The Concept of Moral Education for University Students: A Study of al-Buzaidi's Book al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah

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Abstract

Moral excellence (akhlak) holds paramount significance in Islam, serving as the criterion for a Muslim's standing before Allah. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized the importance of benevolence and deeds over outward appearances, highlighting the inseparable connection between ethical conduct and spiritual integrity. Despite this high regard for moral virtues, embodying them remains a significant challenge for Muslim youth, particularly among university students. The era of globalization, coupled with the pervasive influence of social media and mass media, often exerts a detrimental impact on adolescents, contributing to a pressing concern over behavioral misconduct issues within higher education institutions. This study examines the concept of moral education for university students by analyzing Al-Buzaidi's book, Al-Adab Al-Mardhiyyah. This research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the principles of moral excellence as a guide for contemporary challenges faced by young Muslims in a university setting.

Keywords: *moral education, university students, Islam, akhlak, Al-Adab Al-Mardhiyyah*

INTRODUCTION

Moral character (akhlak) is fundamentally important in Islam, serving as the measure by which Allah (SWT) judges a Muslim's spiritual condition. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stressed this in a hadith: "The completeness of a believer's faith lies in the nobility of their morals" (Abu Daud, 1984, No. 4682). These traditions highlight the inseparable connection between ethical conduct and spiritual integrity, compelling Islam to advocate strongly for virtuous behavior as a reflection of one's devotion to Allah (SWT) (Fauzen & Najib, 2025; Huda et al., 2019; Maimanah & Darmadji, 2023; Sulaiman, 2021).

Although moral excellence is held in the highest regard, attaining and embodying such virtues remain a significant challenge for Muslim youth, particularly among university students (Setiawan, 2025). In the era of globalization, social media and mass media have become major influences, often exerting a detrimental impact on adolescents (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Du, 2023; Khalaf et al., 2023; Sagala & Kandedes, 2024). The prevalence of behavioural misconducts—such as bullying, theft, substance abuse, and illicit relationships—in higher education institutions has become a pressing concern (Wan Ismail et al., 2022). This ethical decline is not a new phenomenon, leading many prior studies to propose ethical frameworks rooted in Islamic scholarship as a solution. Notable examples include the methodologies of Abu Talib al-Makki (Sidi et al., 2021; Yazaki, 2012), Imam al-Ghazali (Mat Jusoh et al., 2018; Munjahid, 2025), and Ibn Hazm (Ripin & Che Ab Rahim, 2010), who meticulously documented and contextualized the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) educational approach for their respective eras. However, despite these efforts, there remains a notable research gap: the exploration of alternative moral frameworks from lesser-studied scholars. This presents a unique opportunity to investigate the contributions of Sheikh al-Buzaidi, a prominent Maghrebi scholar, whose pedagogy

offers fresh insights into addressing the moral decline among contemporary Muslim youth.

This study, therefore, argues that Sheikh al-Buzaidi's approach to moral education is uniquely positioned to address contemporary moral crises among Muslim youth. Unlike many prominent scholars who wrote during an era of relative stability, Al-Buzaidi formulated his pedagogy amidst a turbulent socio-political climate in 18th-century Morocco. At the time, the Alawid Sultanate was plagued by political instability, internal conflicts, and the growing threat of Western colonial aggression. Despite this challenging context, his integrated model of external etiquette (adab zahir) and internal spiritual refinement (adab batin) successfully nurtured a generation of spiritually grounded scholars, most notably Ibn Ajibah. This paper posits that Al-Buzaidi's framework, forged in an era of ideological encroachment and societal upheaval, offers a resilient and practical model of moral formation that remains highly relevant for contemporary educational settings. By examining his work, this research seeks to demonstrate how a historical approach can be transformed into a viable pedagogical solution for modern challenges.

In alignment with these efforts, this study seeks to address the aforementioned research gap by examining the moral pedagogy of Sheikh al-Buzaidi through his book Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah Li Salik Toriq al-Sufiyyah. The research aims to fulfill two primary objectives: first, to explore the principles and methods of moral education as articulated by Sheikh al-Buzaidi; and second, to analyze the potential application of his framework as an alternative pedagogical model for addressing the moral crises faced by contemporary Muslim university students. By achieving these objectives, this paper contributes to the field of Islamic moral pedagogy by reviving and contextualizing a lesser-known classical framework for the modern era.

