Article

Example-Based Moral Education in Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's Thought and Its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

This study examines the thought of Abdullah Nashih Ulwan on moral education through the method of exemplification (role modeling). In the midst of increasing moral decline in contemporary society, Ulwan's approach offers an Islamic pedagogical model that emphasizes character formation through lived examples rather than mere verbal instruction. Employing a qualitative library research method, this study analyzes Ulwan's seminal work *Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam* along with supporting literature and modern educational theories. The findings reveal three core principles of Ulwan's concept of moral education: consistency between words

and actions, sincerity of intention, and the embodiment of Islamic values in daily life. His perspective resonates with Bandura's social learning theory, which highlights the role of social environment and behavioral modeling in shaping character. The study concludes that Ulwan's ideas remain relevant in addressing the moral challenges of today's youth and provide practical implications for families, schools, and educational policy. These findings reaffirm the central role of educators as moral exemplars and emphasize the need for a holistic integration of ethical conduct into all dimensions of the educational process.

Keyword

Abdullah Nashih Ulwan, Digital Era, Ethics, Islamic Education, Moral Education

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pemikiran Abdullah Nashih Ulwan tentang pendidikan moral melalui metode keteladanan (role modeling). Di tengah meningkatnya gejala dekadensi moral pada era kontemporer, pendekatan Ulwan menawarkan model pedagogis Islam yang menekankan pembentukan akhlak melalui contoh nyata, bukan sekadar instruksi verbal. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif studi pustaka dengan menelaah karya utama Ulwan Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam serta literatur pendukung dan teori pendidikan modern. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Ulwan menekankan tiga prinsip utama pendidikan moral: konsistensi antara ucapan dan perbuatan, ketulusan niat, serta penghayatan nilai-nilai Islam dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Perspektif ini selaras dengan teori pembelajaran sosial Bandura yang menekankan peran lingkungan sosial dan peniruan perilaku dalam pembentukan karakter. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemikiran Ulwan tetap relevan dalam menjawab tantangan moral generasi muda dan memberikan kontribusi praktis bagi keluarga, sekolah, dan kebijakan pendidikan. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya peran pendidik sebagai teladan moral serta perlunya integrasi holistik etika ke dalam seluruh dimensi pengalaman pendidikan

Kata Kunci
Abdullah Nashih Ulwan, Era Digital, Etika, Pendidikan Islam, Pendidikan Moral

INTRODUCTION

Rapid modernization, globalization, and the penetration of digital technology have profoundly influenced the mindset, behavior, and values of young people. These shifts have been accompanied by increasing cases of juvenile delinquency, student violence, substance abuse, pornography, cyberbullying, and declining respect for authority figures. The Indonesian Child Protection Commissi on (KPAI, 2025) reports a steady rise in violence among students, signaling that moral decline is not merely a social phenomenon but a crisis in character education.

In Islamic thought, moral education forms the essence of the entire educational process. Al-Ghazali (2012) emphasizes that the ultimate goal of education is the cultivation of noble character (*al-insān al-kāmil*), while the Prophet Muhammad explicitly stated that his mission was to "perfect noble morals" (HR. Ahmad). One of the most effective methods of instilling morality is *uswah hasanah* (exemplary behavior), since children tend to imitate behavior more easily than follow verbal instruction. Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (2007), in *Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam*, underscores that the conduct of parents, teachers, and community

leaders has a decisive influence on children's moral development. His perspective aligns with Bandura's (1977, 2001) social learning theory, which argues that most human behavior is learned through observation and imitation of significant role models.

Contemporary scholarship reinforces this point. Lickona (1991, 2004) highlights modeling and moral community as pillars of character education, while Berkowitz and Bier (2005) stress that role models remain the strongest predictors of children's moral outcomes. More recent studies also show how digital platforms expose youth to competing and often negative role models (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Subandi, 2020). This context underscores the urgency of revisiting classical Islamic frameworks such as Ulwan's and situating them within current challenges in moral education.

