



The Implications of 'Abdus Şamad al-Falimbānī's Sufi Thought for *Santri* Moral Education in *Pesantren*

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ABSTRACT

Modern education often separates academic mastery from character formation, a profound challenge that also impacts Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). This qualitative field study explores the Sufi thought of 'Abdus Şamad al-Falimbānī in his classical work, *Sayr al-Sālikīn ilā 'Ibādat Rabb al-'Alamin*, and its implications for *santri* moral education at Pesantren Baiturrahman and Pesantren Darussalam, Bandung Regency. Data collected via textual analysis, observation, and interviews reveal that al-Falimbānī's core concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (soul purification) offers a progressive framework across seven levels of the *nafs*. In practice, this framework is operationalized through textual study, exemplary teaching, habituation to worship, and *muḥāsabah* (self-reckoning). This structured approach fosters enhanced self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social concern among *santri*. The study concludes that integrating al-Falimbānī's classical Sufi psychology with institutional habituation provides a highly relevant, comprehensive model for contemporary *pesantren*-based moral education.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education on a global scale faces a persistent and deeply rooted tension between the cultivation of cognitive knowledge and the formation of holistic moral character. In the pursuit of academic excellence and technological advancement, modern educational paradigms have increasingly marginalized the spiritual and ethical dimensions of human development. Rapid technological change, information overload, and shifting social patterns have profoundly complicated the moral development of young people. Consequently, educators and policymakers are witnessing a global crisis in character, manifested in rising cases of ethical degradation, weak emotional resilience, and a pervasive culture of instant gratification.

In the Indonesian context, *pesantren*—as the oldest indigenous Islamic educational institutions in the archipelago—have historically functioned as the ultimate fortresses of moral and spiritual education. However, *pesantren* are not immune to the aforementioned global pressures (Muhaimin, 2010). Although *pesantren* maintain a robust and long-standing tradition of moral education facilitated through communal living, rigorous religious habituation, and the exemplary conduct of *kiai* (charismatic religious leaders) and teachers, contemporary challenges continue to penetrate their walls. Preliminary observations conducted via initial site visits at two prominent Islamic boarding schools in Bandung Regency, West Java—Pesantren Baiturrahman and Pesantren Darussalam—revealed recurring difficulties among students (*santri*). Despite being immersed in a religious environment, many *santri* exhibit visible struggles with self-control, consistency in daily



worship, sincerity of intention (*ikhlas*), and the practical application of internalized religious values in their day-to-day interactions. This gap between cognitive religious knowledge and actualized moral conduct highlights an urgent need to revitalize the psychological and spiritual frameworks utilized within *pesantren* pedagogy.

To address this profound gap, both institutions continue to teach *Sayr al-Salikin ila 'Ibadat Rabb al-'Alamin*, the magnum opus of the highly influential eighteenth-century Malay-Indonesian scholar, Shaykh 'Abdus Šamad al-Falimbānī. Authored as a creative adaptation and contextual elaboration of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* specifically tailored for the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) context, the book articulates a comprehensive and systematic program of *taẓkiyat al-nafs*—the rigorous purification of the soul. Al-Falimbānī positioned this purification process as the absolute foundation for acquiring noble character (*akhlāq al-karimah*). Within his Sufi paradigm, al-Falimbānī held that true closeness to God, as well as moral perfection, is attained not merely through the superficial breadth of theological or jurisprudential knowledge, but through a sustained, agonizing, and ultimately transformative process of self-purification. This journey must be meticulously guided by a qualified teacher (*murabbi*), practiced through continuous spiritual exercise (*riyāḍah*), and maintained through an unyielding struggle against base, worldly desires (*mujābahah*).

