



Critical Pedagogy in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali and Paulo Freire: A Comparative Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.4.1023.102609>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to compare two main schools of thought: the Islamic school of critical thought which is based on the philosophical teachings of the significant medieval Muslim philosopher Al-Ghazali and the contemporary critical school of thought, which is based on the work of the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire. The study is qualitative and it employs a content analysis of both scholars' works, with the purpose of drawing commonalities and differences between the two traditions.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali Critical Pedagogy, Freire and Al-Ghazali, Islamic Critical Pedagogy, Islamic Educational Thought, Comparative Education, Critical Theory

Introduction

Since the past, the purpose, meaning and implications of education are critical elements that have inspired worldwide philosophers and educators' curiosity and creativity. Indeed, Medieval Muslim scholars wrote widely on teacher's education, curriculum development and the goals and objectives of education. Those scholars attempted to approach the issue of pedagogy and teachers' education with the foundational idea that human being is the vicegerent of God and center of universe. Hence social justice promotion is the driving force behind any kind of pedagogical work in Islamic tradition. Based on this principle and vision, Muslim philosophers since ancient times have attempted to associate education with 'tazkiyah' or critical self-development, with the potential to transform individuals to be agents of change.

In this context, Al-Jahiz placed teachers as the champions and leaders of society in his book, *The Book of Teachers* (Kitab al-Muallimin). Besides, Ibn Sina in his work (*Kitab al-Siyasa*) called for cooperative learning and peer to peer interaction. Also, Ibn Sahnoun, the pioneer in teacher's education in Islamic history asked teachers to challenge the mind of students, with the goal to build their critical capacities in his book (*Adab al-Muallimun*), Rules of Conduct for Teachers. Similarly, Al-Qabisi, who was influenced by his countryman Ibn Sahnoun, insisted on the teaching and the empowerment of girls.

Also Ibn Hazm in his major work *Tawq al-Hamamah* (the Ring of the Dove) was a supporter of student-led learning and a rational act of liberating the learner from any intellectual authority in dealing with knowledge and the text. Along with that many Muslim scholars who wrote on education such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Khadoun, Ibn Abd Al-Baar, Ibn Jamaah, Ibn Miskawaih, Al-Qurtubi, At-Tussi and more were all supporter of an education that builds the leadership character of the learner to be assigned what is called Al-Amanah or responsibility as God's representative or vicegerent on the earth.

However, contemporary critical pedagogy is influenced by the Frankfurt school of thought. It emphasizes a modality of learning that illuminates, liberates, empowers and enfranchise people from any social or political restrictions. This principle of education is compatible with Islamic pedagogy, oriented to free the human mind from any superstitious thought, dogma or other kinds of exploitation. Islamic pedagogy as fostered particularly by medieval Muslim educators and philosophers is to enlighten the path for self-development, freedom and social justice.

However, the shared values by both traditions need careful examination, particularly by exploring the work of their eminent leaders Al-Ghazali with reference to his influential books on the field of pedagogy such as *Ehya' Ulum E-Deen* (Revival of Religious Sciences), *Kimiya-yi sa'adat*, (the Alchemy of Happiness), *Tahaful Al-Falasifah* (the Incoherence of the Philosophers), *Ayyuha Al Walad* (Oh Student), *Al-Munqid min Al-Dalal* (Rescuer From Error) and Freire and his major work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Methodology

The study is qualitative study. It employs a content analysis of both scholars' works, with the purpose of drawing commonalities and differences between the two traditions. The study is an attempt to understand how the concept of critical pedagogy is approached and interpreted by two different schools.

Critical pedagogy as a concept deals with educational problems and crises, hence this study would contribute to understanding different practices of critical pedagogy, with the potential to enhance best practices in contemporary education. The study asks the question: to what extent Al-Ghazali and Freire's perspectives on critical pedagogy are related including their conceptualization of political pedagogy.

Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali's full name is Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad at-Ṭūsiyy al-Ġazzālīy. He was born in c. 1058 in Tus, a town in the north of Iran. He was a philosopher, jurist, Sufi and theologian. Al-Ghazali is one of the great scholars of Islam in philosophy, education and other fields. Al-Ghazali was also known for his Professorship at the *Madrasah* (University) of Nizhamiyah Baghdad (Zaini, 2017). Al-Ghazali's life was not simple and he was actively involved in the political, religious and spiritual life of the Caliphate (Kirabaev & Al-Janabi, 2019).

Freire

Freire's full name is Paulo Reglus Neves Freire and was born in 1921 in Recife, the north of Brazil. Freire was a Professor of History and Philosophy of Education in the University of Recife. Paulo was imprisoned in the 1964 coup d'état, accused of subversive elements in his teaching. Upon exile in Chile Paulo Freire was able to return to Brazil by 1979. He was one of the most significant philosophers of education of the twentieth century, with a focus on the education of the poor and eradicating illiteracy among individuals from previously colonized nations (Gerhardt, 2000).

Goals of education

Educational goals within Al-Ghazali's reformative project include three aspects: cognitive aspects, affective aspects, and spiritual/psychomotor aspects. For Al-Ghazali cognitive aspects might include cognitive development like intelligence and thinking ability. Affective aspects are concerned with the development of the heart, such as the development of the senses. The spiritual and psychomotor aspects in Al-Ghazali's education thoughts also place emphasis on the physical development of the child. Physical development for Al-Ghazali includes collaborative games, physical health and skills (Asrorun Niam Sholeh, 2004).

Al-Ghazali connected learning to morals and character building along with attitude and behavior change. Al-Ghazali's philosophy of education gives more emphasis to the development of moral and social values which are in line with Paulo's educational ideas that the goal of education is to build the agency and character of the student. Freire along with his focus on the character education and agency building of the learner, he is much concerned with social and the political transformation of learning, with the emphasis on the critical consciences. Thus, the primary objective of Paulo's education is assisting in understanding and overcoming the social structures contributing to people's oppression and exploitation.

Freire's reformative pedagogic project is the establishment of a critical instructional approach, an inquiry pedagogy centered on earners' experiences as the starting point for teaching and learning. Freire perceives education as an instrument of liberation to overcome domination, with the hope to change the political system and the inequalities within the society. Accordingly, Freire's philosophy of education is meant to transform, with reference to 'conscientization' or critical consciousness which is "a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural and economic context that influence and shape their lives" (Dirx, 1998, p.3). Based on Freire's critical pedagogy, schools should not only serve as sources for fostering critical thinking among students, but also incubators for promoting ways inspiring learners to take action and change their surrounding environments.

Al-Ghazali's theory of education is rooted in the Islamic philosophy that human being is the vicegerent of God, with implications of developing the character and morals, allowing the individuals to foster social justice and equality. In Al-Ghazali's understanding, it is the spirit of human being that caused Man this superiority over all other creatures, with the title God's vicegerent and representative on the earth. For Al-Ghazali only through reason and religion people can fulfill this task designed to man. It is noted that religion in Islamic philosophy is often associated with morals education, with reference to Al-Hadith: "I was sent to uphold and complement ethical values." Indeed, Al-Ghazali's philosophy to be compatible with this role assigned to Man as the center of universe invested in the utility of learning philosophy, with the conviction that the objective of education is to prepare learners for societal tasks, equipped with both theoretical and practical knowledge to transform their communities.

Al-Ghazali as a philosopher was also influenced by Greek philosophy, particularly cognitive skepticism and rationality of freedom in thought. Al-Ghazali educational project questioned existing pedagogies and educational ideas that centered on imitation and free from any questions of innovation. Al-Ghazali's cognitive driven thinking inspired him to renovate the curriculum, with recommendations for focusing on pedagogical tasks that put critical thinking and reason at the heart of the pedagogy. Hence the concept of self-training or 'tazkiyah' journey is equipped with the necessary instructional strategies to train the self to reach a higher status of criticality (self-development), far away from being imprisoned by uncritical mind or appetitive self.

Freire on the other hand with more influence by Marxist driven research and Frankfurt school educational thoughts was more concerned to find meaningful connections between pedagogy and liberation from hegemony and exploitation. The learner, according to Freire, should be intellectually able to determine existing inequalities in the society and address them freely, with no fear of being judged. Freire criticized the banking education model, allowing no hope of generating critical learners and agents of change and instead he suggested problem based education as an effective method, with the potential to transform the student.

