
Book Review

**Juxtaposition of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and John Dewey'S
Progressive Thoughts**

Mu'arif

- Book title : *Paradigma Pendidikan Berkemajuan: Teori dan Praksis Pendidikan Progresif Religius KH Ahmad Dahlan*
- Author : Dr. Mohamad Ali, M.Pd.
- Pages : xxxvi + 326 pages
- Edition : I, October 2017
- Publisher : Suara Muhammadiyah

At least, there are three Indonesian pedagogues who have initiative to put forward modern education in the early twentieth century. They are K.H. Ahmad Dahlan with Muhammadiyah movement, Ki Hajar Dewantara with Taman Siswa, and Mohammad Sjafei with INS Kayutanam. The figures as well as the educational thoughts of Ki Hajar Dewantara and Mohammad Sjafei have been frequently discusses in their biographies, but the figure of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is less recognized. For instance, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and his educational movement and thought are not explained in a historical book entitled *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia V* by Marwati Djoened Poesponegoro and Nugroho Notosusanto (1990). In fact, his renewal movement that is entirely manifested in the organization of Muhammadiyah has a high concern in the educational sphere, in addition to the health, social services, scouting, and the struggle of women equality. Compared to INS Kayutanam and Taman Siswa, Muhammadiyah movement in educational sphere is more phenomenal. However, the marginalization of the roles and thoughts of Ahmad Dahlan in the narrative of Indonesian historiography has led to 'empty space' between the historical chains of Indonesian education (p. 5-8), particularly in the history of educational thought. Thus, Mohamad Ali, a Muhammadiyah activist and prolific writer, laid the basic thesis in his dissertation by employing a historical approach and educational philosophy.

Ali's courage to set his studies into perspective on modern educational theories is deservedly appreciated. So far, previous studies

on K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and Muhammadiyah are preoccupied on either the national historical context to investigate the chains of the Indonesian history of education or the transnational context to reveal the chain of reformation of the Islamic world (p. 12). By identifying the main concept of educational thought propounded by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, Ali found at least five keywords: “pragmatic,” “progressive,” “social-pedagogical,” “renewal (*tajdid*),” and “progressive.” The term “pragmatic” is obtained from previous studies (Alfian, 1989; Karel A Steenbrink, 1994) that put the figure of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan as a pragmatist. “Progressive” is derived from the concept and theory of Pragmatism. “Social-pedagogical” refers to the statement of Roeslan Abdulgani (1963) who claimed Muhammadiyah is mainly oriented its movement on social-pedagogical realm. “Renewal” refers to previous studies of the *tajdid* movement in which Muhammadiyah is included in the chains of the modern Islamic revival movement (Harun Nasution, 1987; Arbiyah Lubis, 1993). Meanwhile, “progressive” is a relatively original keyword as quoted from the interview between Amir Hamzah Wirjosoekarto and a pupil of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, Siti Umniyah, that the founder of Muhammadiyah had advised his pupils to become progressive scholars/intellectuals.

Ali's preference to use John Dewey's theory of Progressive Education Philosophy should be appreciated. At least, according to the writer's judgment, there are two possible considerations why K.H. Ahmad Dahlan can be juxtaposed with John Dewey in the context of their educational thoughts as carried out by Mohamad Ali. *First*, the international context. *Second*, the background of those figures.

The world endured the post-World War I bankruptcy. The impact was not solely affected the Western political system, but also changed the socio-cultural system adopted by the West. The old ideology or value system as the tradition was criticized in line with the demands of the era that compelled practical solutions to the increasingly complicated human reality. The Western was querying the philosophy of traditionalist system or Perennialism, which was perceived irrelevant in facing the demands of the era. Consequently, new paradigms were pioneered by philosophers who inquired the concept of Idealism because it was considered transcendent, beyond the human capacity of understanding. In this context, the rise of the philosophical school of Pragmatism was a response to the failure of traditionalist philosophy in providing practical solutions to the problems within the modern society.

It such as circumstance, John Dewey promulgated his philosophical thought.

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and John Dewey are actually present in the same era, but with different location and cultural background. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan lives in the East, precisely in the Dutch East Indies, while John Dewey lives in the West, in the United States. The Eastern world is renowned for its religious spiritualism in contrast to the Western world with its materialism. Even though K.H. Ahmad Dahlan lives in the same period with John Dewey, their dissimilar place and cultural background powerfully influenced their way of thinking.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey puts forward the basic concept of “education as necessity of life” in the context of human life as a social being. People live in a dynamic social-society system like living organisms. Society as a living “organic entity” consists of individuals with intellectual and moral personality. As an organic entity, society is a dynamic one. Consequently, all the values clinched by a society are relative relying on the principle of usefulness and benefit for the society in certain era and place. Social interaction among individuals is dynamically intertwined, in which becomes the meaning of education according to John Dewey. He declared the educational process involves the active role of the individuals (humans) in their environmental consciousness. This process that entails all human capabilities is barely conscious and initiated from the moment an individual is born.