METHOD

This qualitative study employs a literature-based approach, focusing on documentary content analysis of a classical text. This design was chosen as it allows for an in-depth observation and systematic interpretation of the ideas and concepts embedded within the primary source. The theoretical orientation of this study is rooted in classical Islamic moral philosophy, particularly the integration of external ethical discipline (adab zahir) and inner spiritual purification (adab batin), as emphasized in traditional Sufi pedagogy.

Data Source

The primary data source for this study is Sheikh al-Buzaidi's Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah Li Salik Toriq al-Sufiyyah. The edition used is the 2006 publication by Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, annotated by Asim Ibrahim Al-Kayyali. This work was selected because it is the only comprehensive text by al-Buzaidi that specifically discusses the methodology of moral education for students, in contrast to his other works which are shorter epistles addressing specific themes.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The process of data analysis was conducted systematically through several phases.

1. Data Collection Phase: The researcher conducted a critical reading of the entire text of al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah. The focus was to identify all discussions, counsels, and methods related to moral education as outlined by Sheikh al-Buzaidi.

2. Data Categorization Phase: The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis, where emergent patterns and recurring concepts were identified inductively and grouped into major thematic categories. These themes include: (1) al-Buzaidi's foundational concepts of moral education, (2) the

types of morals to be cultivated (adab zahir and adab batin), and (3) the practical methods for moral training.

3. Analysis Phase: A descriptive documentary approach was employed to interpret each category. The researcher analyzed how al-Buzaidi developed his ethical arguments, the Quranic and Prophetic traditions he utilized, and the practical implications of his methods. This was done not only to describe the moral content, but also to uncover the epistemological logic and pedagogical strategies embedded in al-Buzaidi's model. The aim is to evaluate the applicability of his framework for modern university-based moral education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings are derived from a thematic content analysis of Sheikh al-Buzaidi's *Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah*. This chapter presents the identified moral framework – categorising the text's aphoristic content into key thematic areas. Despite the non-linear and prescriptive style of the original text, the systematic analysis reveals a coherent methodology that reflects a comprehensive and holistic approach to moral education. These findings directly address the core research questions of this study, which focus on the structure, content, and pedagogical implications of al-Buzaidi's moral training model.

Structure and Main Themes of *Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah*

Sheikh al-Buzaidi's *Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah Li Salik Toriq al-Sufiyyah* serves as a detailed ethical manual for spiritual seekers. The text is characterised by a non-linear, aphoristic structure, presenting over 70 concise prescriptions for conduct (*adab*) rather than a structured curriculum. However, a thematic content analysis enables its reorganisation into four major thematic categories: (1) The Nature

of Moral Training Challenges, (2) The Types of Morals to be Cultivated, (3) The Methods of Moral Training and (4) The Assessment of Training Effectiveness. These themes reveal that al-Buzaidi did not view moral education as a set of isolated behavioural instructions, but as an integrated and recursive discipline aimed at cultivating inner and outer transformation. His pedagogical vision reflects the objective of producing *insan rabbani*, the individuals who are deeply attuned to divine values in both thought and action

The Methodology of Moral Training

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of a comprehensive methodology for moral training, which is the core of Al-Buzaidi's pedagogy. This methodology is not presented as a rigid step-by-step process but as a set of interconnected practices essential for moral development. The key methods identified are as follows:

1. Purifying Intentions (*Tazkiyyah*): Al-Buzaidi emphasises that all actions must begin with sincere intention (*niyyah*), driven solely by the desire to please Allah. This foundational principle serves as the internal compass for all subsequent ethical conduct, ensuring that moral actions are not performative but rooted in genuine spiritual purpose.

2. Choosing Righteous Companions (*Suhbah*): The text highlights the critical influence of one's social environment. Al-Buzaidi advises students to choose companions who are pious and morally upright, as these relationships serve as a support system and a source of positive influence, helping the individual to remain steadfast in their moral journey.

3. Self-Preparation and Discipline (*Riyadah*): This method involves a disciplined routine of spiritual exercises and physical self-control. Al-Buzaidi advocates for practices such as adhering to a balanced daily schedule, controlling one's desires, and maintaining a state

of mindfulness, all of which are crucial for building resilience against temptation.

4. Reflection and Consultation (*Muhasabah* and *Muzakarah*): Al-Buzaidi's framework encourages continuous self-reflection (*muhasabah*) to evaluate one's actions and intentions. Additionally, he promotes the practice of consulting (*muzakarah*) with knowledgeable and trustworthy individuals before making important decisions, ensuring that one's actions are guided by wisdom and sound counsel.