Accordingly, this study addresses two key questions: (1) What is Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's concept of exemplary-based education? (2) What is the urgency of this concept for moral education in today's context? The aim is to explore Ulwan's educational thought, analyze its relevance to contemporary moral challenges, and contribute theoretically to Islamic educational discourse and practically to the reconstruction of character education in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a literature study method. This method is appropriate since the research focuses on conceptual analysis of Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's ideas on exemplary-based education within the framework of Islamic moral education. Unlike statistical approaches, this method emphasizes interpretation of concepts and meanings derived from written sources. As Zed (2008) notes, literature study involves collecting and critically examining data from authoritative works such as books, journal articles, and official documents.

The data were drawn from two types of sources. Primary sources consist of Ulwan's original works, particularly *Tarbiyatul Aulad fi al-Islam*, which elaborates his views on the roles of parents, teachers, and society in shaping children's character, with an emphasis on the centrality of exemplary conduct. Secondary sources include classical Islamic educational works (e.g., Al-Ghazali, Ibn Miskawaih), contemporary studies on moral and character education, educational psychology, and theories of social learning such as Albert Bandura's concept of observational learning, which parallels the Islamic notion of role modeling.

Data collection was carried out through systematic tracing of relevant print and digital references, followed by recording, categorizing, and thematic analysis. The researcher acted as a critical reader, comparing and interpreting sources rather than merely compiling them. Data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical technique: descriptive analysis was used to present Ulwan's views systematically, while analytical interpretation connected these ideas with contemporary challenges in Islamic education. To ensure validity, a source triangulation strategy was applied by cross-referencing multiple literatures and relying only on academically credible works.

This study recognizes its limitations. As it does not include field observation, the findings are primarily normative and theoretical. Further empirical research is needed to test the applicability of Ulwan's concepts in current educational settings. Nevertheless, this study

contributes to Islamic education scholarship by re-examining Ulwan's ideas and highlighting their potential relevance for contemporary discourse on moral education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Abdullah Nashih Ulwan: Life, Works, and Educational Legacy

Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (1932–1987) was a prominent Islamic scholar, educator, and writer from Aleppo, Syria. He pursued his higher education at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, where he deepened his studies in sharia and Islamic education. His academic background at Al-Azhar played a central role in shaping his integrative perspective, which combined classical Islamic scholarship with insights from pedagogy and psychology (Amaliati, 2020).

Ulwan is best known for his influential work *Tarbiyatul Aulad fi al-Islam* (*Children's Education in Islam*), which systematically addresses the dimensions of children's education—faith, morals, worship, social relations, physical health, and psychology—grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith. Central to this work is the emphasis on *uswah hasanah* (exemplary conduct) as the most effective educational method in shaping children's character (Arsyad et al., 2023).

Beyond *Tarbiyatul Aulad fi al-Islam*, Ulwan authored several other important works, including *Islamic Morals*, *Islamic Education Methodology*, *In the Shade of Hadith*, and *Asrar al-Tarbiyah al-Nabawiyah*. These writings highlight his consistent concern with moral education, the role of teachers as role models, and the pedagogical legacy of the Prophet Muhammad.

Through his scholarship and da'wah activities, Ulwan sought to respond to the moral and educational challenges of Muslim societies. His thought remains highly relevant in contemporary Islamic education, particularly in addressing the crisis of role models in both formal and non-formal institutions. In the Indonesian context, his ideas have been widely adopted in curriculum development, pesantren education, and character formation programs (Tamirih et al., 2023).

Moral Education from an Islamic Perspective

In Islamic thought, morality holds a fundamental position, serving not only as a spiritual dimension but also as the foundation of social life and education. The term "morality" derives from the Arabic *khuluq*, meaning character or disposition. Al-Ghazali (2005) defines it as a trait embedded in the soul that naturally gives rise to behavior without prior rational deliberation, indicating that morality reflects an inner disposition rather than merely external acts.

The Qur'an highlights morality as central to human conduct, as in QS. Al-Qalam [68]:4: *"And indeed you (Muhammad) are of a great moral character."* Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad SAW affirmed, *"I was sent to perfect noble character"* (HR. Ahmad, no. 8952), underscoring that the moral dimension is at the core of Islam's message.

Classical and contemporary scholars such as Ibn Miskawayh, Al-Ghazali, and Al-Attas view morality as part of the human soul that must be nurtured through education and training. Al-Ghazali (1993) emphasizes two primary methods: habituation (*ta'wid*) and exemplary role models (*uswah hasanah*). Al-Attas (1993) further states that the goal of

Islamic education is to "instill adab," which integrates knowledge, practice, and values, with morality as its central element.