Consequently, the concept of *taẓkiyat al-nafs* is directly and undeniably relevant to the modern *pesantren* educational framework, as it provides a structured psychological and spiritual roadmap specifically designed to correct the exact moral shortcomings observed among contemporary *santri*. Al-Falimbānī's detailed mapping of the seven levels of the soul (*nafs*)—from the lowest, destructive impulses of *nafs al-ammārah* to the perfected state of *nafs al-kāmilah*—offers educators a diagnostic and therapeutic tool. However, the study's preliminary findings critically indicate that the rich, transformative values embedded in the classical text have not been systematically internalized as a structured, institutionalized educational model. Instead, their transmission still depends heavily, and sometimes precariously, on individual teachers' localized initiatives and personal charisma, rather than a planned, sustained, and systematically evaluated institutional program.

Prior scholarship on Shaykh 'Abdus Šamad al-Falimbānī has been extensive, yet it has remained largely confined to specific disciplinary boundaries. The majority of existing literature has predominantly examined his intellectual biography, tracking his prestigious position within the transregional network of Middle Eastern and Nusantara scholars during the eighteenth century (Azra, 1994, 1999). Other foundational works have meticulously explored the theological, mystical, and philological content of his writings, analyzing how he synthesized orthodox Ash'arite theology with unitive Sufism (Abdullah, 2015). Related studies, such as the one conducted by Fathurrahman (2018), have successfully reconstructed his specific theoretical doctrines regarding *taẓkiyat al-nafs*. While these historical and philological studies are invaluable for understanding al-Falimbānī's intellectual legacy, they have not systematically examined how the profoundly educational concepts he articulated could be pragmatically operationalized as a functioning model of moral education within the living, breathing ecosystem of the modern *pesantren* system.

Conversely, existing contemporary research on *pesantren* moral education has largely focused on general teaching methods, broad character education policies, the sociological exemplary role of the *kiai*, and modern curriculum development. These studies frequently borrow frameworks from Western educational psychology or general Islamic ethics, without firmly grounding these pedagogical discussions in specific, classical Sufi psychologies of the self, such as those formulated by Nusantara scholars like al-Falimbānī.

This dichotomy leaves a clear and critical research gap: no study has yet comprehensively connected the theoretical moral-educational content of *Sayr al-Salikin* with its actual planning, practical implementation, continuous evaluation, and the specific challenges faced in real-world

pesantren settings. It is not enough to simply acknowledge that *pesantren* teach classical texts; it is crucial to investigate *how* the esoteric doctrines of the *nafs* are translated into daily disciplinary actions, emotional regulation strategies, and social etiquette (*adab*) for adolescents navigating the complexities of the digital age.

To address this critical gap, this study fundamentally analyzes the Sufi thought of 'Abdus Šamad al-Falimbānī relevant to *santri* moral education. Furthermore, it empirically investigates how that classical thought is implemented in practice, how its implementation is evaluated by educators, and what contemporary factors actively support or severely hinder its realization at Pesantren Baiturrahman and Pesantren Darussalam. Theoretically, this study aims to enrich the broader scholarship of Islamic education by systematically reconstructing a model of moral education that is firmly grounded in the rich intellectual heritage of a native Nusantara '*ulama*. Practically, it aims to offer *pesantren* stakeholders, contemporary educators, and institutional policymakers a robust conceptual resource for strengthening character formation—one that is simultaneously deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship and agilely responsive to the urgent, contemporary needs of modern moral education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing a dual-focused field-study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodology deliberately combined rigorous textual content analysis (a study-of-thought design) with deep, empirical field research. This synergistic approach allowed the researchers to first distill the core pedagogical and psychological concepts within the primary textual object, *Sayr al-Sālikīn ilā 'Ibādat Rabb al-'Ālamīn*, and subsequently examine its real-world empirical implementation, translation, and challenges within dynamic *pesantren* environments. *Sayr al-Sālikīn* was purposively selected as the primary text because it represents al-Falimbānī's most systematic and exhaustive treatment of *taẓkiyat al-nafs* and the developmental stages of the seven levels of the *nafs*, and crucially, because it actively functions as a core curricular reference at both selected research sites.