5. Guarding the Etiquette of Speech: The text provides specific guidance on the importance of speech. Al-Buzaidi warns against engaging in gossip, backbiting, and excessive talk. This method underscores the belief that a person's inner state is often reflected in their speech, making verbal discipline a key aspect of moral refinement.

6. Respecting and Following the Teacher: A central tenet of al-Buzaidi's methodology is the profound respect and obedience owed to one's spiritual guide or teacher. This relationship is not merely for the transmission of knowledge but is considered a vital medium for the student's moral development and character formation.

These six elements form the operational core of al-Buzaidi's educational philosophy which links personal virtue with communal responsibility.

The Integration of *Adab Zahir* and *Adab Batin*

A hallmark of al-Buzaidi's framework is its seamless integration of *adab zahir* (external manners) and *adab batin* (inner spiritual refinement). For example, seemingly mundane instructions such as greeting others, maintaining posture, or refraining from interrupting speech, are consistently framed as opportunities to cultivate deeper

traits such as humility (*tawadhu*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), and vigilance (*muraqabah*). This dual-level focus ensures that moral education is not reduced to behavioural compliance but aimed at transforming the self from within.

Furthermore, all these instructions are grounded in scriptural sources. The text cites over 30 Qur'anic verses and several Hadiths, not merely as supports but as epistemological foundations. This affirms that al-Buzaidi's ethics are not speculative but revelatory in origin, which strengthens their credibility and relevance in Islamic educational settings.

Table 1

Selected Themes in al-Buzaidi's Moral Framework with Quranic and Hadith References

Theme	Quranic Reference	Hadith Reference	Description
Sincerity of Intention (Niyyah)	Al-Zalzalah 99:7–8	-	All actions must originate from a sincere desire to seek Allah's pleasure.
Etiquette with Teachers	Al-Hujurat 49:1–2	Ibn Majah, h.3932	One must show deep respect, avoid speaking over or ahead of the teacher.
Verbal Discipline	Luqman 31:19	Muslim, h.2675	Speech should be soft, meaningful, and free from gossip or sarcasm.
Good Companionship (Suhbah)	Al-An'am 6:68	-	Avoid keeping company with people who mock religion or behave immorally.
Spiritual Discipline (Riyadah)	Taha 20:114	-	Maintain daily routines and control over the nafs through physical restraint.
Reflection and Consultation	Al-Hashr 59:18	-	Regular self-examination and consultation ensures continued moral growth.

Theme	Quranic Reference	Hadith Reference	Description
Obedience to Mentors	Al-Nisa' 4:59	-	Obeying trusted guides is crucial in the moral development journey.

Source: Al-Buzaidi (2006). Authors' analysis.

This balanced integration offers a valuable reference point for addressing moral challenges faced by today's university students such as ethical inconsistency, superficial religiosity and the dissonance between personal values and social performance.

Proposed Conceptual Model

Based on the above findings, this study proposes a conceptual model that encapsulates the dynamic interplay of al-Buzaidi's moral training components. The model consists of four interlocking domains:

1. Spiritual Foundation (*Tazkiyyah*)
2. Social Environment (*Suhbah / Teacher–Student Relationship*)
3. Ethical Practices (*Riyadah / Adab Zahir*)
4. Reflective Evaluation (*Muhasabah & Muzakarah*)

These domains operate cyclically, reinforcing each other in a continuous loop of self-discipline, guidance, and refinement. The model may serve as a reference for the development of contemporary Islamic moral education modules, particularly within higher education institutions.

Figure 1 presents a cyclical, interdependent structure of four core domains—Spiritual Foundation (*Tazkiyyah*), Social Environment (*Suhbah /* Teacher–Student Relationship), Ethical Practices (*Riyadah / Adab Zahir*), and Reflective Evaluation (*Muhasabah & Muzakarah*)— that collectively operationalise al-Buzaidi's vision of moral education. From a conceptual standpoint, the model departs from linear moral development theories by adopting a feedback-loop architecture,

reflecting the recursive nature of ethical formation in Islamic pedagogy. This is significant because in al-Buzaidi's view, moral transformation is not a one-off attainment but a continuous, self-reinforcing process where spiritual purification fuels behavioural refinement – which in turn deepens spiritual states.