The main objectives of moral education in Islam can be summarized as follows:

1. Cultivating divine awareness (taqwa). Moral education is directed to instill divine values as the center of behavioral orientation. Every action must be based on sincere intentions because of Allah SWT. This awareness fosters muraqabah, namely the feeling of being watched by Allah in every action.

2. Forming a noble personality (akhlaq al-karimah) Islamic education emphasizes the importance of a personality that is balanced, emotionally stable and wise in action. This is in accordance with the words of the Prophet: "The believer with the most perfect faith is the one with the best morals" (HR. Tirmidhi, no. 1162).

3. Realizing a just and civilized social order. Good morals are the foundation for the birth of a harmonious and loving society. Values such as honesty, justice, responsibility, and empathy are the pillars that support Islamic social life.(Nasution, 2015).

4. Being a means to happiness in this world and the hereafterIslam views that life in this world is a field for planting good deeds that will produce happiness in the hereafter. Therefore, moral education functions as a guide to true success, not just material achievement alone.(Al-Syaibany & Syaibany, 1979).

Abdullah Nashih Ulwan highlights that the most effective method of moral education is through *uswah hasanah*—living examples demonstrated by teachers, parents, and community leaders. He stresses that moral formation is the product of habituation within a supportive environment, rather than a purely cognitive process (Ulwan, 2007).

Thus, moral education in Islam is a holistic system that integrates intellectual, spiritual, and ethical development. It seeks not only to impart knowledge but also to shape character and cultivate individuals who embody Islamic values in their personal and social lives.

A Review of the Concept of Exemplary Behavior

In Islamic teachings, the concept of exemplary behavior or uswah hasanah is the most effective method of moral education. Exemplary behavior is the provision of real examples to students through behavior displayed by educators, parents, or community leaders. Exemplary behavior is not only a pedagogical instrument, but also a moral principle inherent in the Islamic education system. The Qur'an explicitly mentions the Prophet Muhammad SAW as the main role model for mankind. Allah SWT says in QS. Al-Ahzab [33]: 21: "Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow; (namely) for anyone who hopes for (the mercy of) Allah and (the coming of) the Last Day and remembers Allah much."

This verse emphasizes that the Prophet's exemplary behavior is not only limited to aspects of worship, but also to social behavior, leadership, family, and education. In many hadiths, the Prophet SAW also shows the principle of exemplary behavior in interactions with friends, children, and marginalized groups. For example, in the hadith narrated by Bukhari

and Muslim, it is told how the Prophet kissed his grandsons Hasan and Husain as a form of affection and emotional learning for his friends. Furthermore, QS. Luqman [31]: 13–19 contains a dialogue between Luqman and his son which contains very philosophical educational advice, while also showing that a father is responsible for being a role model in faith, worship, and social behavior.(Muhaimin, 2011).

In the context of moral education, role models are the most natural and profound method in shaping student behavior. This is emphasized by Ulwan (2007) that "the behavior of an educator is a reflection of the content of education itself; therefore, the educator's morals are the first lesson absorbed by the child." In educational psychology theory, the concept of role models is known as modeling or observational learning, which was pioneered by psychologist Albert Bandura through social learning theory. According toBandura (1977)Humans learn not only through direct experience, but also by observing the behavior of others and the consequences of that behavior. Bandura's theory states that there are four main processes in learning through observation, namely:

Process	Explanation
Attention (Attention)	Individuals pay attention to models or figures they emulate.
Retention (Understanding)	Individuals store information from observed behavior.
Reproduction (Reproduction)	Individuals try to imitate these behaviors in real life.
Motivation	Individuals are motivated to continue the action if the outcome is positive.

Source :(Bandura, 2001:22)

The application of this theory in education shows that teachers as behavioral models have a very important role. If teachers teach honesty but often lie, then the moral message conveyed becomes ineffective. Children are very sensitive to the inconsistency between words and actions. Therefore, the success of moral education depends greatly on the quality of the example given by educators.