In his point of view, Mohamad Ali proposes at least three key concepts of John Dewey to be juxtaposed with the educational concept of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan. *First*, intelligence or human active intelligence to solve life problems. *Second*, experience or empirical experience. *Third*, progress as a logical consequence of the ever-dynamic character of society (p. 53).

As a Pragmatic philosopher, John Dewey underlines his philosophical thinking on the aspects of experience in human life. Therefore, he offered pragmatism. Nevertheless, he also put the concept of intelligence in man as one of the “instruments”—John Dewey’s thought is also renowned as Instrumentalism—to understand the empirical experience. Conceptually, the term *intelligence* is more mechanical, which is dissimilar with the term *intellectual* which is metaphysical. In the philosophy of Pragmatism, the tradition of speculative thought, particularly the metaphysical concepts that are relatively complicated to seize by the human active intelligence, indeed obtain substantial

criticism. They propose a new conception of metaphysics that is more comprehensible to the human active intelligence, namely the concept of mechanical intelligence each of which is bound to each other between the idea and the empirical experience.

The concept of human *experience* becomes a focus in John Dewey's study of philosophy. He laid the empirical experience as the central instrument after intelligence. The experience is accumulative comprising small particles that converge into a unity of living organisms with the involvement of human's role. An experience contains a truth. Thus, a lot of experiences also mean a lot of truths. Since each experience has its own value of truth, while the characteristics of the experience are private and dynamic, the truth according to John Dewey is relative (relativism). There is no absolute truth in the philosophy of Pragmatism, since truth is continuously corrected by the subsequent new truth. Hence, a dynamic experience necessitates a "progressive" spirit to persistently update concepts as new truths are discovered. John Dewey's epistemological framework which is based on empirical experience becomes the foundation for the development of scientific knowledge. In pertaining with this, he proposed the concepts and theories of scientific methods that form the basis for the development of positivistic knowledge.

Juxtaposed with John Dewey's progressive educational concept, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's concept is actually diverse as claimed in the beginning of the process of this study. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan with his religious cultural background has obviously different cosmological style with John Dewey's materialistic cultural background. Ontologically, the religious Eastern society has propensity to perceive reality in a dichotomy: material/empirical and spiritual/idealist. Beyond the concept of metaphysics, in the Muslim's point of view, empirical reality has multiple dimensions and also implications for the eschatological concept (life after the end of empirical realm). Each intention, thought, and action of human in the empirical realm implies the goodness or evilness of life in the eschatological realm (the hereafter). The eschatological concept that transcends metaphysics is absence in the Western philosophical system. Nevertheless, in the epistemological and axiological dimension, John Dewey's progressive educational thought is intertwined with K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought. The juxtaposition of the meaning and relevance of the ideas of these two figures is presented.

Ali found out that the concept of progressive education devised by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is the renewal of Islam (*tajdid fil Islam*) which leads to Ibn Taimiyah's thought to Muhammad Abduh. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan promotes *tajdid* movement that has passed complex socio-political dynamics, specifically in the early twentieth century which marks the rise of the national awakening. This educational thought is laid in the context of *tajdid* in educational sphere.

K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is renowned for his "pragmatic" in the sense of highlighting actions rather than theorization that affirms the resolute "pragmatic" of this Muhammadiyah's central figure. However, this pragmatism is preoccupied in the epistemological and axiological dimension which is indeed the spirit of philosophical thoughts of Pragmatism.

As a *mujaddid*, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan puts the Quran and Sunna as the main source of knowledge with *ijtihad* (optimal function of active intelligence) to reveal new meaning (truth) in Islam to be implemented in social life. The consequence of *ijtihad* is to uncover "new truth" relevant to the development of the era. Thus, the spirit of *tajdid* is in accordance with Progressivism in terms of the desire for "progress." *Tajdid* movement in education focuses on the efforts for community empowerment as well as ignorance and poverty alleviation. Therefore, it is reasonable if some scholars suggest that K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's movement embodied in the Muhammadiyah is a "social-pedagogical movement."

In this book, Mohamad Ali succeeded in establishing and simultaneously asserting the terminology of "progressive" in the educational concept of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan which is less recognized. This terminology is an outcome of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's genuine contemplation might be hardly understood when it is translated in the contemporary context. Nevertheless, by using John Dewey's progressive educational theory as the approach, the term "progressive" in the context of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought can be comprehended easily.

Paradigma Pendidikan Berkemajuan: Teori dan Praksis Pendidikan Progresif Religius K.H. Ahmad Dahlan is an intellectual work of high quality academic standard. In overall, the presence of this book will hopefully trigger other scholars to intensely divulge K.H. Ahmad Dahlan's ideas by using other perspectives. If Mohamad Ali succeeds in juxtaposing K.H. Ahmad Dahlan with John Dewey, it is

Mu'arif

expected there will be researchers who are interested in juxtaposing the educational thought of the founder of Muhammadiyah with other theorists, e.g. the critical education of Paulo Freire.

**) Member of Primary and Secondary Education Council, Muhammadiyah Central Executive.*