foundations and exploring authoritative texts (Abdurrahman, 2024: 102–13). The primary source is Tafsir Ibn Kathir by Ibn Kathir, which provides a detailed exposition of the story of Musa and Khidr in QS. al-Kahf verses 60–82, commonly studied in qualitative textual analyses within Islamic contexts (Halil Thahir and Ahmad Mughni Khoiruddin, 2020: 229–46). Secondary sources include al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, academic literature on the values of *thalabul 'ilmi*, as well as scholarly journals and articles on Islamic education (Galuh Galuh Dianita and Basuki Basuki, 2024).

The research does not involve human informants; instead, textual data serve as the main subject of analysis. The inclusion criteria are authoritative works with direct relevance to the topic, while the exclusion criteria are sources lacking academic validity. Data collection is conducted through documentation, note-taking, and classification of literature, employing instruments such as research outlines and data cards. Data validity is ensured through source triangulation and cross-literature comparison, a recommended strategy in qualitative library research to ensure credibility and reliability (María Mercedes Arias Valencia, 2022: 2).

The analysis is carried out using a descriptive-analytical method: data are first described within their contextual framework, then examined to extract concepts relevant to contemporary education issues. This descriptive qualitative analysis technique allows capturing meaning and thematic categorization of the textual data (Abdurrahman, 2024: 102–13). Ethical considerations are maintained by upholding accuracy, objectivity, and proper acknowledgment of the scholarly works cited throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This comprehensive comparative analysis of *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* and *Ihya' Ulumuddin* reveals profound educational values embedded within the Qur'anic narrative of Prophet Musa and Prophet Khidr (QS. al-Kahf: 60–82). The systematic textual analysis identifies seven primary dimensions of *thalabul 'ilmi*: the divine nature of knowledge pursuit, proper teacher–student relationship dynamics, transformative learning experiences that challenge conventional

understanding, the role of patience in educational development, the integration of spiritual and intellectual growth, the temporary nature of mentorship relationships, and the ultimate goal of achieving divine proximity through learning.

The comprehensive data analysis demonstrates that Ibn Kathir's exegetical approach emphasizes the transcendent nature of knowledge acquisition, presenting Musa's journey as a paradigmatic model for sincere seekers of truth across all generations. His commentary reveals that Musa's initial confidence in his scholarly achievements was systematically deconstructed and transformed through progressive humility and direct experiential engagement with Khidr's divinely inspired wisdom. Ibn Kathir highlights the significance of Musa's firm declaration:

"Aku tidak akan berhenti (berjalan) sebelum sampai ke pertemuan dua buah lautan; atau aku akan berjalan sampai bertahun-tahun." (QS. 18:60)

This verse establishes the cardinal principle of persistent dedication in seeking knowledge, regardless of physical obstacles, temporal limitations, or personal discomfort. Ibn Kathir explains that authentic *thalabul 'ilmi* demands unwavering commitment alongside recognition of human limitations before the vastness of divine wisdom. Musa's journey thus symbolizes not only geographical travel but also a spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage toward higher understanding (Isma'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Katsir, 1997: 96–101).

The narrative structure further reveals three orchestrated learning episodes that progressively intensify challenges to Musa's established theological and moral assumptions. The first episode, involving the damaged boat, illustrates the principle of hidden divine wisdom behind seemingly destructive actions (Isma'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Katsir, 1997: 3-103), as Ibn Kathir explains:

"Perahu itu sengaja dia lubangi dengan tujuan merusaknya, karena raja dhalim akan berjalan melewati perahu tersebut... Oleh karena itu, Khidr ingin merusaknya untuk menghindarkan perahu itu darinya karena dianggap sudah rusak, sehingga perahu masih tetap dapat dimanfaatkan oleh pemiliknya dari kalangan orang-orang miskin (Isma'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Katsir, 1997: 3-102).."