In a nutshell, Al-Ghazali grew up as a philosopher and theologian, thus he presented education as a tool for 'tazkiyah' and critical self-training. On the other hand, Freire's education project was a byproduct and reflection of his miserable life affected by neoliberal and authoritarian regime. Hence, his philosophy calls for rethinking school's role, with a focus on its political dimension toward freedom and social justice.

Inclusive learning

Inclusive education was a major concern of both thinkers' educational philosophies. Freire and Al-Ghazali emphasized the creation of a safe learning and an education of plurality. Al-Ghazali's classroom challenges bias and ensures inclusiveness by dealing fairly with all students regardless of their social backgrounds. For example, Al-Ghazali insisted that young learners should not be allowed to boast to their peers about their parent's material goods or the food they eat, including their clothes and accessories. Those principles echo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where disadvantaged people are given a safe space to study without being afraid of being judged. Al-Ghazali asked teachers to deal with students as their own kids, caring for them and dealing with them in complete fairness. Al-Ghazali's pedagogy established a relational environment led by the teacher's compassion which ensures psychological comfort ushering student's inner to meaningful learning that transforms their character and community.

Al-Ghazali strived to create a supportive educational environment that provides the foundation for emotional, physical, and academic wellness where students can rely on the teacher and each other and clearly express themselves. Along with that Al-Ghazali was careful to take into consideration the learner's different capacities and knowledge level while respecting their space by adopting the mentorship based learning, a method between learner centered and teacher centered approach.

To implement this method, Al-Ghazali asked teachers to step back and let the learners do the task themselves and only step-in when needed. The mentorship based methodology was out of his understanding that learners need to be let alone to develop student-led learning which makes the classroom more of a community, encouraging both independent and mutual learning. Keeping a safe physical distance allows students to lead their learning and build a community of practice. Also Al-Ghazali reminds teachers that education is not for making money but for helping students to improve.

Thus to Al-Ghazali's understanding, teachers are social change agents not inspired by money but by a noble goal; individuals who want to apply for this profession should make sacrifices and joy at a high level of responsibility, humility and professionalism. Al-Ghazali's in this context is not to oppress educators' economic rights, but more about the commercialization of knowledge (Putra, 2017; Zaini, 2017).

Similarly, Freire, through his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* called for a democratic education where students from all backgrounds are allowed to work collectively to reflect on social inequalities, with the aim to promote social change. For Paulo, critical pedagogy is an opportunity for people to express their concerns freely without fear of being judged, which is similar to Al-Ghazali's teachers' code of ethics. The humanistic focused approach inspired both educators to develop a modality of learning that it is conducive to inclusiveness and plurality in education

Curriculum

Freire and Al-Ghazali share the same pedagogical perspective concerning connecting theory to practice. Freire's perspective on pedagogy is clearly influenced by pragmatism and its leaders such as Peirce, Dewey, Kolb and Piaget, with emphasis on 'learning by doing', the idea that students can learn best by actively engaging with the material rather than being given a listening and memorizing task. That's for Freire any pedagogical manifestation should be supported by practice (Freire, 1970).

On the other hand Al-Ghazali was a strong opponent of rote learning, urging for incorporating a new innovative mode of learning that combines the practical side of learning with the theoretical knowledge. Along with his focus on hybrid learning modality to transform learners, he attempted to classify education into two clusters: theory which includes religion & morals and practice part which encompasses economics, social sciences and political sciences. Based on this classification of knowledge, Al-Ghazali attempted to create a nexus for learning, placing the learner at the centre of this learning process.

Al-Ghazali during his time was seen as a pioneer, calling for adopting a new mode of learning that exposes learners to a new version of learning based on experiential learning. Al-Ghazali continually argued that some harmony and balance should be made between science and practice in order to reach pedagogical goals. In this context he said:

"Some connection should be established between science and practice adding piety to them.....and these are the individuals enjoying enough perception and awareness through which they can reach the science peaks and their nature have capacity to receive and accept piety" (Ghazali, 1955, p. 77-78).