Fieldwork was conducted extensively at two specific sites: Pesantren Baiturrahman (located in Cisarua, West Bandung Regency) and Pesantren Darussalam (located in Dayeuhkolot, Bandung Regency). These two institutions were purposively chosen because they explicitly retain classical Sufi texts (*kitab kuning*) within their formal curricula, maintain established and highly structured systems of moral habituation, and granted the researchers adequate, sustained access for long-term observation, interviewing, and institutional document review.

Primary data were gathered from a meticulously selected group of key informants who play direct roles in the moral formation process: the supreme leader (*kiai*) of each *pesantren*, the specific religious teachers (*ustadz*) actively responsible for the instruction and exegesis of *Sayr al-Sālikīn*, as well as a cross-section of both senior and junior *santri*. Secondary data sources supplemented the field findings, including al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, contemporary scholarly literature on Sufism, prior theses, and internal institutional documents such as daily schedules, curriculum maps, and formal codes of conduct (*adab* regulations).

Data collection was executed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to capture personal experiences and pedagogical strategies; passive participant observation of religious instruction, congregational worship, and daily teacher-student interactions; and documentation review. These three methods were utilized jointly to ensure robust triangulation of sources and methods. Following data collection, the field data were systematically analyzed using the interactive qualitative model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This involved data condensation (selecting and simplifying field notes), data display (organizing information into

descriptive matrices), and conclusion drawing and verification. The credibility and validity of the findings were strictly maintained through member checking with the informants and peer debriefing with academic specialists in Sufism and Islamic educational psychology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sufi-Educational Concepts in Sayr al-Sālikīn

A meticulous textual analysis of *Sayr al-Sālikīn ilā 'Ibādat Rabb al-'Ālamīn* reveals that 'Abdus Ṣamad al-Falimbānī constructs a highly systematic, profoundly nuanced pedagogy of the soul that serves as a cornerstone for moral education (Fathurrahman, 2018). Unlike modern educational paradigms that frequently reduce moral instruction to the cognitive memorization of ethical codes or civic duties, al-Falimbānī approaches human character from a deeply ontological and psychological perspective (Abdullah, 2015). He fundamentally frames worship (*'ibādah*) not merely as the mechanical, jurisprudential execution of outward rituals, but as a profound spiritual engagement requiring the continuous, agonizingly maintained inward presence of the heart (*ḥudūr al-qalb*) (Al-Falimbani, n.d.). In this framework, sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) and inner attentiveness are positioned as the absolute substance of moral education, whereas outer rituals serve merely as the protective shell (Solihin, 2002).

Al-Falimbānī's pedagogical masterpiece is built upon the foundational concept of *taẓkiyat al-naḥs* (the purification of the soul), heavily influenced by al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* but contextualized for the Nusantara audience (Azra, 1994; Al-Ghazali, n.d.). He argues that noble character (*akhlāq karimah*) is never acquired through superficial habituation alone; rather, it is the organic, inevitable fruit of a purified internal state (Hawwa, 2006). To guide the student (*sālik*) toward this state, al-Falimbānī elaborates on a rigorous developmental psychology based on the seven levels of the soul (*naḥs*) (Solihin & Anwar, 2005). This hierarchical mapping provides educators with a sophisticated diagnostic tool to assess and treat the spiritual ailments of learners.

The first and lowest level is *Nafs al-Ammārah bi al-Sū'* (the soul that incites to evil) (Al-Falimbani, n.d.). At this stage, the student is entirely subjugated by base desires, impulsivity, and ego-driven motives. Educational intervention at this level requires strict discipline, external monitoring, and the forceful curtailment of destructive habits through rigorous spiritual exercise (*riyāḍah*) and the struggle against the ego (*mujābahah*) (Fathurrahman, 2018). The second level is *Nafs al-Lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul). Here, the student begins to develop a functioning moral conscience; they may still commit transgressions, but these are immediately followed by intense guilt and repentance (Syukur, 2004). The third level, *Nafs al-Mulhimah* (the inspired soul), marks a critical transition where the student begins to receive divine inspiration to perform good deeds, finding intrinsic pleasure in obedience.

