

Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts on Education as a Means of Empowering the People

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Abstract. *This study examines Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on education as a means of community empowerment and social transformation. Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of the Muhammadiyah organization, viewed education as the primary tool to liberate Muslims from ignorance, backwardness, and social injustice. His educational approach integrated religious and general sciences while providing practical skills relevant to societal needs. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study to explore Ahmad Dahlan's educational concepts and their application in community empowerment. The findings reveal that Ahmad Dahlan emphasized inclusive education, ensuring access for all social groups, including the poor and women, while focusing on the development of individuals with strong social and moral awareness. In his perspective, education functions as an agent of social change, fostering a more just, prosperous, and civilized society. Rooted in Islamic values, his educational model remains relevant in addressing modern educational challenges.*

Keywords: Ahmad Dahlan, Muhammadiyah, Islamic Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a very strategic role in building a progressive, prosperous, and just society (Akhyar et al., 2025). In Islam, education is not only understood as an effort to transfer knowledge, but also as a process of forming a complete human personality, which is able to bridge the relationship between individuals and God (hablummin Allah), with fellow human beings (hablum minannas), and with the universe. Education based on spiritual and moral values is the main foundation in producing a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also has social sensitivity and collective responsibility towards society (Abbas, 2020).

In the early 20th century, when Muslims in the archipelago were in a state of being colonized, left behind, and marginalized from the flow of modernization, an Islamic reform figure named Ahmad Dahlan was born. Ahmad Dahlan, who was born with the name Muhammad Darwis, was a cleric and intellectual who had a great vision in bringing Muslims out of backwardness. He realized that one of the main causes of the backwardness of Muslims was the low level of education and minimal access to modern knowledge. At that time, the education system among Muslims tended to be traditional, limited to religious teaching in surau or Islamic boarding schools, without providing space for general knowledge such as science, technology, and foreign languages.

Ahmad Dahlan viewed that ignorance was the root of all the problems of the people, from poverty, social injustice, to oppression under colonial rule. Therefore, he saw education as the main way to free the people from these shackles (Hasanah et al., 2024). However, the education meant by Ahmad Dahlan was not education that was solely oriented towards intellectualism or material achievement, but rather education that integrated religious and moral values with modern knowledge. For him, education must be able to create individuals who were not only academically intelligent, but also had noble morals and high social awareness.

As the founder of Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan later founded various educational institutions that adopted a modern approach. The Muhammadiyah schools he founded not only taught religious knowledge, but also general knowledge, such as mathematics, physics, biology, and Dutch. This approach was considered revolutionary in its time, because previously Islamic religious education tended to be exclusive and only taught religious aspects textually. Ahmad Dahlan also introduced a structured curriculum-based education system and emphasized the importance of education for all levels of society, regardless of gender or social status.

One of Ahmad Dahlan's major contributions was to fight for women's education. At that time, women were often considered not to need formal education and were only prepared to become housewives. However, Ahmad Dahlan viewed women as an important part of empowering the community. He founded Madrasah Diniyah and Aisyiyah, educational institutions specifically for women, with the aim of producing a generation of women who are intelligent, independent, and able to contribute to community development. For him, women's education is not only a right, but also a basic need to create quality families and strong communities (Miranda & Muchtar, 2023).

In Ahmad Dahlan's vision, education not only functions to produce individuals who are personally successful, but must also have a broad social impact. Education, according to him, is a means to create social transformation, where educated individuals are expected to be able to become agents of change that bring goodness to society. Islamic values such as *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (inviting to goodness and preventing evil) are the main foundations in the educational model developed by Ahmad Dahlan. He believed that educated and enlightened Muslims would be able to face the challenges of the times, both in spiritual, intellectual, and social contexts (Zaidan et al., 2025).

