THOUGHTS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION FIGURES IN INDONESIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IDEAS, CONTEXTS, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Abstract

This writing explores the educational thoughts of five prominent Islamic thinkers in Indonesia—KH Ahmad Dahlan, KH Hasyim Asy'ari, Nurcholish Madjid, Hasan Langgulung, and Abdurrahman Wahid—using a comparative-critical approach. Through in-depth literature analysis and thematic comparison, this study examines the similarities and differences in their educational concepts, particularly in terms of objectives, curriculum, the relation between religious and secular sciences, and social orientation. The findings reveal that despite differing approaches, their visions collectively contribute to a holistic, contextual, and transformative Islamic education. The writing recommends integrating these perspectives into contemporary Islamic education policy and practice.

Keywords: *Islamic Education, Indonesian Thinkers, Comparative Study, Modernization, Tradition, Reform*

1. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Islamic education in Indonesia has undergone a long and complex journey, beginning with traditional pesantren systems and evolving toward integration with modern education. Amidst societal transformation, the thoughts of Islamic education reformers play a vital role in shaping the philosophy, direction, and contextual praxis of Islamic education (M. & Al, 2020). These figures are not merely institutional leaders but also thinkers who have contributed significantly to the development of Islamic educational epistemology, curriculum, methodology, and values within Indonesian society.

Prominent figures such as KH Ahmad Dahlan, KH Hasyim Asy'ari, Nurcholish Madjid, Hasan Langgulung, and Abdurrahman

Wahid (Gus Dur) have made profound contributions to shaping Indonesia's Islamic education system. Each of these individuals emerged from different socio-historical backgrounds but shared a common concern for how education can become a transformative tool for the Muslim community and the nation (Firani et al., 2023). Their thoughts are not only locally significant but also hold relevance in global Islamic education discourses, particularly in areas such as curriculum reform, spiritual-humanist values, and the integration of sciences.

Nevertheless, few academic studies have provided a systematic and comparative analysis of their ideas. A comparative approach to their educational thought would provide a strong theoretical and practical foundation for developing Islamic education in the face of globalization, secularization, and value crises.

B. Problem Formulation

Based on the background above, this article seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the central ideas of each figure regarding Islamic education?

2. How did the historical and social context shape their thoughts?

3. What are the fundamental similarities and differences in their educational approaches?

4. How relevant are their ideas to contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia?

C. Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Describe and comparatively analyze the educational thoughts of five major Indonesian Islamic figures.

2. Explore the philosophical, methodological, and applicative dimensions of each thinker.

3. Assess the relevance of their ideas to the current development of Islamic education.

D. Research Benefits

This research is expected to provide:

1. **Theoretical Contribution**: Enrich the body of knowledge in Islamic education through cross-figure analysis.

2. **Practical Contribution**: Offer insights to Islamic education policymakers, educators, and institutions in designing curricula and methods relevant to Indonesia's context.

E. Brief Literature Review

Several previous studies have explored individual figures, such as Ahmad Dahlan's educational reforms (Ilya et al., 2025), Azra's thoughts on educational modernization (Fauzi, 2022), and Nurcholish Madjid's secularism approach (Dian et al., 2022). However, a comparative and integrative study of the five figures remains scarce, particularly one that analyzes their relevance to contemporary Indonesian Islamic education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Islamic Education Theory

In Islamic educational theory, three core concepts often form the foundation: *ta'līm* (instruction), *tarbiyah* (education), and *ta'dīb* (ethical formation). According to Al-Attas (1991), Islamic education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but a process of nurturing a civilized human being by integrating knowledge with ethics.

The goal of Islamic education is the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat an-nafs*) and the creation of the complete human (*insan kāmil*). This contrasts with many Western educational models that emphasize cognitive, secular, and individualistic dimensions (Nasr, 1996). Therefore, Islamic education cannot be separated from its own epistemological roots—revelation, reason, experience, and the classical scholarly tradition. While Indonesian Muslim thinkers align with this tradition, they differ in interpretation according to their contexts.

B. Approach to Figure Studies

This study adopts a contextual hermeneutic and sociology of knowledge approach. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted, knowledge is socially and historically constructed. Hence, the educational thoughts of Islamic scholars must be understood within the sociopolitical and cultural dynamics of their time (Suryadi, n.d.).

In addition, a thematic-comparative approach is used to highlight similarities and differences in their thoughts across five educational themes (Phonna, n.d.):

1. Educational goals

2. Curriculum concepts

3. Relationship between religious and secular sciences

4. Strategies for educational reform

5. Role of educators and institutions

C. Previous Research

Relevant prior studies include:

1. Islamic education reform post-colonial era (Azra, 2012)

2. KH Ahmad Dahlan's Muhammadiyah-based modernization (Karimuddin, 2019)

3. KH Hasyim Asy'ari's pesantren approach and character education (Nurul & Ulin, 2025)

4. Gus Dur's pluralism and humanist values in education (Eva & Wely, 2021)

5. Nurcholish Madjid's concept of secularization in religious education (Kholifatur et al., 2021)

6. Langgulung's critique of science dichotomy and Islamic integration (Mumtahanah, 2011)

While these studies provide depth individually, comparative-integrative analyses are rare and essential for constructing a holistic, progressive, and context-sensitive Islamic educational model in Indonesia.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Type and Approach of Research

This study is qualitative in nature, utilizing a descriptive-analytical and critical-comparative approach. The primary focus is to examine and compare the educational thoughts of five prominent Islamic education figures in Indonesia, based on their works and

contributions to the development of Islamic education. This approach is chosen to thoroughly explore the historical context, core values, and the relevance of their ideas within the framework of contemporary Islamic education (Kurdi, 2023).