The fourth level is *Nafs al-Muṭma'innah* (the tranquil soul). At this stage, the student has achieved a stable emotional and spiritual equilibrium (Al-Falimbani, n.d.). The fifth level, *Nafs al-Raḍiyyah* (the contented soul), is characterized by absolute satisfaction with the divine decree, where the student accepts both adversity and prosperity with equal grace (Solihin, 2002). The sixth level, *Nafs al-Mardīyyah* (the soul pleasing to God), reflects a state where the student's entire existence is aligned with divine will. Finally, the highest zenith is *Nafs al-Kāmilah* (the perfected soul), a rare state of absolute spiritual maturity (Fathurrahman, 2018).

To traverse these demanding stages, al-Falimbānī prescribes a tripartite operational method: *takballī*, *tahallī*, and *tajallī* (Al-Falimbani, n.d.; Solihin & Anwar, 2005). *Takballī* is the agonizing process of emptying the heart of destructive vices (*akhlāq madhmūmah*) such as arrogance (*kibr*), ostentation (*riyā'*), envy (*ḥasad*), and the love of worldly status (*ḥubb al-jāh*). Once the vessel of the heart is cleansed, it must undergo *tahallī*—the adornment of the soul with praiseworthy virtues (*akhlāq*

mahmūdah) such as patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*syukur*), and sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) (Hawwa, 2006). The culmination of this process is *tajallī*, the experience of divine illumination (Al-Falimbani, n.d.). Crucially, al-Falimbānī insists that this monumental psychological transformation cannot be undertaken autonomously; it requires a *murabbi* (spiritual guide) acting as a spiritual physician (Abdullah, 1983).

Implementation at the Two Pesantren

The transition of al-Falimbānī's theoretical framework from classical manuscript to lived reality was empirically observed at Pesantren Baiturrahman and Pesantren Darussalam. At both institutions, the leadership explicitly frames the ultimate purpose of education as the formation of *santri* who harmonize rigorous religious knowledge with impeccably noble character, actively resisting the modern educational paradigm that prioritizes cognitive achievement over moral integrity (Muhaimin, 2010; Tafsir, 2010). Consistent with traditional *pesantren* epistemology (Dhofier, 1982), the pedagogy surrounding *Sayr al-Sālikīn* is deliberately expansive; it is not confined to the physical boundaries of classroom recitation but is systematically woven into the *pesantren's* twenty-four-hour daily rhythm.

The formal instruction of the text utilizes the traditional *bandongan* and *sorogan* methods (Bruinessen, 1995), but with a critical modern adaptation. Teachers responsible for explicating the text reported a distinct pedagogical strategy: instruction always begins from the *santri's* immediate, lived experiences. Rather than initiating lessons with abstract Sufi cosmology, the *ustadz* grounds the discourse in everyday adolescent struggles, such as the phenomenology of a quick temper during a dormitory dispute or the psychological laziness encountered when waking up for the night prayer (*tahajjud*). Only after establishing this relatable baseline do they theoretically introduce al-Falimbānī's seven levels of the *nafs* (Al-Falimbani, n.d.). The explicit pedagogical aim here is deeply personal self-recognition and spiritual diagnosis (Nata, 2001).

Beyond formal instruction, the implementation relies heavily on continuous, rigorous habituation to worship and communal discipline, a hallmark of traditional Islamic education in Indonesia (Steenbrink, 1986). Both *pesantren* enforce a grueling daily schedule designed to break the dominance of *nafs al-ammārah*. This includes mandatory congregational prayers, structured periods of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and significantly, the practice of *qiyām al-layl* (night prayers) (Madjid, 1997). These practices are not treated as optional extracurriculars but as essential laboratories for *riyāḍah* (spiritual exercise) as prescribed by al-Falimbānī (Fathurrahman, 2018).