Therefore, this study aims to examine in depth Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on education as a means of empowering the people. With this approach, this paper attempts to explain how the concept of education initiated by Ahmad Dahlan is not only relevant in its time, but also

provides inspiration for the development of Islamic education in a modern context. In addition, this study will also explore how Ahmad Dahlan's ideas about education can be implemented to answer various social, cultural, and economic challenges faced by Muslims in the current era of globalization.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method to analyze Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on education as a means of empowering the people (Akhyar & Kosim, 2024). Data were collected from various primary sources, such as Muhammadiyah documents and notes related to Ahmad Dahlan, as well as secondary sources in the form of books, journals, and relevant articles. The data analysis technique was carried out through content analysis with data reduction steps, categorization of main themes, and interpretation to understand the socio-historical context of Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts and their relevance in the modern era. Data validation was carried out by triangulating sources to ensure the accuracy and validity of the information. This research is library research, with implementation focused on literature exploration to produce a comprehensive understanding of Ahmad Dahlan's ideas on education as a tool for social transformation and empowerment of the people.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Education According to Ahmad Dahlan

Ahmad Dahlan views education as an integral process that not only focuses on intellectual development, but also includes character building, instilling moral values, and increasing social awareness. In his idea, education should be a means to realize the goals of human life as taught in Islam, namely to become a caliph on earth and serve Allah ('abdullah wa khalifatullah). Therefore, education is not only limited to mastering knowledge, but also the formation of humans who have noble morals, have social awareness, and are able to bring positive changes to society (Sari et al., 2023).

In the education system designed by Ahmad Dahlan, he integrated two types of knowledge, namely religious knowledge and general knowledge. Religious knowledge is considered important for forming a spiritual and moral personality, while general knowledge is needed to face the challenges of life and make a real contribution to the progress of the community. Ahmad Dahlan realized that at that time, religious education was often isolated from the development of modern science. This caused Muslims to lag behind in various areas of life. To overcome this problem, he founded Muhammadiyah schools that combined a

modern curriculum with religious teaching. This curriculum includes subjects such as mathematics, science, language, and practical skills, accompanied by learning the Qur'an, hadith, and morals.

One of the important principles in Ahmad Dahlan's educational concept is *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (inviting to goodness and preventing evil). This principle is the philosophical foundation for all educational activities that he developed. Ahmad Dahlan believed that education should be able to produce individuals who not only think about their own interests, but also care about the conditions of the surrounding community. He wanted education to produce a generation that is aware of social responsibility and is able to become agents of change to create a better society (Mainuddin & Septiani, 2022).

Ahmad Dahlan also emphasized the importance of an inclusive educational approach, which includes all groups, regardless of social, economic, or gender background. At that time, women's education was still considered unimportant and even taboo in certain communities. However, Ahmad Dahlan dared to challenge this view by establishing special educational institutions for women, such as Madrasah Diniyah and Aisyiyah. In her view, educated women will be able to become important pillars in building quality families, which in turn will contribute to broader community empowerment.

In addition, Ahmad Dahlan strongly emphasized the importance of education that is oriented towards practice and real application in everyday life. He believed that the knowledge taught in schools must be relevant to the needs of society and be able to provide solutions to various social problems faced by the community. Therefore, he introduced interactive and contextual learning methods, where students are invited to think critically, discuss, and understand how the knowledge they learn can be applied in real life.

Ahmad Dahlan also viewed education as a medium for building social solidarity in society. In the educational process, he emphasized the importance of instilling values such as mutual cooperation, helping each other, and justice. This is in line with the mission of Muhammadiyah as an Islamic movement that is not only oriented towards religious renewal, but also towards social renewal (Alinata et al., 2024). Thus, according to Ahmad Dahlan, education is an effort to create individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also have high social sensitivity and commitment to the welfare of the community.

Furthermore, Ahmad Dahlan sees education as a continuous process (long-life education), where humans continue to learn throughout their lives to achieve spiritual and intellectual perfection. He believes that learning does not stop at school, but must be continued in everyday life through reflection, experience, and community service (Islahi & Parhan, 2024).

In a philosophical context, Ahmad Dahlan's concept of education is greatly inspired by the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith. One of the verses that is an important foundation in his thinking is Surah Al-Mujadalah verse 11: "Allah will exalt those who believe among you and those who are given knowledge by degrees." This verse shows that knowledge has a high position in Islam, as long as it is combined with faith. On this basis, Ahmad Dahlan emphasized that true education is education that is able to unite knowledge and faith.

