

The Reconstruction of Indonesian Education Through Ki Hajar Dewantara's Concept of Reasoning of the Liberated Human

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Abstract:

The Indonesian education system faces a crisis rooted in the loss of a philosophical direction that should liberate student thinking. This paper examines Ki Hajar Dewantara's concept of *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* (Reasoning of the Liberated Human) as a transformative epistemological foundation for reconstructing Indonesian education. Employing a qualitative approach with library research and content analysis of Dewantara's writings, particularly *Menuju Manusia Merdeka*, this study explores its historical and conceptual dimensions. The findings indicate that Dewantara's epistemology signifies a paradigmatic shift from colonial education, promoting a framework that integrates empirical observation, rational thinking, and local cultural consciousness. His *Tripusat Pendidikan* (Three Centers of Education: family, school, community) presents a holistic solution to educational fragmentation. Furthermore, Dewantara's concept of freedom extends beyond political liberation to encompass intellectual and cultural emancipation, fostering autonomous yet socially responsible individuals. This research concludes that *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* offers an essential philosophical basis for developing an Indonesian education system that is liberating, culturally authentic, and globally competitive.

Keywords: Ki Hajar Dewantara; educational reconstruction; reasoning of the liberated human

Abstrak:

Sistem pendidikan Indonesia menghadapi krisis yang berakar pada hilangnya arah filosofis yang seharusnya membebaskan pemikiran siswa. Artikel ini mengkaji konsep *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* Ki Hajar Dewantara sebagai landasan epistemologis transformatif untuk merekonstruksi pendidikan Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi pustaka dan analisis isi terhadap karya-karya Dewantara, khususnya *Menuju Manusia Merdeka*, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi dimensi historis dan konseptualnya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa epistemologi Dewantara menandakan pergeseran paradigmatis dari model pendidikan kolonial, dengan mengedepankan kerangka kerja yang mengintegrasikan observasi empiris, pemikiran rasional, dan kesadaran budaya lokal. Konsep *Tripusat Pendidikan* (keluarga, sekolah, masyarakat) yang digagasnya menawarkan solusi holistik terhadap fragmentasi pendidikan. Lebih lanjut, konsep kemerdekaan Dewantara melampaui pembebasan politik hingga mencakup emansipasi intelektual dan kultural, membentuk individu yang otonom namun bertanggung jawab secara sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* menawarkan dasar filosofis esensial untuk mengembangkan sistem pendidikan Indonesia yang membebaskan, berakar budaya, dan berdaya saing global.

Kata kunci: ki hajar dewantara; rekonstruksi pendidikan; nalar manusia merdeka

ملخص البحث:

يواجه نظام التعليم الإندونيسي أزمة ناتجة عن فقدان التوجّه الفلسفي الذي ينبغي أن يحرّر تفكير الطلاب. تتناول هذه الورقة مفهوم "نالار مانوسيا مردكا" (تفكير الإنسان المحرّر) لكي هاجار ديوانتارا كأساس إبستمولوجي تحويلي لإعادة بناء التعليم في إندونيسيا. وبالاعتماد على منح نوعي باستخدام البحث المكتبي وتحليل المحتوى لأعمال ديوانتارا، وخصوصاً كتابه *نحو الإنسان المحرر*، تستكشف الدراسة الأبعاد التاريخية والمفاهيمية لهذا الفكر. وتشير النتائج إلى أن إبستمولوجيا ديوانتارا تمثل تحولاً نموذجياً من التعليم الاستعماري نحو إطار يدمج بين الملاحظة التجريبية والتفكير العقلاني والوعي الثقافي المحلي. ويقدم مفهوم "التربية ثلاثية المراكز" (الأُسرة، المدرسة، المجتمع) الذي وضعه ديوانتارا حلاً شاملاً لمشكلة تفكك العملية التعليمية. علاوة على ذلك، فإن مفهوم الحرية لدى ديوانتارا يتجاوز التحرر السياسي ليشمل التحرر الفكري والثقافي، بما يسهم في تكوين أفراد أحرار يتمتعون بالمسؤولية الاجتماعية. وتخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن "نالار مانوسيا مردكا" يشكل أساساً فلسفياً جوهرياً لتطوير نظام تعليمي إندونيسي محرر، أصيل ثقافياً، وقادر على المنافسة عالمياً.