Furthermore, the implementation of *taẓkiyat al-nafs* is profoundly dependent on the exemplary conduct (*uswah ḥasanah*) of the educators. In the totalizing environment of the *pesantren*, the *kiai* and *ustadz* are subjected to the constant, unblinking scrutiny of their students (Dhofier, 1982). When *santri* observe their teachers embodying profound patience during conflicts, demonstrating genuine humility, and maintaining an unwavering commitment to nocturnal worship, the esoteric concepts of *Sayr al-Sālikīn* materialize into tangible, imitable realities. Both institutions also institutionalize *muḥāsabah* (self-reckoning), guiding *santri* to meticulously review their daily intentions and scrutinize their hearts for traces of arrogance or showing off (*riyā'*) (Hawwa, 2006). As a result of this immersive implementation, *santri* at both sites reported remarkable shifts in their character, showing enhanced emotional regulation and greater receptiveness to constructive correction.

Evaluation of Implementation

Evaluating the success of a curriculum based on *taẓkiyat al-nafs* presents a unique pedagogical challenge, primarily because the ultimate goal—the purification of the inward state—defies conventional, quantitative measurement (Tafsir, 2010). Reflecting the profoundly inward nature of

Sufi moral formation (Solihin, 2002), neither Pesantren Baiturrahman nor Pesantren Darussalam evaluates character development through standardized written tests, multiple-choice ethics exams, or reductionist quantitative scoring rubrics. Instead, both institutions have developed a sophisticated, highly qualitative, and longitudinal evaluation system that relies on the continuous observation of behavioral change over extended periods.

This evaluation focuses on nuanced, behavioral indicators that serve as outward symptoms of inward realities (Muhaimin, 2010). Key metrics include the refinement of *adab* (etiquette and profound respect) toward teachers and elders, the quality of harmony and empathy demonstrated in peer relationships, the level of personal discipline maintained without explicit supervision, and the degree of responsibility exhibited when entrusted with institutional tasks (Syukur, 2004). Furthermore, evaluators pay close attention to a *santri*'s emotional self-regulation during conflicts—observing whether a student reacts from the impulsive *nafs al-ammārah* or the composed *nafs al-muṭma'innah* (Al-Falimbani, n.d.). This holistic evaluation draws on the triangulated observations of classroom teachers, senior *santri*, and the dormitory supervisors (*musyrif*), who maintain the most intimate daily contact with the students.

Leadership at both institutions universally characterized this moral change as a gradual, non-linear, and often arduous process (Madjid, 1997). It is widely understood that spiritual growth involves periods of regression and stagnation. *Santri* who were initially highly resistant to discipline were frequently reported to become progressively more receptive to spiritual guidance over sustained periods of intense mentorship (Steenbrink, 1986). The evaluation process also explicitly identifies the supporting and inhibiting factors shaping the operationalization of al-Falimbānī's thought. Primary supporting factors include a visionary institutional leadership that unapologetically prioritizes character formation, high teacher competence in translating classical Sufi idioms, and the immersive nature of the residential *pesantren* environment (Dhofier, 1982).