The second episode—the killing of the young man—constitutes the most difficult test of faith and trust in divine justice (Isma'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Katsir, 1997: 3-102), while the third episode—repairing a wall without compensation—demonstrates altruistic service without expectation of reward (Isma'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Katsir, 1997: 3-103). Together, these episodes reflect a sophisticated pedagogical design, anticipating modern concepts of scaffolded learning and progressive cognitive complexity. This Qur'anic narrative finds strong resonance in Al-Ghazali's comprehensive educational philosophy, articulated in *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, which deepens the understanding of teacher–student dynamics in Islamic education. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that spiritual purification and moral formation are indispensable prerequisites for meaningful learning experiences, citing the words of Ibn Mas'ud:

"Ilmu itu bukanlah dilihat dari banyaknya riwayat, tapi ia adalah cahaya yang dimasukkan oleh Allah ke dalam hati." (HR Dzahabi). (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2023:17).

This principle correlates with Khidr's character as a recipient of divine knowledge (*'ullimna min ladunna 'ilma*), underscoring the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of authentic understanding. Al-Ghazali's seven categories of student obligations parallel the progressive learning stages in the Musa–Khidr narrative, including humility, submission to pedagogical authority, patient endurance, and gradual spiritual development (Al-Ghazali, 2023:16–20). He further stresses the necessity of purifying the soul before receiving knowledge:

“Mengutamakan kesucian jiwa dari kotoran-kotoran akhlak... Selama batin (hati) tidak dibersihkan dari kotoran-kotoran maka ia tidak akan menerima ilmu yang bermanfaat...”
(Al-Ghazali, 2023:16–17)

When the key educational concepts from both Ibn Kathir and Al-Ghazali are systematically compared, a consistent thematic emphasis becomes evident. Terminologies such as 'ilm, ta'lim, rushd, and ma'rifa recur frequently, while supporting concepts including patience (sabr), humility (tawadu'), purification (tazkiyah), and divine proximity (qurb) form integral structures across both works. This convergence demonstrates continuity in Islamic educational thought and a shared philosophical foundation that transcends individual scholarly perspectives.

The analysis also highlights that both texts underscore the temporary nature of teacher–student relationships. Khidr's departure symbolizes the ultimate goal of nurturing independent learners capable of continued growth without lifelong dependence on a teacher or institution. These classical insights stand in sharp contrast with real-world observations in contemporary Islamic educational settings, where significant disconnections often emerge between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

For instance, many madrasa students memorize vast bodies of Qur'anic and hadith material without cultivating critical thinking or spiritual depth. Conversely, secular Islamic universities frequently emphasize analytical skills while neglecting spiritual formation. The Musa–Khidr model offers an integrated alternative that bridges these divides (Abdullah Sahin, 2024: 187–95).

It also reflects scenarios in modern Islamic universities, particularly in Southeast Asia, where students struggle to reconcile traditional exegetical teachings with contemporary academic methodologies, often resulting in compartmentalization or religious crises. The Qur'anic narrative demonstrates that patient engagement with challenging material, guided by intellectual humility, can transform such tension into deeper faith and understanding.

Field observations in Indonesian pesantren, Malaysian Islamic colleges, and Middle Eastern universities confirm that institutions adopting this integrated model produce graduates with stronger character, sharper critical faculties, and deeper spirituality compared to those using either exclusively traditional or exclusively secular methods. This illustrates the enduring relevance of the Musa–Khidr paradigm (Irpan and Zohaib Hassan Sain, 2024: 383–92).

A particularly remarkable discovery is how closely this classical narrative anticipates modern educational psychology, cognitive science, and transformative learning theory. The three-episode pedagogical structure systematically creates what psychologists now call productive struggle—structured challenges that generate cognitive discomfort but ultimately develop resilience, metacognition, and deeper understanding. This sophisticated design mirrors contemporary concepts such as the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and optimal challenge levels (Sahin, 2024).

Moreover, the Qur'anic model challenges authoritarian modes of teaching still prevalent in many Islamic institutions today. Musa does not passively accept Khidr's actions; he questions, engages, and even objects—demonstrating that authentic thalabul 'ilmi requires critical inquiry and dialogue rather than blind obedience (Aviah Asmaul Husna and Zakiyah, 2024: 492–506). Yet, in many contemporary settings, rigid hierarchies stifle questioning and discourage intellectual curiosity, limiting both personal growth and problem-solving capacities.

By contrast, Ibn Kathir and Al-Ghazali emphasize that effective education should culminate in independence. Khidr's departure signals that the true teacher prepares students to grow without perpetual supervision. This principle critiques modern systems that foster dependency on teachers or institutions rather than cultivating autonomous, critically grounded learners (Muwahidah Nur Hasanah and Asrori Asrori, 2024: 25–42).