Overall, the concept of education according to Ahmad Dahlan has characteristics that are holistic, progressive, and oriented towards empowering the people. His ideas encompass spiritual, intellectual, and social aspects that are integrated with each other, making it one of the most relevant models of Islamic education of all time. This approach not only answers the challenges faced by Muslims at that time, but also provides inspiration for the development of Islamic education in the modern era.

Education as a Tool for Empowering the Community

Ahmad Dahlan views education as the main instrument for building civilization and empowering the people. In the context of empowering the people, according to Ahmad Dahlan, education not only functions as a tool to improve individual intellectual abilities, but also as a strategic means to free Muslims from various forms of backwardness, both economically, socially, and spiritually (Huda & Kusumawati, 2019). For him, education is the main key to creating sustainable social transformation, where Muslims are not only recipients of change, but also become the main actors in building a better society.

During Ahmad Dahlan's lifetime, Muslims in the archipelago were in a state of oppression due to colonialism, and faced major challenges in the form of low levels of education and rampant ignorance. This condition caused Muslims to be marginalized in various aspects of life, including in economics, politics, and culture (Sabrina et al., 2024). Ahmad Dahlan realized that ignorance was the root of the powerlessness of the people. Therefore, he placed education as a fundamental step to elevate the status of Muslims and free them from the shackles of colonialism and social injustice.

The concept of empowering people through education initiated by Ahmad Dahlan has several important dimensions:

1. Education to Increase Self-Awareness

Ahmad Dahlan believed that education should begin by instilling awareness in individuals about their potential and responsibilities as Muslims. Education is not only intended to provide knowledge, but also to raise spiritual and social awareness in the people. In his view, an educated person will have a deeper awareness of his obligation to

contribute to the welfare of society. Therefore, education must create individuals who are able to understand their rights and obligations, both as servants of Allah ('abdullah) and as caliphs on earth (khalifatullah).

2. Education to Overcome Social Inequality

Ahmad Dahlan saw education as a tool to overcome social inequality that occurred in society. He realized that one of the main causes of the backwardness of Muslims at that time was the lack of access to quality education. Therefore, he founded Muhammadiyah schools that were open to all groups, regardless of social, economic, or gender status. In the educational institutions he founded, he paid special attention to the poor and women, who at that time were often neglected in the formal education system. By providing inclusive education, Ahmad Dahlan hopes to create equality in society and open up opportunities for all individuals to achieve a better life (Azman & Helandri, 2022).

3. Education as a Tool of Emancipation

In addition to creating equality, education is also viewed by Ahmad Dahlan as a tool of emancipation from the shackles of colonialism, both physically and mentally. He believes that Muslims will not be able to rise from adversity as long as they are still trapped in ignorance and dependence on others. Through education, people are taught to think critically, independently, and innovatively so that they can free themselves from this dependence. According to Ahmad Dahlan, education must be able to produce a generation that has intellectual independence, who can face global challenges without losing their Islamic identity.

4. Education as a Means of Social Transformation

Ahmad Dahlan emphasized that education should not stop at individual development, but must have a real impact on people's lives. In Ahmad Dahlan's vision, education is a process of social transformation that aims to create a more just, prosperous, and equitable society. He wanted education to produce individuals who were capable of becoming agents of change, who could lead Muslims towards progress and independence. Islamic values such as *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (encouraging good and preventing evil) became an important foundation in this educational process.

5. Education Based on Islamic Values

Ahmad Dahlan believed that empowering the people through education could only be done if the education was based on Islamic values. In the educational system he developed, he integrated the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith with modern science. He wanted education to not only produce individuals who were academically intelligent, but

also had good morals and were able to internalize Islamic values in everyday life. With this approach, education is expected to create individuals who are not only successful in the world, but also in the afterlife.