Conversely, educators identified formidable contemporary inhibiting factors (Nata, 2001). Foremost is the intense psychological tension between the gradual, highly effortful nature of spiritual formation and the pervasive instant-gratification orientation fostered by digital technology. Younger *santri* often expect rapid, effortless results, making them vulnerable to frustration when facing the patience required by true character change (Muhaimin, 2010). Internally, teachers consistently pinpointed sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*) as the absolute most difficult trait to both instill and evaluate (Hawwa, 2006). Because *ikhlaṣ* is an entirely unobservable inward state, a student might exhibit flawless outward compliance while harboring corrupt internal motives, a reality that perpetually challenges the limits of behavioral evaluation. Furthermore, the *santri* themselves cited personal laziness and reactive emotional volatility as persistent daily obstacles to maintaining consistency (*istiḳāmah*) in their ongoing purification journey (Fathurrahman, 2018).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that al-Falimbānī's concept of *taẓkiyat al-nafs* should be understood as a transformative model of moral education rather than merely as a classical Sufi doctrine concerning individual spirituality. In *Sayr al-Sālikīn*, moral development begins with the purification of the inner self because observable behavior is regarded as an expression of the spiritual condition of the heart. This conception provides an important distinction between Sufi moral education and approaches that emphasize moral knowledge or behavioral compliance alone. The finding is consistent with Yufi (2023), who demonstrates that al-Ghazālī's Sufi values are closely associated with the development of spiritual intelligence among *santri*. It is also reinforced by Lestari (2026), who positions al-Ghazālī's integration of ethics and Sufism as a potentially relevant response to contemporary hedonistic tendencies in Islamic education. Within this perspective, morality is not simply taught as knowledge about good and bad conduct; rather, it is cultivated through continuous

transformation of motivation, consciousness, and spiritual orientation. The present study extends this discussion by showing how al-Falimbānī translated this Ghazālīan tradition into a systematic Nusantara Sufi pedagogy in which *taẓkiyat al-naḥs* becomes the foundation for developing *akhlāq karīmah*.

A particularly significant finding is al-Falimbānī's conceptualization of the seven levels of the *naḥs*, from *naḥs al-ammārah* to *naḥs al-kāmilah*. Rather than treating character as a fixed moral attribute, this hierarchy conceptualizes moral formation as a gradual developmental process in which learners may move through different states of self-control, moral awareness, emotional stability, and spiritual maturity. This interpretation has important pedagogical implications because it suggests that moral education should be responsive to the learner's internal condition rather than applying identical interventions to all students. At the lower stages, stronger discipline and supervision may be required, whereas increasingly reflective and self-regulated practices become possible as moral consciousness develops. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing that Sufi education in pesantren is fundamentally concerned with gradual spiritual and ethical formation rather than the transmission of religious knowledge alone (Maimun et al., 2026). Similarly, Alawi et al. (2025) show that Sufi teachings can contribute to the formation of religious behavior among *santri*. The seven-stage framework identified in the present study therefore provides a potentially useful developmental lens through which pesantren educators can interpret differences in students' moral and spiritual progress.

The findings further reveal that *takhallī*, *tahallī*, and *tajallī* constitute the operational mechanism of this transformative process. *Takhallī* requires learners to identify and progressively eliminate destructive dispositions such as arrogance, envy, ostentation, and excessive attachment to worldly recognition; *tahallī* involves cultivating patience, gratitude, sincerity, humility, and other virtues; while *tajallī* represents the culmination of spiritual refinement. This sequence is pedagogically important because it integrates moral diagnosis, corrective practice, and virtue formation within a coherent process. Contemporary research on Sufi-based character formation supports this interpretation. Wahyudin et al. (2026), for example, report that the integration of Sufi ethical values into pesantren life contributes to character formation through institutionalized values and daily practices. Juwita et al. (2025) more specifically identify Abdussamad al-Palimbani's thought as relevant to moral education within the pesantren tradition. The present findings deepen these studies by demonstrating that al-Falimbānī's contribution is not limited to a collection of moral values; it provides a sequential pedagogical mechanism through which undesirable dispositions are recognized, disciplined, replaced by virtues, and progressively internalized.

The implementation observed at Pesantren Baiturrahman and Pesantren Darussalam further demonstrates that the educational relevance of *Sayr al-Salikin* depends substantially on the contextualization of classical Sufi concepts within the lived experiences of contemporary *santri*. Teachers do not begin with abstract metaphysical explanations but connect concepts such as *naḥs al-ammārah*, *mujāhadah*, and *riyāḍah* with recognizable experiences, including anger during peer conflict, laziness in performing *tahajjud*, and difficulty maintaining personal discipline. This pedagogical adaptation is important because it prevents classical Sufi texts from becoming detached from students' actual moral struggles. The finding is compatible with A'dam's (2016) analysis of the relationship between *kyai*, tarekat, and pesantren education, which highlights the importance of spiritual authority and moral guidance in the pesantren tradition. It also corresponds with Maimun et al. (2026), who identify Sufism as a continuing formative tradition in the everyday religious life of *santri*. Thus, the contribution of classical Sufi literature to contemporary Islamic education appears to depend not simply on preserving the text, but on the educator's capacity to translate its spiritual vocabulary into pedagogically accessible interpretations.