الكلمات الأساسية: كي هاجار ديوانتارا؛ إعادة بناء التعليم؛ تفكير الإنسان المحرر

INTRODUCTION

The crisis in Indonesia's educational system extends beyond technical or administrative issues—it strikes at the most fundamental level: the loss of philosophical direction that should liberate students' thinking. While curricula constantly change and policies shift one after another, the essence of education as a process of intellectual liberation grows increasingly unclear. In this context, Ki Hajar Dewantara's concept of *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* (Reasoning of the Liberated Human) becomes particularly relevant. Dewantara did not simply propose educational reform; instead, he offered an epistemological paradigm—a way of thinking that positions human beings as free, critical, and responsible subjects (Dewantara, 2009, p. 12-13).

Indonesian education has long been reproductive in nature—emphasizing rote memorization, teacher authority, and uniformity. This model carries forward remnants of colonial mentality that ignores students' critical potential and intellectual independence (Freire, 1985, p. 52-59). Ki Hajar Dewantara emphasized that true education must awaken thinking power, creative capacity, and emotional awareness to develop human beings who are not only intelligent but also possess free spirits and moral character (Pranoto et al., 2017, p. 48-51). In his understanding, liberated humans are not those who are free without

boundaries, but rather those who can think independently and act based on ethical and social awareness.

The concept of *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* suggests that students should not merely be passive recipients of information but active creators of meaning. Education must free human beings from intellectual and cultural dependency while building historical consciousness and national identity (Al-Razi et al., 2024). In today's global context, where information is abundant but understanding remains superficial, liberated reasoning becomes essential for addressing contemporary challenges with dignity and relevance.

Given this background, this paper seeks to answer two key questions: (1) How should the epistemological concept of *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* be understood within Ki Hajar Dewantara's educational philosophy? and (2) How can this concept provide a foundation for reconstructing Indonesia's national education system? Through philosophical and historical approaches, this study explores Dewantara's intellectual heritage to develop an educational model that is liberating, contextual, and humanistic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational reconstruction efforts in Indonesia have been extensively studied, particularly in the contexts of character strengthening, inclusivity, and religious moderation. (Fastmadhi et al., 2024), for instance, emphasize the importance of Islamic education based on multiculturalism and dialogue to foster tolerant attitudes within plural society. A similar perspective is offered by (Khasanah et al., 2023), who advocate for Islamic educational reconstruction by adopting universal civilizational values in curriculum design.

In the context of general education, (Fatimah & Sumarni, 2024) propose a holistic approach that encompasses intellectual, spiritual, and emotional aspects of students. Their study demonstrates that social sensitivity must become a key element in contemporary educational transformation. Additionally, (Hafiz et al., 2025) emphasize that religious moderation can be integrated into curricula to promote character development and religious tolerance in the digital era.

Meanwhile, (Sukri et al., 2018) highlight the importance of participatory approaches grounded in local wisdom for curriculum design, ensuring that students do not merely become objects of knowledge transfer but active agents of learning. However, most of these

studies remain application-focused and have not yet deeply addressed the epistemological dimensions of education.