Freire's problem posing learning

Freire's philosophy of education is meant to help learners become self-sufficient rather than ready-made. Therefore, the curriculum should be oriented towards freeing learners and making them individuals of cultivation rather than adaptation. Paulo criticized the traditional approach of education through the metaphor 'banking education' where learners are oppressed, voiceless and unable to contribute to learning. On the other hand, the teacher is the main subject of the learning process, while students are only minor characters in this story (Freire, 1970).

Freire suggested emancipation education, with a focus on Socratic questioning and higher order thinking. Both teacher and students should contribute to learning through dialogue where students are able to reflect on their oppressed situation. Freire attacked traditional pedagogy which is one-way interaction, alienating students' role and contribution while providing fewer opportunities for active and meaningful learning. The learning relies much on memorization of the contents, without any room for creative thinking or exploring self-actualizing opportunities.

Teacher learner interaction

Al-Ghazali draws much attention to the climate in which teaching and learning takes place, and the kinds of relations that are desirable in the learning community. For Al-Ghazali the teacher is not a transmitter of knowledge but a model and example, with great influence on his student and the community as whole. Al-Ghazali outlined a number of qualities a teacher should have. Those qualities are in the form of skills, attitudes and dispositions. First, teachers should be deeply committed to their profession with a high sense of responsibility and a true role model by practicing what they teach. Besides, teachers' work is not limited to the teaching of a particular subject; rather, it should encompass all aspects of the personality and life of the kid. Al-Ghazali was not a supporter of using force or corporal punishment, but rather incorporating more creative ways that are based on love and affection. In this sense, teachers are asked to deal with their students as their own kids, with the potential to understand their different needs.

Teachers in the Al-Ghazali reforming project should protect the dignity of the students and should not shame students through direct criticism; rather they should teach through examples and suggestions. The teacher should be flexible with every student, teaching them according to their competence and needs. In this sense, teachers are asked to estimate the comprehension of their students and not be given instructional tasks that are beyond their logic of understanding to prevent any learning frustration. Al-Ghazali also draws to attention the great importance of breaks, games and physical education for young learners, with the goal for refreshing and enhancing their motivation to learning. For Al-Ghazali, the learning climate should be enjoyable and child-friendly environment; hence the curricular and the teacher timetables need to take account other student's needs.

The student, in turn, has a duty to consider the teacher as a father, to whom he owes obedience and respect. In this context, Al-Ghazali outlined a number of learners' duties in his work, *Ya Ayoha Alwalad* (Ah Student) towards their teachers and education. Unlike Al-Ghazali who sees that students should show obedience to their teachers even when they make mistakes, Freire breaks this by inviting a new paradigm in education that does not see teachers as an all-knowing source of knowledge.

For Paulo even teachers' knowledge should also be questioned; hence the classroom is a space for dialogue and reciprocal learning, with no omnipresent intellectual authority. However, Al-Ghazali's educational theory perceives the child as a blank slate which is compatible with 17th-century philosopher John Locke's idea of *tabula rasa*. Al-Ghazala was influenced by (Hadith Al-fitra) which confirms the influence empiricism in the upbringing of the child. Nevertheless, Freire opposes this insisting that learners bring with them some experiences and knowledge that may contribute to the learning process.

Corporative learning

Al-Ghazali views various people's role as necessary in influencing a child's moral development, especially the parents, peers, and teachers. Al-Ghazali classroom was a support of peer to peer interaction and student led learning. Al-Ghazali asked teachers to step back and let the learners do the task themselves and only step-in when needed. The mentorship based methodology was out of his understanding that learners need to be let alone to develop Student-led learning which makes the classroom more of a community, encouraging both independent and mutual learning. Al-Ghazali also emphasized peer to peer learning but more outside the class, with reference to companionship. Al-Ghazali attached this role to parents' task, with reference to observation which is meant to reform the child's behavior and actions.