Another major finding concerns the role of habituation and the total educational environment of the pesantren. Congregational prayer, *dhikr*, Monday–Thursday fasting, *qiyam al-layl*, communal discipline, and other structured religious practices function as practical laboratories for *riyāḍah* and *mujāhadah*. In this sense, moral education extends beyond formal classroom instruction and becomes embedded in the temporal, social, and spiritual organization of everyday life. This finding strengthens Juwita et al.'s (2025) argument regarding the continuing influence of al-Falimbānī's thought on pesantren moral education and is consistent with Wahyudin et al. (2026), who emphasize the integration of Sufi moral values into the institutional culture of pesantren. The important implication is that *taẓkiyat al-naḥs* cannot be effectively reduced to a discrete subject in the curriculum. Its pedagogical force derives from the alignment between what students learn, what they repeatedly practice, the social norms surrounding them, and the spiritual expectations embedded in the institution. Character formation is therefore better understood as an ecological process in which curriculum, ritual practice, community discipline, and institutional culture mutually reinforce one another.

Equally important is the finding that the effectiveness of this educational process depends on *uswah ḥasanah* and the relational authority of the *murabbī*, *kiai*, and *ustadz*. Students encounter moral concepts not only through textual explanation but also through continuous observation of how educators manage conflict, demonstrate humility, maintain discipline, and perform religious practices. This finding is particularly relevant to Sufi pedagogy because spiritual knowledge is understood as embodied knowledge: virtues must be witnessed before they can be meaningfully imitated and internalized. Yufi (2023) similarly connects the internalization of Sufi values with the development of spiritual qualities among pesantren students, while A'dam (2016) emphasizes the distinctive role of the *kiai* within the spiritual and educational structure of pesantren. The present study advances this discussion by identifying educator modelling as a mediating mechanism between classical Sufi knowledge and students' lived moral development. Consequently, the pedagogical competence required for teaching *Sayr al-Salikin* cannot be limited to textual mastery; it also requires congruence between the teacher's discourse and personal conduct.

The findings on evaluation further challenge conventional approaches to assessing character education. Both pesantren evaluate moral development longitudinally through observable indicators such as *adab*, interpersonal empathy, responsibility, discipline without direct supervision, receptiveness to correction, and emotional regulation rather than through standardized written examinations. This approach is consistent with the underlying epistemology of *taẓkiyat al-naḥs*, in which moral development is viewed as gradual, multidimensional, and partly internal. It also complements the findings of Alawi et al. (2025) regarding the behavioral implications of Sufi teaching and Wahyudin et al. (2026) concerning character formation through Sufi values. Nevertheless, the present findings expose an important epistemological limitation: outward behavior cannot fully represent inward states such as *ikhlāṣ*. A student may demonstrate discipline and religious compliance while their internal motivation remains inaccessible to educators. For this reason, assessment within Sufi-based moral education should not claim to measure spiritual purity directly. A more defensible approach is to triangulate prolonged behavioral observation, reflective *muḥāsabah*, educator assessment, and students' self-reflection as indirect indicators of developmental change.