Integrating the Concept of Exemplary Behavior: An Islamic and Psychological Perspective

Role models in Islam and social learning theory have a very strong point of convergence. Both emphasize the importance of role models in shaping behavior and character. The difference lies in orientation: if modern psychological theory focuses on empirical aspects and observational behavior, then Islam adds transcendental and spiritual dimensions. The following table illustrates a comparison between role models in Islam and in Bandura's theory:

Aspect	Exemplary behavior in Islam	Modeling in Bandura's Theory
Source of value	Revelation (Quran & Hadith)	Observation of other human behavior
Central character	Prophet Muhammad SAW	A model who is admired or has authority
Objective	Formation of good morals and piety	Socially acceptable adaptive behavior
Learning process	Emulating the morals of the Prophet and	Observation,

	pious people through exemplary behavior	imitation, and reinforcement
Spiritual dimension	Ada (afterlife orientation, sincere intention)	Not discussed

Source: researcher processing

In the current educational context, educators increasingly face challenges in serving as consistent role models. The gap between values taught and behaviors demonstrated often creates cognitive dissonance among students, undermining their trust in educational institutions and prompting them to adopt alternative value systems from external sources, particularly social media. Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (2007) emphasized that exemplary conduct constitutes the most effective method of moral education, asserting that children do not primarily require lengthy theoretical explanations of honesty or trustworthiness, but rather visible demonstrations of these virtues by parents, teachers, and community leaders. Such lived examples, he argued, provide lessons stronger than "a thousand words."

The implementation of role modeling must extend beyond teachers to include parents, community figures, and leaders, thereby ensuring that the broader social ecosystem reflects consistent moral values (Muhaimin, 2009). Without such embodiment, moral education risks becoming rhetorical rather than transformative. Within Islamic pedagogy, educators are regarded as *murabbi*—spiritual and moral caregivers—whose responsibility is not limited to the transmission of knowledge, but also to the practice of values in everyday interactions. This emphasis aligns with Al-Attas's (1980) concept of *ta'dīb*, which highlights the internalization of values through manners and exemplary conduct.

In the era of digital disruption, the need for authentic role models has become even more urgent. The proliferation of negative content and value relativism in digital spaces places students at risk of moral disorientation. Schools, madrasahs, and families must therefore strengthen their function as sites of moral exemplarity, offering students concrete figures of reference in constructing their ethical identity.

The Concept of Role Modeling in Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's Educational Thought

In the context of Islamic education, Abdullah Nashih Ulwan is one of the contemporary figures who has made a major contribution, especially in the field of children's moral education through an exemplary approach. His thoughts expressed in the monumental work *Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam* are the main reference in this discussion. Ulwan views that moral education cannot be separated from the figure of the educator who is a role model. For him, education is not merely a process of transferring knowledge, but a process of internalizing values that are only effective if conveyed through real examples. Ulwan emphasized that exemplary behavior is the most effective method in shaping a child's personality. In *Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam*, he stated that children learn by observing and imitating. Therefore, parents and teachers as primary educators must reflect the desired values to be instilled in children. According to Ulwan (2007), "children are a reflection of their parents' behavior; if the parents are upright, then their children's morals will also be upright; if they deviate, then the children will be led to the same deviation" (p. 118).

This principle is in line with Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which states that humans learn not only through direct experience, but also through observing the behavior of other people who are considered models.(Bandura, 1991). In this framework, Ulwan

indirectly applies the principles of modern educational psychology, although he packages it in a more normative Islamic language. In the book, Ulwan systematically outlines the basic principles of role models as the foundation for forming children's character. There are three main principles that are emphasized: consistency (*istiqamah*), sincerity, and actualization of values in everyday life. The three can be described as follows:

1. Consistency (Istiqamah)
    According to Ulwan (2007), educators must have a consistent attitude in their words and actions. When a teacher or parent tells a child to be honest, but he himself often lies, then the value of honesty will not be ingrained effectively. This consistency is the foundation of trust between educators and students. He wrote, "There will be no trace of a father's verbal advice if it is not accompanied by real behavior that reflects the truth of the message" (p. 122). This consistency is what makes an educator have moral authority.
2. Sincerity
    Ulwan also emphasized that role models will not be effective if they are done because of showing off or worldly motivations. Sincerity is the main requirement for the values instilled to enter the child's heart. Role models that are done with sincerity will foster sincerity in the relationship between educators and children, which ultimately gives birth to respect and love.
3. Actualization of Values
    Role models are not just normative narratives, but must be seen in daily actions. For example, teaching children to pray is not enough by telling them to, but must be done by getting used to praying on time, in congregation, and involving children in the practice. Ulwan views the actualization of values as "silent learning" which is more influential than lectures or orders (Ulwan, 2007, p. 130). To clarify this concept, the following table can be presented:

Principle of Exemplary Behavior	Description	Implications in Moral Education
Consistency	Speech and action must be in harmony; does not apply double	Building trust, instilling real values
Sincerity	Done for the sake of Allah, not for image or social pressure	Increase the sincerity of teacher-student relationships, eliminate hypocrisy
Actualization of Values	Islamic values are manifested in daily life practices	Children learn from actions, not just from words.

Ulwan also linked the concept of example to the life of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. According to him, the Messenger of Allah was a model of perfect moral education, as confirmed in the Al-Qur'an, "Indeed there is in the Messenger of Allah a good role model for you" (QS. Al-Ahzab [33]: 21). In Ulwan's view, all aspects of the Prophet's life, both in the family, in society and when leading war, contained invaluable educational value. Therefore, he invited educators to emulate the Prophet comprehensively, not just ritualistically. Apart from *Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam*, the principles of exemplary also appear in Ulwan's other works such as *Asbab Tasyri' al-Islami* and *Al-Madkhal ila al-Da'wah al-Islamiyyah*, where he

expands the discussion of exemplary to the realm of *da'wah* and leadership. In these works, example is seen as a transformative strategy in forming a civil society based on Islamic values. This emphasizes that for Ulwan, role models are not only a method of educating children, but also a method of social change.

The uniqueness of Ulwan's approach lies in the synthesis of classical Islamic values with modern pedagogical approaches. He does not reject the development of psychology and educational theory, but rather integrates them with Islamic treasures harmoniously. For Ulwan, role models are not only an educational strategy, but also an expression of faith. He wrote, "Every act of an educator must be based on the awareness that Allah sees it, because from there sincerity and noble morals are born" (Ulwan, 2007, p. 115). Ulwan's thinking is very relevant in the context of the moral degradation of children and adolescents today. When role models in the public space, including educational figures, no longer show integrity, then moral education loses the exemplary reference that should be its foundation. In a situation like this, Ulwan's thinking about the importance of the role of role models is increasingly urgent to be raised and applied. Thus, Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's thinking offers a perspective that is not only normative but also practical. Role models are not just a traditional educational method, but are a strategic instrument in instilling Islamic values in a transformative, consistent, and sustainable manner. Within the framework of moral education, example becomes a bridge between values and actions, between ideals and reality, between faith and actions.

Role Model as a Method of Moral Education

Role models have a central position in moral education because they unite speech, behavior, and values into a whole that is easily understood by students. Moral education is not just about normative knowledge about good and bad values, but rather deeper: a process of habituation, modeling, and internalization of moral values in everyday life. In this context, the role model method (modeling) appears as the most natural and effective approach in forming character, especially in children who are psychologically in the imitation and identity search phase. In the theory of moral development, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg emphasize that children go through stages in understanding moral values and rules. In the early stages, children's morals are heteronomous, where rules are seen as something absolute and come from external authorities, such as parents and teachers (Kohlberg & Power, 1981). Therefore, the existence of an authoritative figure who is consistent in behavior and speech is very important in this stage of moral formation. Role models become concrete instruments in the process of learning values, because children not only absorb what is taught, but also what is done by important figures in their lives.

Role modelling as a method of moral education has high relevance to children's moral development. Children tend to imitate adults they admire or trust.Bandura (1977)in Social Learning Theory emphasizes that children learn from their social environment through the process of observation and imitation. In the context of moral education, teachers and parents act as behavioral models, where their actions will become a reference for children in forming responses to life situations. When teachers demonstrate honesty, discipline, and politeness, children will tend to imitate and make it part of their personal value system.