B. Data Sources

This study relies on qualitative secondary data gathered through library research. The data sources include both primary and secondary materials:

1. **Primary data** are drawn directly from the original writings of the educational figures under study, including books, articles, speeches, and institutional documents from schools they established or led (Yumarni, 2019). Examples include: *Islam, Kemodernan dan Keindonesiaan* (Majid, 1987), *Abdurrahman Wahid* (Barton, 2002), KH Ahmad Dahlan's writings in Muhammadiyah documents, *Adabul 'Ālim wa al-Muta'allim* by KH Hasyim Asy'ari, and *Manusia dan Pendidikan dalam Islam* by Hasan Langgulung.

2. **Secondary data** are obtained from academic literature discussing Islamic education thought in Indonesia (Devi et al., 2024), including scholarly articles, theses, dissertations, and biographies of the aforementioned figures.

C. Data Collection Techniques

The data were collected through:

1. Literature searches in digital libraries, academic databases, and peer-reviewed journals (Lisa et al., 2024).

2. Identification of key themes in the works of the selected figures (Dedi & Sahliah, 2019).

3. Selection and categorization of information relevant to the focus of comparative analysis (Yevi, 2024).

D. Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis followed several stages:

1. **Data Reduction** – selecting relevant data according to themes such as educational goals, curriculum, epistemology, and social relevance (Hafsah et al., 2023).

2. **Thematic Categorization** – organizing the ideas of each figure based on similarities and differences (Ecep, n.d.).

3. **Comparative Analysis** – comparing the figures based on predetermined variables (Nugroho, n.d.).

4. **Critical Interpretation** – interpreting each figure's ideas by considering historical contexts and current educational challenges (Najrul et al., 2023).

E. Data Validity

To ensure data validity (M., 2023):

1. Triangulation of sources was used by comparing multiple primary and secondary references.

2. Critical reading and interpretation were applied to each text, considering both historical and contextual perspectives.

3. Theoretical frameworks of Islamic education and the sociology of knowledge served as analytical tools.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. KH Ahmad Dahlan: Education and Reform

KH Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923), the founder of Muhammadiyah, is widely recognized as a pioneer of modern Islamic education in Indonesia (Abdul & Djoko, 2015). He introduced an educational system that integrated religious sciences with modern secular subjects during a time dominated by traditional pesantren and colonial educational models. One of his major contributions was the establishment of Islamic schools with a modern curriculum, such as the Muhammadiyah HIS.

These schools provided robust religious education while also incorporating subjects like natural sciences, foreign languages, and mathematics. This innovative approach helped prepare Indonesian youth to face the challenges of modernization and foster national independence. Through Muhammadiyah, he also significantly contributed to Indonesia's independence movement and to social and humanitarian development.

His key educational principles include:

1. Integration of religious and secular knowledge

2. Good deeds (*amal saleh*) as the goal of education

3. Character formation through social praxis (Ushie et al., 2024)

For KH Ahmad Dahlan, education should produce individuals who are intellectually capable, morally upright, and socially responsible. He envisioned education as a means of forming independent, faithful, and socially beneficial citizens. His model emphasized adaptability to societal change while rejecting stagnant conservatism (Nisrokha, 2020).

B. KH Hasyim Asy'ari: Traditional Education and Moral Strengthening

KH Hasyim Asy'ari (1871–1947), founder of Nahdlatul Ulama, represents the traditional pesantren approach (Bahaking et al., 2023). In his book *Adab al-'Ālim wa al-Muta'allim*, he emphasized the importance of adab (ethics) in the pursuit of knowledge (Enggal et al., 2023). For him, education is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but a formative process of the soul, ethics, and spirituality.

He believed that the ideal person (*al-insan al-salih*) is not only knowledgeable but also morally virtuous and spiritually strong. Thus, education must emphasize ethical formation and discipline alongside intellectual development (Mukani, 2007).

His educational philosophy includes:

1. Emphasis on scholarly lineage (*sanad*) and salafi traditions

2. Strengthening of character and obedience to teachers

3. Classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) as the curriculum foundation (Azizah, 2023)

KH Hasyim Asy'ari rejected secularization and upheld the integrity of classical Islamic scholarly traditions, while allowing for cautious and respectful adaptation to changing contexts. Education, in his view, was inseparable from ethical conduct, discipline, and reverence toward teachers (Hidayah, 2020).