The contemporary challenge identified by the study—particularly the tension between the slow discipline of spiritual formation and the instant-gratification orientation associated with digital life—further demonstrates the continuing relevance of al-Falimbānī's pedagogy. The traditional logic of *riyāḍah*, *mujāhadah*, *ṣabr*, and *istiḳamah* requires repetition, delayed gratification, and sustained self-regulation, whereas contemporary digital environments frequently reward immediacy, rapid stimulation, and continuous novelty. This does not mean that classical Sufi pedagogy should reject

digital culture; rather, its principles can provide a critical ethical framework for cultivating self-regulation within it. Lestari (2026) similarly argues for the relevance of al-Ghazālī's ethical-Sufi thought in responding to contemporary hedonistic tendencies, while recent pesantren studies continue to identify Sufi values as resources for strengthening religious and moral character (Alawi et al., 2025; Wahyudin et al., 2026). Future implementation should therefore explore how *mujābahah*, *muhāsabah*, and *murāqabah* can be translated into practices of digital self-control, critical consumption, emotional regulation, and responsible online behavior.

Taken together, the findings support a **Sufi-based transformative character education model** consisting of four interconnected processes: **spiritual diagnosis, purification, habituation, and reflective evaluation**. Spiritual diagnosis is represented by the hierarchy of the *nafs*; purification operates through *takballi*, *tahalli*, and ultimately *tajalli*; habituation occurs through *riyāḍah*, *mujābahah*, ritual discipline, communal life, and educator modelling; and reflective evaluation operates through *muhāsabah* and longitudinal observation of behavioral development. This model constitutes the principal contribution of the study because it connects al-Falimbānī's classical Sufi psychology with observable pedagogical practices in contemporary pesantren. Rather than positioning *Sayr al-Sālikīn* merely as a historical Sufi text, the findings demonstrate its potential as a pedagogical framework for integrating inner moral consciousness, disciplined practice, educator exemplarity, and continuous self-evaluation. This interpretation also expands existing scholarship on al-Palimbani and pesantren character education (Juwita et al., 2025) by explaining **how** Sufi concepts can move from textual doctrine to institutional practice and, subsequently, to observable processes of character formation.

CONCLUSION

The Sufi thought of 'Abdus Ṣamad al-Falimbānī, as meticulously articulated in his magnum opus *Sayr al-Sālikīn ilā 'Ibādat Rabb al-'Ālamīn*, offers a profound and highly systematized conceptual paradigm for contemporary moral education. This study demonstrates that al-Falimbānī's core doctrine of *taẓkiyat al-nafs*—the rigorous purification of the soul across its seven developmental levels—transcends the limitations of modern educational models that often reduce character building to mere cognitive instruction. By integrating the progressive stages of *takballi* (emptying vices), *tahalli* (adorning virtues), and *tajalli* (divine illumination), this classical framework provides *pesantren* educators with a sophisticated psychological diagnostic tool to address the root causes of moral degradation among adolescents.

Empirical observations at Pesantren Baiturrahman and Pesantren Darussalam confirm that the successful operationalization of this classical Sufi psychology relies not on rigid classroom lectures, but on total environmental immersion. The transmission of these values demands the sustained, authentic exemplary conduct (*uswah ḥasanah*) of the *murabbī*, relentless institutional habituation through structured worship, and the deeply internalized practice of continuous self-reckoning (*muhāsabah*). Through these immersive methods, *santri* exhibit observable improvements in emotional self-regulation, interpersonal empathy, and profound respect (*adab*). The evaluation of such spiritual transformation correctly eschews quantitative metrics in favor of longitudinal, behavioral observation, accepting that true moral development is a gradual, non-linear journey.

Nevertheless, the implementation of this classical framework faces unprecedented contemporary challenges, most notably the profound tension between the excruciating patience required for genuine spiritual struggle (*mujābahah*) and the pervasive instant-gratification culture fueled by the digital age. Furthermore, the perpetual difficulty of instilling and measuring pure sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) remains an inherent limitation of human evaluation. Ultimately, this study concludes that integrating al-Falimbānī's traditional pedagogy into modern institutional settings offers a

powerful, culturally rooted antidote to contemporary moral crises, suggesting a vital direction for future Islamic educational policy.

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