This gap is what the present research seeks to address by offering an analysis of *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* (Reasoning of the Liberated Human) as an epistemological concept from Ki Hajar Dewantara. Unlike the technical approaches in previous studies, Dewantara offers a philosophical foundation that is both emancipatory and contextual. To date, very few studies have explicitly examined how Dewantara's intellectual legacy can serve as a philosophical basis for formulating a national education model that is both liberating and culturally rooted.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing library research and content analysis methods to explore the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara, particularly as articulated in his seminal work *Menuju Manusia Merdeka (Towards the Liberated Human)*. This methodological approach is selected in alignment with the study's primary objective: to examine the historical, genealogical, and conceptual dimensions of Dewantara's thought, with particular emphasis on intellectual freedom, self-awareness, and socio-moral responsibility. The research is exploratory in nature and adopts a descriptive-analytical framework to systematically elucidate the structure and substance of Dewantara's educational philosophy within the context of reconstructing the national education system.

The data sources in this research consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include original works authored by Ki Hajar Dewantara, particularly *Menuju Manusia Merdeka*. Secondary sources comprise scholarly journals, academic books, previous research articles, and other relevant literature that provide contextual depth and theoretical insight into Dewantara's ideas. Data collection is conducted through documentation techniques, involving the systematic and critical examination of the aforementioned literature.

Data analysis is carried out using content analysis, which aims to uncover the meanings, values, and conceptual structures embedded in the analyzed texts. This analytical process includes data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretative analysis of the historical, genealogical, and conceptual aspects of the *Nalar Manusia Merdeka* (Reasoning of the Liberated Human) concept. To ensure the credibility and

validity of the findings, source triangulation is employed by cross-verifying information across multiple sources of literature. This procedure is intended to maintain objectivity and enhance the academic rigor of the study's conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Life and Educational Mission of Ki Hajar Dewantara

Ki Hajar Dewantara, born as Raden Mas Soewardi Soerjaningrat on May 2, 1889, in Yogyakarta, is recognized as the pioneer of Indonesian national education. Despite originating from the noble Pakualaman family, he rejected feudalism and actively advocated for equality through education (Soemarsono, 2009, p. 5-6). His formal education began at the Europeesche Lagere School (ELS) and continued at STOVIA, although he did not complete his studies due to health reasons (Soemarsono, 2009, p. 6-7).

Beyond his role as an educator, Dewantara was actively engaged in journalism and political movements. He co-founded the Indische Partij alongside Douwes Dekker and Cipto Mangunkusumo, and was subsequently exiled by the colonial government due to his critical essay "*Als ik eens Nederlander was*" (If I Were a Dutchman). This experience further strengthened his commitment to pursuing national liberation through education (Pranoto et al., 2017, p. 24-27).

Following his return from exile in the Netherlands, Dewantara established Perguruan Taman Siswa on July 3, 1922, in Yogyakarta—an educational institution that served as the vehicle for realizing his philosophy of liberating education. Within this institution, he formulated the principle "*Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, Tut Wuri Handayani*" as the foundation for leadership and learning (Dewantara, 2009, p. xv).

For Ki Hajar Dewantara, national independence could not be achieved solely through political struggle. He believed that education must serve as a means of intellectual and cultural liberation, enabling individuals to think independently, develop character, and assume social responsibility. This concept was articulated in his work *Menuju Manusia Merdeka* (Toward Free Human Beings) as both a critique of the colonial education system and an alternative proposal for education based on the nation's own cultural foundations (Dewantara, 2009, p. 12-18).

In recognition of his contributions, he was appointed as the first Minister of Education of the Republic of Indonesia, awarded the title of National Hero, and his birthday was designated as National Education Day through Presidential Decree No. 305 of 1959 (Presidential Decree of the Republic of Indonesia, 1959).

The Epistemological Foundation of Ki Hajar Dewantara's Educational Philosophy

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that examines the foundations of knowledge. This field specifically investigates the nature, sources, and justification of knowledge, viewing it as justified true belief. At its core, epistemology explores all aspects related to knowledge and the ways in which knowledge is acquired. This philosophical inquiry rests upon three fundamental elements—belief, truth, and justification—which together serve as criteria for determining whether a belief can be considered valid knowledge. Thus, epistemology represents a reflective effort to examine the essence of knowledge and trace the methods and sources that make it legitimate and reliable (Audi, 2011).