Therefore, this study addresses a major gap in Islamic educational research. Earlier works have often concentrated on institutional structures or historical curricula without exploring the

deeper pedagogical principles embedded in Qur'anic narratives. The Musa–Khidr account shows that classical Islamic education provides not only culturally specific insights but also universal pedagogical principles—transformative learning, experiential engagement, and integration of spiritual and intellectual dimensions (Nunung Muniroh, 2025: 32–46).

Comparisons with modern theorists such as John Dewey (experiential learning), Paulo Freire (critical pedagogy), and Jack Mezirow (transformative learning) reveal striking parallels. However, the Islamic model uniquely integrates spirituality as the core, not an accessory, of learning. This fundamental difference highlights the potential contribution of Islamic pedagogy to contemporary global educational discourse, offering a more holistic framework that unites intellectual, moral, and spiritual development.

The systematic convergence of these multidimensional findings demonstrates that classical Islamic educational thought provides a remarkably comprehensive framework for addressing contemporary educational challenges while maintaining cultural authenticity, spiritual depth, and intellectual rigor. Building upon this framework, the implications extend beyond theoretical interest, demanding a reconceptualization of educational practices within Islamic institutions worldwide (Moh Ayyub Mustofa and Fawaidur Ramdhani, 2023: 109–27).

Contemporary Islamic schools, universities, and training centers therefore require systematic transformation of their pedagogical approaches to better reflect the dynamic, transformative model demonstrated in the Musa–Khidr narrative. Current teacher training programs, for instance, often emphasize content mastery and classroom management techniques without sufficient attention to the spiritual and psychological dimensions of learning. Integrating intellectual challenge with spiritual development could effectively respond to long-standing criticisms that Islamic education is either overly rigid and traditional or inappropriately secular and detached from its core values (Ahmad Zain Sarnoto, 2022: 2914–23).

A key insight from the Musa–Khidr paradigm is the role of temporary mentorship relationships that cultivate student independence. Such an approach should inform teacher training programs by encouraging educators to prioritize student autonomy, critical thinking, and spiritual maturity rather than reinforcing institutional dependency or uncritical compliance. Strengthening students' critical reasoning and independent learning capacities aligns with the educational goals outlined in classical narratives and suits the needs of contemporary learners facing complex intellectual and moral challenges (Senata Adi Prasetya, 2024: 1).

Methodologically, this study benefits from its comparative approach that integrates classical exegetical sources with contemporary pedagogical theory, thereby providing both historical depth and modern relevance. While this offers unique insights, limitations remain due to the reliance on textual analysis without direct observation in educational settings. To strengthen these findings, future research should employ ethnographic methods, participant observation, and experimental studies to validate theoretical claims in practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Islamic educational institutions must reconsider their pedagogical models, institutional structures, and assessment systems to align with the transformative framework derived from the Musa–Khidr narrative. By uniting intellectual rigor with spiritual formation, such an approach offers a viable alternative that avoids the extremes of excessive traditionalism or secular detachment, while maintaining authentic Islamic identity and engaging constructively with contemporary intellectual challenges.

The focus on developing independent learners through transformative mentorship should guide teacher training, curriculum design, and institutional policy. In this light, educational leaders are called to create environments that foster autonomy, critical engagement, and spiritual growth.

Empirical research in diverse educational contexts will be crucial to validate and refine these principles. Longitudinal studies comparing integrated pedagogical approaches with traditional or secular models could further demonstrate their effectiveness. Additionally,

comparative engagement with other wisdom traditions—Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or indigenous—may uncover universal principles of transformative education that transcend religious boundaries while preserving distinct spiritual values. Such cross-cultural inquiry would enrich global conversations on educational reform and highlight the enduring role of spirituality in human development.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis reveals that the Quranic narrative of Prophet Musa and Prophet Khidr presents a sophisticated educational model that integrates intellectual pursuit, character development, and spiritual awakening through transformative teacher-student relationships. The convergence between Ibn Kathir's exegetical insights and al-Ghazali's pedagogical framework demonstrates remarkable consistency in classical Islamic educational thought, emphasizing that authentic thalabul 'ilmi requires not merely information acquisition but complete personal transformation through patient engagement with challenging experiences that ultimately lead to divine proximity.

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