In Islam, role models have a very strong foundation, as Allah says in QS. Al-Ahzab

[33]:21, "Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow." The Prophet Muhammad SAW not only conveyed revelation in the form of words, but also realized it in behavior, social interactions, and family life. Thus, role models are the main approach in the process of conveying Islamic values. Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (2007) stated that children's education in Islam is very dependent on the role models of parents and their surroundings. He wrote, "Children will follow the example of their parents' lives much faster than the verbal commands they hear every day" (p. 126). In practice, role models in moral education can be seen in three main environments, namely: family, school, and society.

1. Role Model in the Family

The family is the first and foremost educational environment. In the household, children learn basic values such as honesty, compassion, patience, and responsibility. This is where the role of parents as role models is important. Parents who consistently display noble morals in their daily lives such as telling the truth, keeping promises, valuing time, and treating others with respect—will have a strong influence on the formation of children's morals. According to(Fahdini et al., (2021)Children do not learn from abstract moral instructions, but from the concrete actions they witness every day. When a father prioritizes congregational prayer and a mother shows patience in the face of problems, these are practical lessons in faith and morals.

2. Role Model in Schools

Schools as formal institutions have the responsibility to strengthen the values that have been instilled at home. Teachers, in this context, not only act as teachers, but also as educators (*murabbi*) who are role models for students. Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (2007) emphasized that the personality of teachers is a determining factor in the success of moral education. Teachers who are disciplined, honest, and polite will have a profound psychological and moral impact on students. On the other hand, teachers who are inconsistent between their words and behavior will actually cause moral confusion.

In research conducted by Lickona (2004)It was found that schools that successfully formed students' characters were schools that had a culture of exemplary behavior from teachers and principals. A school culture that emphasized the values of integrity, hard work, and social concern would be transmitted to students if these values were internalized and practiced by all components of the school.

3. Role Model in Society

The wider community also plays a role as an arena for moral education. Children do not live in a vacuum; they are exposed to various behaviors from the social environment, including neighbors, community leaders, and the mass media. In an ideal Islamic society, community leaders such as clerics, leaders, and *da'wah* activists are role models in spreading good values. However, in the context of today's modern society, role models are often in crisis because many public figures actually show behavior that is counterproductive to moral education.

Therefore, synergy is needed between family, school, and society in building a social environment that supports the formation of morals through role models. Ulwan calls this *al-bi'ah at-tarbawiyah*, namely an environment that educates through daily interactions that are

full of values (Ulwan, 2007).

To describe this relationship briefly, the following table presents the relationship between the educational environment and forms of role models:

Educational Environment	Key Role Models	Examples of Exemplary Behavior	Moral Values That Are Instilled
Family	Mother father	Pray together, tell the truth, respect each other	Faith, compassion, honesty
School	Teacher	Time discipline, fair in judging, empathy	Discipline, justice, responsibility
Public	public figure	Helping others, being a role model, being wise in your attitude	Social concern, integrity, wisdom

Integrated role models in the three environments will form a holistic moral education system. Without role models, moral teachings will be empty rhetoric that is difficult for children to practice in real life. Therefore, in an effort to improve the quality of moral education, the role model method must be placed as the main approach, not just a complement.

In the digital era like today, the biggest challenge is to create authentic and relevant role models. Many children are more exposed to figures on social media than their teachers or parents. This emphasizes the need to revitalize role models through adaptive media, but still display strong Islamic values. Thus, role models are not only important, but also very urgent to be brought back into the practice of today's moral education. Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's thoughts on role models are very contextual, because he not only emphasizes the ideal aspect, but also invites every educator to start from themselves as a representation of the values taught.

The Relevance of Ulwan's Thought in Contemporary Moral Education

Abdullah Nashih Ulwan offers a distinctive contribution to the discourse on moral education, particularly through his emphasis on *exemplary behavior* (*uswah hasanah*) as the core method of moral formation. In *Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam*, Ulwan (2003) stresses that morality cannot be instilled merely through theoretical instruction, but must be embodied in real actions demonstrated by educators, parents, and the wider social environment. For Ulwan, the family and school serve as the primary spaces where values are internalized, and the presence of consistent role models is central to this process. He highlights that values such as sincerity, trustworthiness, patience, and compassion must not only be taught but continuously practiced within daily interactions (Ulwan, 2007).