Figure 1

Al-Buzaidi's Moral Training Conceptual Model
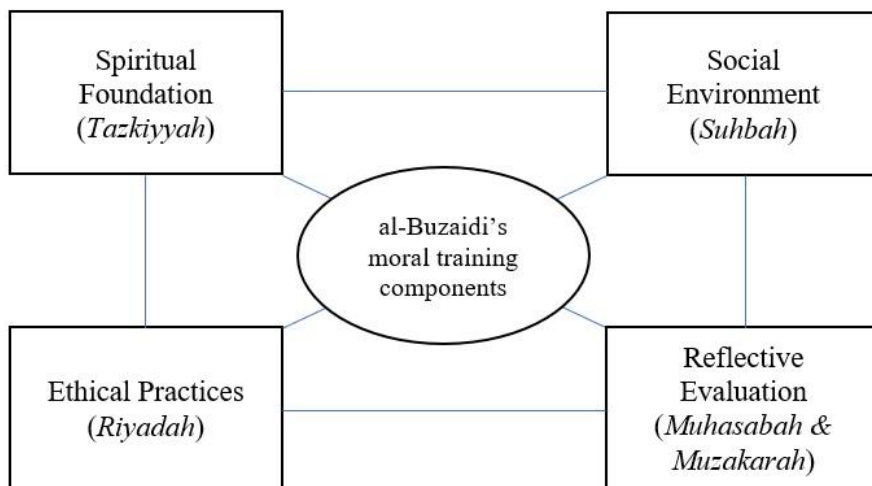
Source: Al-Buzaidi (2006). Authors' analysis

The positioning of Tazkiyyah as the foundational domain aligns with the Qur'anic principle that "success is for those who purify themselves" (Al-Shams 91:9), thereby grounding the model in a theological imperative. The model's second domain, Suhbah and Teacher–Student Relationship, operationalises the social transmission of moral values through guided companionship, which is a concept supported by classical tarbiyah traditions and contemporary social learning theory. This dual emphasis—peer influence management and mentorship—responds directly to the peer-pressure vulnerabilities faced by modern university students.

Ethical Practices (Riyadah / Adab Zahir) function as the behavioural embodiment of internal states, ensuring that moral aspirations translate into visible, disciplined conduct. The inclusion of Reflective Evaluation (Muhasabah & Muzakarah) as an ongoing domain is particularly noteworthy, as it embeds a self-corrective mechanism within the moral growth process, preventing stagnation and moral complacency. This reflective dimension also parallels contemporary metacognitive approaches in character education, but with an explicitly spiritual orientation.

By integrating internal, social, behavioural, and reflective dimensions into a mutually reinforcing cycle, the model addresses a major limitation in many modern moral education frameworks: the tendency to isolate moral cognition, behaviour, or environment. The cyclical design ensures that interventions can begin at any domain—whether through cultivating sincere intention, restructuring social circles, initiating ethical routines, or fostering self-reflection—and still engage the whole system. This flexibility enhances the model's adaptability for higher education settings, making it both historically grounded and pedagogically scalable

This chapter critically engages with the findings presented earlier, highlighting their significance within the moral landscape of contemporary university students. It explores the pedagogical implications of Sheikh al-Buzaidi's moral framework – not merely as a historical reference, but as a context-sensitive and viable educational model. The discussion is structured to demonstrate how this framework offers a cohesive response to modern moral challenges by reviving timeless principles rooted in Islamic tradition.

Al-Buzaidi's Moral Pedagogy: A Holistic Framework

The analysis of *Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah* reveals a holistic framework that harmonises external conduct (*adab zahir*) with inner spiritual refinement (*adab batin*). This integrated approach is a key

differentiator from many contemporary moral education models that often focus solely on behavioural modification or purely intellectual understanding without addressing the spiritual core. Al-Buzaidi's methodology is particularly relevant in an era where moral problems are often rooted in a lack of internal spiritual discipline and a disconnection from a higher purpose. By anchoring every external action to an internal intention (*niyyah*) and spiritual aspiration, Al-Buzaidi's framework transcends time and context. It offers a model of character formation rooted not only in outward conformity but in inward transformation. In contrast to fragmented models of morality, his pedagogy re-centres the heart (*qalb*) as the locus of ethical change.

Implementing Al-Buzaidi's Methodology in the Modern University Context

The methods of moral training identified in the findings chapter can be directly implemented in modern university settings to address specific moral challenges.