6. Education for the Economic Development of the People

Ahmad Dahlan also viewed education as a means to improve the economic level of the people. He realized that poverty was one of the main factors causing the powerlessness of Muslims. Therefore, he encouraged the teaching of practical skills in the education he developed. Muhammadiyah schools not only teach theoretical knowledge, but also skills that are relevant to the needs of society, such as trade, agriculture, and crafts. In this way, education not only creates intelligent individuals, but also productive ones who are able to contribute to economic development (Bustam, 2021).

7. Education to Instill Leadership

Ahmad Dahlan believed that education should create visionary and noble leaders. For him, good leaders are those who have intellectual, spiritual, and social intelligence. Therefore, the education he designed aims to produce a generation that is not only academically competent, but also has a strong leadership spirit. In Muhammadiyah education, values such as responsibility, justice, and the courage to fight for the truth are always emphasized as part of the learning process.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on education as a tool for empowering the people remain relevant today. In the era of globalization, the challenges faced by Muslims are increasingly complex, ranging from moral crises to economic disparities. Ahmad Dahlan's ideas teach that education must be holistic, encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and social development, so as to be able to create a generation that is not only competitive, but also has integrity and commitment to the welfare of the people. With this concept, Ahmad Dahlan shows that education is not just a teaching and learning process, but a movement that aims to create a people who are independent, empowered, and able to face the challenges of the times. This idea provides timeless inspiration for the development of Islamic education as a strategic instrument in building a better society.

Education and Social Transformation

Ahmad Dahlan views education as the main force to drive social transformation, namely the process of systematic and sustainable change in society towards better conditions. In his view, education is not only aimed at producing intellectually intelligent individuals, but also individuals who are able to make real contributions to social change. Education, according to

Ahmad Dahlan, is a catalyst that connects knowledge, morality, and social action to create a more just, prosperous, and civilized society (JAMHARI, 2018).

During Ahmad Dahlan's lifetime, social transformation of Muslims was greatly needed because of the condition of the people who were experiencing backwardness in various fields due to colonialism and minimal access to quality education. In this situation, Ahmad Dahlan saw that education must be the main tool to raise the collective consciousness of the people and encourage them to make changes. He believed that education was not only individual, but had a strong social dimension, where education must be able to change the mindset, attitudes, and behavior of society collectively.

1. Education as a Tool for Social Liberation

Ahmad Dahlan believed that education is a means of liberating people from various forms of oppression, both physical and mental. According to him, education must be able to free people from ignorance, backwardness, and injustice that binds them. By providing relevant and inclusive education, Ahmad Dahlan wanted Muslims to be aware of their rights and the ability to fight for justice and prosperity. In this context, education is understood as a process of empowerment that builds the independence of the people so that they are no longer dependent on other parties, including colonizers.

2. Education to Change the Mindset of Society

One of the social transformations emphasized by Ahmad Dahlan was changing the mindset of society. He realized that one of the main causes of the stagnation of Muslims was a traditional mindset that was rigid and less open to change. Through education, Ahmad Dahlan tried to change the way people view things from a fatalistic mindset to a progressive and dynamic mindset. He encouraged people to think critically, rationally, and based on contextual Islamic teachings. Education managed by Ahmad Dahlan, such as Muhammadiyah schools, not only teaches religious knowledge, but also general knowledge that is relevant to the development of the times, such as science, mathematics, and foreign languages. In this way, he hopes to produce a generation that has broad insight and is able to face global challenges (Wulandari et al., 2023).

3. Education as a Means of Social Solidarity

Ahmad Dahlan also views education as a tool to strengthen social solidarity in society. In the education process, he emphasized the importance of instilling values such as mutual cooperation, helping each other, and justice. He believed that education must be able to create individuals who care not only about themselves, but also about the interests of society at large. This principle is reflected in the concept of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*

which is the philosophical foundation of Ahmad Dahlan's education. Through education, he wanted to create a society that has a collective awareness to help each other and fight for good together.

4. Education to Create Transformational Leaders

For Ahmad Dahlan, social transformation is impossible without leaders who are able to bring about change. Therefore, the education he designed also aims to produce leaders who have vision, integrity, and commitment to the welfare of the people. According to him, education must form individuals who are not only intellectually competent, but also have a strong leadership spirit. He emphasized the importance of values such as responsibility, courage, and justice as part of the education process. By producing transformational leaders, Ahmad Dahlan hopes that education can be a driving force for social change in society.