C. Nurcholish Madjid: Education and the Liberalization of Islamic Thought

Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005), or Cak Nur, advanced a rational and reformist vision of Islamic education (Tungga et al., 2023). He critiqued the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences and proposed a tauhid-based educational model that remains open to modern knowledge.

Cak Nur emphasized moral character development and advocated for curriculum reform that integrates religious and secular sciences, enabling students to develop a comprehensive worldview (Hidayat, 2018).

His core ideas include:

1. Deconstruction of Islamic formalism

2. Functional secularization—religion as an active force in life

3. Education as a process of human liberation and empowerment (Haq, 2022)

According to Madjid, Islamic education should nurture independent thinkers, morally accountable individuals, and socially engaged citizens. His inclusive and holistic vision also promoted tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and respect for diversity (Djeprin, 2024).

D. Hasan Langgulung: Integration of Knowledge and Tauhid-Based Education

Hasan Langgulung (1928–1985) is known as a systematic thinker in Islamic education. In his book *Manusia dan Pendidikan dalam Islam* (The Human and Education in Islam), he articulated a tauhid-based educational paradigm that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions (Abdul & Agusman, 2025).

Langgulung emphasized the integration of religious and modern sciences as a means to produce balanced individuals who are faithful, devout, and morally upright (Tang, 2018). His vision included social responsibility and the holistic development of human potential.

His educational hallmarks include:

1. Integration of modern sciences and Islamic values

2. Education as a means of achieving balance between body and soul

3. Rejection of the dualistic separation of knowledge (Wina, 2020)

Langgulung's educational framework is philosophical and psychopedagogical, grounded in Islamic epistemology, and well-suited for national education reform (ELSI, n.d.).

E. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur): Humanist and Pluralist Education

Abdurrahman Wahid (1940–2009), known as Gus Dur, regarded education as a means of nurturing dignified and inclusive human beings (Gafur, n.d.). He rejected religious exclusivism and promoted education based on humanism, democracy, and pluralism.

Gus Dur stressed the importance of embracing diversity in society and advocated for education that builds unity in a multicultural nation (Benny, 2024).

His educational principles include:

1. Equal access to education without discrimination

2. Education as an instrument of social justice

3. Promotion of local wisdom in Islamic education (Oktaviani & Mahbub, 2023)

For Gus Dur, Islamic education must coexist with national values and human rights, and should cultivate tolerant and open-minded individuals. He also prioritized character education rooted in inclusivity and justice as a means to achieve sustainable national progress (Mukh, 2025).

F. Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Ahmad Dahlan	Hasyim Asy'ari	Nurcholish Madjid	Hasan Langgulung	Abdurrahman Wahid
Educational Orientation	Modernization	Traditional	Intellectual Reform	Integrative	Humanist-Pluralist
Educational Goals	Social good & deeds	Character development	Liberation & empowerment	Human perfection	Justice and freedom
View of Knowledge	Integrative	Religion-centric	Anti-dichotomy	Tauhid-based integration	Local-global integration
Institutional Role	Modern, formal	Pesantren & classics	Inclusive education	National system	Democratic education
Socio-Historical Context	Colonial, early 20th	Pre-independence	New Order	Modernization era	Transition to democracy

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

This comparative study of five influential figures in Indonesian Islamic education—KH Ahmad Dahlan, KH Hasyim Asy'ari, Nurcholish Madjid, Hasan Langgulung, and Abdurrahman Wahid—reveals that each thinker offers a unique yet complementary approach, shaped by distinct historical contexts and value orientations.

1. KH Ahmad Dahlan represents the spirit of modernization in Islamic education, emphasizing the integration of religious and secular sciences alongside a strong orientation toward social praxis.

2. KH Hasyim Asy'ari advocates a traditional pesantren-based approach rooted in morality, ethics (*adab*), and scholarly lineage (*sanad*).

3. Nurcholish Madjid promotes reform and intellectual liberation in Islamic education, highlighting the importance of rationality, inclusivity, and critical thinking.

4. Hasan Langgulung offers a systemic and integrative approach that bridges psychological, theological, and pedagogical dimensions within a tauhidic framework.

5. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) envisions education as a platform for promoting pluralism, humanism, and democratic values.

Despite their differences in approach, all five figures share a deep commitment to contextual, progressive, and community-oriented Islamic values. Their thoughts remain highly relevant for constructing an inclusive, meaningful, and globally competitive Islamic education system in Indonesia.

B. Recommendations

1. For academics and educators: It is essential to integrate the educational philosophies of these five thinkers into curriculum design and teaching strategies to ensure that Islamic education remains dynamic and adaptive.

2. For Islamic educational institutions: There is a need to evaluate and overcome the dichotomy between religious and secular curricula through systematic efforts to promote integration based on Islamic values.

3. For policymakers: The insights and inspirations drawn from these figures can serve as a foundation for developing a national education system rooted in local wisdom, Islamic principles, and openness to pluralism.

4. For future researchers: Further exploration of contemporary or lesser-known local figures in Islamic education is necessary to enrich the intellectual landscape and broaden the understanding of Islamic educational thought in Indonesia.

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