1. Combating Peer Influence through *Suhbah*: The moral decline among students is often exacerbated by negative peer influence and social pressure, leading to issues like drug abuse and gang involvement. Al-Buzaidi's emphasis on *Suhbah* (choosing righteous companions) provides a practical solution. Universities can facilitate this by promoting positive social groups, mentorship programs, and student societies focused on service and personal development, thereby creating an environment where students can find positive role models and support systems.

2. Addressing Mental Health through *Riyadah* and *Muhasabah*: Issues of stress, anxiety, and a lack of purpose are prevalent among university students. Al-Buzaidi's methods of *riyadah* (ethical practices) and *muhasabah* (self-reflection) offer a therapeutic and preventative approach. By incorporating

practices of daily self-reflection, mindfulness, and structured spiritual routines, students can develop the resilience and inner peace needed to navigate academic and social pressures, transforming their challenges into opportunities for spiritual growth.

3. Nurturing Leadership with a Focus on Integrity: Al-Buzaidi's framework, which prioritises sincerity of intention and honesty, can be a foundational model for nurturing student leaders. Instead of focusing solely on skills, leadership training can be structured around the cultivation of inner qualities, such as trustworthiness and a sense of responsibility to God. This would ensure that leaders are not only capable but are also morally grounded, which would set a positive example for the wider student community.

4. Strengthening the Mentor-Mentee Relationship: The importance of the teacher-student relationship in Al-Buzaidi's framework provides a strong argument for revitalising mentorship programs in universities. Mentors (lecturers, senior students) can act not only as academic advisors, but also as the student's spiritual guides. This personal guidance can help students internalise moral values and address specific challenges in a supportive environment, echoing the successful *tarbiyah* relationship that al-Buzaidi had with his own students, such as Ibn Ajibah.

A Timeless and Resilient Framework

The analysis demonstrates that Sheikh al-Buzaidi's moral pedagogy, forged in an era of political instability and ideological encroachment, is a resilient and highly relevant framework for contemporary moral crises. His focus on internal spiritual refinement as the basis for external conduct offers a holistic and foundational solution. This study positions his pedagogy not merely as a historical

artefact but as an adaptable, deeply Islamic response to moral degeneration. His emphasis on inner purification, communal bonds, and guided practice aligns closely with what is needed in today's moral education: depth, meaning, and rootedness.

Having articulated the practical implications of this model, the next section offers a concluding synthesis and outlines recommendations for future research

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine Sheikh al-Buzaidi's approach to moral education, as articulated in *Kitab al-Adab al-Mardhiyyah*, and to assess its potential application to the moral formation of contemporary Muslim university students. The findings revealed that al-Buzaidi offers a uniquely holistic moral framework that harmonises *adab zahir* (external behaviour) with *adab batin* (internal refinement). His methodology consists of six interdependent strategies: purifying intentions, choosing righteous companions, engaging in self-discipline, practising constant reflection, guarding speech, and nurturing strong teacher–student relationships. These methods form a cyclic and reinforcing system that begins from the heart and radiates outward into action.

In addressing the research questions, this study demonstrated that al-Buzaidi's pedagogy offers an alternative model to many existing frameworks, particularly in its emphasis on spiritual transformation as the engine of moral development. Unlike modern models that may focus on policy, curriculum, or disciplinary enforcement, this framework focuses on the moral cultivation of oneself – an approach that is deemed increasingly necessary in a world of superficial ethics.

This research contributes to the field of Islamic moral pedagogy by reviving an underexplored classical source and contextualising it

within the present-day moral crisis. It affirms that classical Islamic scholarship retains enduring relevance when creatively and critically re-examined. For future research, it is recommended that empirical studies be conducted to evaluate the practical effectiveness of implementing Al-Buzaidi's framework within a university setting. Such studies should assess its impact on students' moral behaviour and spiritual resilience. Furthermore, future research could also explore comparative analyses with other classical scholars to further highlight the uniqueness and contributions of Al-Buzaidi's pedagogy.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Data curation: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Formal analysis: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Funding acquisition: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Investigation: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Methodology: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Project administration: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Resources: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Software: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Supervision: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Validation: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Visualization: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Writing – original draft: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J.; Writing – review & editing: M.H.Z.A., A.W.S., M.F.P.R., & M.K.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not required for this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

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