For Al-Ghazali learning does not only take place in the classroom, but also outside drawing attention to the potentially pernicious influence of the children's comrades on their character. Thus children should be peered with intelligent individuals who enjoy high quality morals. Al-Ghazali believes that comrades are part of the learning process thus the character of the child is not only built by the teacher but also by their colleagues. Al-Ghazali also insisted on games and physical education which is a high level of peer to peer interaction. For Al-Ghazali even games and physical education are part of the learning process, helping the learner to refresh and acquire new energy for the next instructional tasks.

Along with some previous Muslim scholars such as Ibn Sahnoun and Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi also addressed peer to peer learning. Ibn Sahnoun who is known for his scholarship on teacher's education in Islam education history pointed to peer to peer interaction in the classroom and collaborative learning. Ibn Sahnoun in his book *Adab al-Muallimun*, (Rules of Conduct for Teachers) argued that this approach is effective with large classes, for teachers cannot reach all students, particularly in the teaching of Quran recitation. Similarly, Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi, a thirteenth-century Sufi poet, repudiated the formal madrasa education and called for emancipation based teaching with the potential to help knowledge seekers liberate themselves (Hassani, 2020).

Critical thinking & active learning

Al-Ghazali was a strong adversary of imitative based learning, with question to any knowledge is a byproduct of imitation. Al-Ghazali connects imitation to blindness and insists that anybody who seeks to follow an imitator is in fact following a blind person (Ghazali, 1996,p. 50 as cited in Mahmoudi et al, 2014). Al-Ghazali was inspired by a mode of learning that stimulates doubt and inquiry. Al-Ghazali was more influenced by Socratic questioning methodology on which any matter should be treated with some doubt. Al-Ghazali argued:

“If there is nothing, in these words, causing you to feel doubt about whichever belief you have inherited, you will gain no benefit from them; since one who has no doubt has not attempted to think, and one who does not think does not see, one who does not see reminds in mere blindness and goes astray (Ghazali, 1996, p. 163). Al-Ghazali also addressed critical thinking in education by urging teachers to take into account learners’ different capacities, insisting implicitly on differentiating instructions and teaching styles. Along with that teachers should pay attention to the classification of learners, with the support of teaching materials and instructional strategies that meet learners’ level of reasoning abilities (Gade, 2018; Hermawan, 2017; Khairani, 2012; Soussi, 2016).

Paulo insisted on a learner centered approach to learning by inventing problem posed learning, with reference to inquiry based method of instruction. To some extent, Al-Ghazali supported learner centered approach to learning calling for teachers to step back letting learners do the things by themselves, but Al-Ghazali’ approach differs in reminding teachers to break this approach from time to time when teacher centered approach is needed. He implicitly asked teachers to apply reflective practice and know what approach needed in the right context.

Freire’s education & politics

Critical pedagogy evolves as a result of the dissatisfaction of the inequalities perpetuated by traditional pedagogy in education. Traditional pedagogy perpetuates the social reproduction of class and promotes social inequalities through schooling practices. Critical pedagogy as a philosophy of education perceives teaching as a political act while rejecting “the neutrality of knowledge, and insist that issues of social justice and democracy itself are not distinct from acts of teaching and learning” (Giroux 2003). Thus for Freire pedagogical theory is always political and connected to the acquisition of agency in how knowledge, identities, and authority are constructed. Freire sees that under the reign of neoliberalism and authoritarian politics, education becomes an object of oppression and hegemony, and a tool of deskilling students, with no hope of producing a generation of students able to recognize themselves as critical citizens and agents of change.

Freire lived in a society in which everything was affected by politics and political changes of the time. With a change in politics, the pedagogical system underwent some change as well. From Freire’s perspective pedagogy in any given society is a complete political ministry. Pedagogy is in favor of the benefits of the dominant political class, and it is in favor of the people’s benefits in a revolutionary society (Freire, 1970). Thus pedagogy is connected to politics. This indeed was not a new project but reinventing Plato’s argumentation, with the implications for a society presenting an image of unity or universal discipline in which politics and pedagogy would be as twins (Olic’, 1997, p. 9).