This approach aligns with the Islamic educational vision of nurturing a balanced human being (*insan kamil*)—a personality harmonizing the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional dimensions of life. Unlike approaches that emphasize rational deliberation (Kohlberg) or universal secular values (Lickona), Ulwan's framework is deeply rooted in faith, spirituality, and Islamic tradition. His perspective integrates moral education into a holistic ecosystem, involving family, school, and society as mutually reinforcing agents of moral formation.

When placed in comparison, Ulwan's thought stands out for its emphasis on practice rather than abstraction:

Thinker	Focus of Moral Education	Main Method	Strengths	Criticism/Limitations
Abdullah N. Ulwan	Islamic moral formation from early age	Exemplary, Islamic environment	Holistic, family- and teacher-centered, faith-based	Less systematic on formal pedagogical frameworks
Imam Al-Ghazali	Purification of the soul and inner morals	Spiritual exercise, exemplary	Strong on inner and spiritual development	More Sufi-oriented, limited applicability in formal schooling
Lawrence Kohlberg	Rational stages of moral development	Moral dilemma, value discussion	Structural explanation of moral reasoning	Secular, rationalistic, limited attention to spiritual dimensions
Thomas Lickona	Character education through universal values	Role model, habituation, dialogue	Contextual for Western schools, practical applications	Detached from religious foundations, culturally bound

While Ulwan's contributions are significant, his framework is not without limitations. His writings provide limited guidance on systematic pedagogical techniques for formal classroom settings. Furthermore, the heavy reliance on exemplary figures assumes a stable moral environment, which may be difficult to sustain in pluralistic and technologically disruptive contexts.

Only after understanding Ulwan's principles clearly can their relevance to contemporary challenges be appreciated. In today's digital era, the younger generation is increasingly exposed to fragmented and relativized values through social media and popular culture. This situation often results in what Hormazal (2001) describes as a "liquid society," where orientation becomes pragmatic and role models are replaced by viral figures who may lack educational value. Here, Ulwan's emphasis on embodied role models becomes highly relevant: children and youth require living figures who consistently represent the values being taught, rather than abstract moral instructions.

Nevertheless, applying Ulwan's ideas today requires adaptation. For example, while his focus on family and teachers as role models remains crucial, the digital environment introduces competing sources of influence that cannot simply be ignored. Critical engagement with media literacy and institutional efforts to align formal education with authentic role modeling are necessary. Schools and policymakers must go beyond symbolic inclusion of "character education" in curricula and ensure that the moral climate of educational institutions reflects the values they intend to transmit.

In conclusion, Ulwan's thought provides an important framework for addressing contemporary moral challenges through a role model–based approach deeply rooted in Islamic values. However, its effective implementation depends on contextual adaptation, critical reflection on its limitations, and integration with broader strategies that address the complexities of modern life. Without such efforts, there is a risk that Ulwan's framework,

while rich in principle, may fall short in addressing the realities of today's fragmented moral landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Abdullah Nashih Ulwan's concept of moral education through exemplary methods, with the objective of understanding its relevance to contemporary Islamic education. The analysis reveals that Ulwan places role modelling as the central foundation in shaping an Islamic personality, emphasizing that the success of moral education requires consistency between words and deeds, sincerity, and the creation of a supportive environment involving families, teachers, and society. The findings indicate that Ulwan's ideas are not only rooted in Islamic tradition but also resonate with modern educational psychology, particularly Bandura's social learning theory. This highlights Ulwan's contribution in bridging classical Islamic pedagogy and contemporary theories of social influence, making his thought both theoretically significant and practically applicable in addressing the moral crisis of the modern era. Theoretically, Ulwan enriches the discourse on moral and character education by integrating Islamic spirituality with pedagogical practicality, standing at the intersection of tradition and modernity. Practically, his framework provides guidance for parents, teachers, and policymakers to strengthen character education through the cultivation of role models, not merely through curriculum reform. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. As a literature-based analysis, it relies on Ulwan's works and secondary interpretations, without empirical testing in real educational settings. Future research could explore the implementation of Ulwan's ideas in contemporary schools and pesantren, assess their effectiveness in various cultural contexts, and compare them with other approaches to character education. In conclusion, Ulwan's emphasis on role models offers a timely reminder that genuine moral education begins with the integrity of educators themselves. By combining spiritual depth with practical pedagogy, his thought contributes to the development of an Islamic education system that is both value-driven and socially responsive.

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