5. Education for Economic Development

Social transformation also includes economic aspects, and Ahmad Dahlan realized that poverty is one of the biggest obstacles to social change. Therefore, according to him, education must be able to create individuals who are economically productive and have skills that are relevant to the needs of society. In the educational institutions he founded, such as Muhammadiyah schools, he taught practical skills that students could use to improve their standard of living. For example, skills in the fields of trade, agriculture, and handicrafts. In this way, education not only creates intelligent individuals, but also economically independent ones, which in turn can improve the welfare of society as a whole (Purnama et al., 2023).

6. Education to Build Civilized Society

Ahmad Dahlan views education as a tool to create a civilized society. In his view, a civilized society is a society that upholds moral values, justice, and diversity. According to him, education must be able to instill these values in individuals so that they can contribute to the development of a harmonious and just society. In this context, education also functions to form a culture of dialogue and tolerance in a pluralistic society.

7. Education as a Continuous Process

Social transformation cannot be achieved instantly, but requires a continuous process. Therefore, Ahmad Dahlan views education as a lifelong process (long-life education). He believes that learning does not only occur in schools, but also in society through various community service and reflection activities. With this approach, social

transformation can continue to occur along with the development of individuals and society (Rahmawati, 2021).

In the modern context, Ahmad Dahlan's ideas on education and social transformation remain relevant. Social challenges such as economic inequality, social conflict, and moral crisis are still problems faced by Muslims in various parts of the world. Education that is oriented towards social transformation, as initiated by Ahmad Dahlan, can be a solution to overcome these challenges. By integrating Islamic values, science, and practical skills, education can create individuals who are able to bring positive change to society. It is understandable that Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts show that education is a very powerful instrument for creating sustainable social change. By making education a tool for empowering people and social transformation, he made a major contribution to creating an independent, empowered, and civilized Islamic society. His ideas are a valuable legacy that continues to inspire the development of Islamic education in the present and the future.

4. CONCLUSION

Education according to Ahmad Dahlan is a process that not only aims to create individuals who are intellectually intelligent, but also to form characters who are moral, have noble character, and have high social awareness. He views education as a tool for empowering the people that can free Muslims from backwardness and social injustice caused by colonialism and ignorance. In his view, education is a means to integrate religious knowledge and general knowledge, produce a generation that has broad knowledge, and is able to overcome the challenges of the times with a contextual approach.

The concept of education initiated by Ahmad Dahlan aims to achieve greater social transformation, by emphasizing the empowerment of individuals and society through inclusive, progressive, and Islamic-value-based education. Education must be able to change the mindset of society from dependence on ignorance to critical awareness and independence. In this case, education functions as a means to create a just, harmonious, and civilized society, as well as a tool to build social solidarity and strengthen social structures that support shared prosperity.

Ahmad Dahlan also emphasized the importance of education as a tool for social liberation that not only equips individuals with intellectual skills, but also with practical skills that can improve their economic standard of living. Education under the auspices of Muhammadiyah, founded by Ahmad Dahlan, opened wider access to all levels of society, regardless of social, economic, or gender background. He also dared to challenge traditional views that limited

education for women, inviting them to play an active role in family and community development.

On the other hand, education for Ahmad Dahlan was not limited to the schoolroom, but must be a lifelong process. This concept of lifelong education is relevant in facing the challenges of an ever-evolving era. Education must be able to prepare individuals to become agents of change who can lead society towards sustainable prosperity and progress.

Overall, Ahmad Dahlan's thoughts on education as a tool for empowering the people and social transformation provide a strong foundation for the development of holistic, sustainable Islamic education that is oriented towards the welfare of the people. His approach that integrates religious knowledge with general knowledge, as well as an emphasis on morality and social awareness, remains relevant to facing the challenges of education in this modern era. Ahmad Dahlan's educational legacy is not only limited to his concept of formal education, but also to the basic values that must be lived in every aspect of daily life to create a more just, prosperous, and civilized society.

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