Freire incorporated pedagogy into the politics domain, with the hope that people would be aware of and restore their compressed rights. Pedagogy is source for awakening their consciousness to break the status quo make some change in the society in which they are oppressed. Paulo opposes the subjection to the status quo and its supporters including teachers; thus criticality and clash of ideas are the bridge towards liberation and reaching the ultimate goal of learning which is social justice. He did not accept any education of adaptation or normalization, but called for a new mode of learning that activates critical thinking and questing. Classroom is the space toward liberation for subjugation via the implementation of a pedagogy allowing the saturation of war of ideas and different perspectives. The classroom is the setting for reciprocal learning between teacher and student; there is no ruling power or intellectual authority in the class. Learning should transform learners to be agents of change. The last stage of learning is societal transformation.

However, liberation for Paulo is more related to disrupting the status quo, with more orientation towards criticizing the political system with no fear of being revenged by the regime (Roberts, 1998, p. 67). Paulo’ liberation is clearly articulated as a social liberation with reference to conscientization which is the awareness of the power dynamics that are keeping a person, or people oppressed.

Al-Ghazali’s political pedagogy

Al-Ghazali used his well-known metaphor, Politics of the Heart in his book *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm ad-Dīn (Revival of the Religious Science)* to address epistemological and pedagogical questions. Al-Ghazali connected epistemological questions with politics, for the power of political language not only in describing the epistemological journey, but its influence in guiding individuals to recognize how knowledge, power dynamic and change are constructed. It is implicitly inferred that knowledge construction and politics are interrelated elements in Al-Ghazali’s conceptualization.

However, human ontology to Al-Ghazali’s understanding is made of mind, body and soul and the spiritual heart is part of the soul. For Al-Ghazali moral education is located in the heart not in the brain; the heart is the supreme command and the center of human beings’ thoughts and actions. Any kind of moral education is generated first in the heart then moved to the body and finally realized through tangible actions.

Al-Ghazali depicted the transformation of the heart through three stages.

The first stage is the appetitive self which is the subjugation and slavery stage. This is the lowest state of human beings where reason is subjected to appetite-self. The subjugation to the dictatorship of the appetitive self which is the ruling power in the heart. The heart in such a state lives under the evil power of the self, closing any window for higher order thinking.

The second stage which is the most important stage is the critical stage. It is a stage of disrupting the status quo by opening a new channel for thinking and questioning. It is the moment of questioning and analyzing. It is a period shaped by dialectic interaction and clashes between two dominant powers, appetitive self and critical self. This stage is the starting point for a war of liberation for critical self and a battle of regaining influences by the appetitive self. Reason in this phase, gradually becomes the interim ruling power and a juridical reference. This phase is the thermometer of measuring ideas, events

and behaviors through reflection, dialogue or rather monologue. The body is affected by this war of attrition caused by both sides. It is a transitory stage between subjugation and liberation.

The last stage indeed is the 'content self,' the well trained self. It is the phase where reason completely controls the self and human behavior. It is the last itinerary in the epistemological journey of the learner. Al-Ghazali was not a supporter of killing completely the appetitive self but he was more concerned with only controlling and limiting its influence.

Al-Ghazali argued that the existence of the appetitive self is healthy, though it should not be let free; it must be subjugated to power of reason and rationality. Harmony between appetitive self and reason brings peace and success; a healthy heart is a heart controlled by reason. The heart is synonymous to the self in Al-Ghazali's conceptualization and it is the ruler of the body.

According to Al-Ghazali, people keep changing, depending on the status of the heart. Thus human beings are subjected to a constant conflict between reason and irrationality of desire. For Al-Ghazali this conflict is needed and useful for human's development and progress. Al-Ghazali's philosophical ideas mirror Freire's dialectical relation between reflection, action and transformation.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazali and Freire were both able to explain their ideas with descriptive language and powerful imagery. Both scholars used politics to advance their education ideas. Al-Ghazali utilized the heart and body and action, while Friere used school, society and action. For Freire school is the most important place for building a learner's agency, with the potential to transform the individuals and their communities. Freire and Al-Ghazali insisted on the transformation through the implementation of criticality and freedom of thought.

Al-Ghazali and Freire called for new models for reforming education. They approached the concept of education, agency building and social transformation differently. However, both scholars connected pedagogy to politics, though through different words and imagery. Dialectical interaction was a major element in both scholars' work of transformative education.

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