Within this philosophical framework, Ki Hajar Dewantara's thought emerges as one of Indonesia's most revolutionary intellectual legacies. Through the educational vision and mission he formulated, Indonesia was conceptually and culturally prepared to liberate itself from colonial epistemology (Dewantara, 2009, p. 12). His visionary and future-oriented ideas remain relevant to this day. Therefore, reexamining Dewantara's educational philosophy is not only worthwhile but also essential. He viewed knowledge not merely as a collection of information, but as a tool of liberation—a means to free humanity from ignorance and oppression (Dewantara, 2009, p. 18).

It is important to recognize that Ki Hajar Dewantara's epistemological perspective has laid the foundation for the educational reality we experience today. Both in his time and in our current era, we share the responsibility of designing a progressive educational framework to build the nation's future (Dewantara, 2009, p. 21). For Dewantara, the future meant liberation from colonial domination; for us, the future means moving toward a competitive and sustainable nation. In both contexts, education serves as the primary vehicle of transformation (Dewantara, 2009, p. 23). If previous generations viewed education as a tool of national liberation, we are now challenged to formulate an educational model based on Dewantara's progressive ideas that can guide Indonesia toward sustainable national development.

According to his epistemological position—formed through philosophical reflection and historical praxis—Ki Hajar Dewantara successfully transformed the collective worldview of society in his time. Previously, the future was often envisioned through mystical rituals, natural signs, or celestial positions. Dewantara introduced an epistemological shift, encouraging society to replace speculative predictions with conscious creation of the future based on understanding the forces underlying events, including national tendencies, historical occurrences—both human-made and natural—and human cognitive capacity (Dewantara, 2009, p. 27). This, according to Dewantara, is the foundation of scientific thinking: a liberated epistemology where individuals are no longer subject to superstition or dogmatic beliefs, but are empowered to make rational and empirically testable predictions.

Drawing from empirical observations of the universe, Dewantara argued that consciousness, will, reason, and imagination constitute essential elements in forming national intelligence. These four elements serve as primary instruments in projecting the future through scientific reasoning. With such an epistemological stance, humans are capable of recognizing and evaluating observable patterns in nature (Dewantara, 2009, p. 34). Through this knowledge, individuals can promote desired events or prevent undesired ones. Scientific thinking thus enables transformation from traditional forms of divination to rational projections grounded in logical reasoning and empirical evidence.

Therefore, the epistemology of Free Human Reasoning formulated by Ki Hajar Dewantara represents an emancipatory paradigm—integrating self-awareness, rationality, and social responsibility in acquiring and applying knowledge (Dewantara, 2009, p. 38). This epistemology is not merely theoretical but highly applicable, manifested through education as a tool of transformation at both individual and collective levels. Within this framework, freedom of thought is considered a fundamental prerequisite for civilizational progress. Dewantara's vision remains highly relevant today, as it positions each individual as an autonomous subject capable of determining their own life direction through knowledge grounded in empirical experience, scientific validation, and universal humanistic values.

One of Ki Hajar Dewantara's fundamental contributions to educational thought is the concept of *Tripusat Pendidikan* (Three Centers of Education), which encompasses three primary environments: family, school, and community. These three do not stand

independently but complement each other in forming complete human beings— knowledgeable, characterized, and autonomous (Dewantara, 2009, p. 49-50).

First, the family is viewed as the earliest and most fundamental center of education. Within this environment, children receive learning that is not only cognitive but also affective and moral. Values such as courtesy, responsibility, and social cooperation begin to be instilled in daily life. Dewantara refers to the family as the first place where children build character and moral consciousness (Dewantara, 2009, p. 56-57).

Second, schools or formal educational institutions function as complements and reinforcers of the education that begins within the family. Here, students are introduced to academic disciplines and rational thinking training. However, Dewantara emphasizes that schools must not be severed from local cultural roots. Formal education must integrate with societal life values and social principles to remain relevant and contextual (Dewantara, 2009, p. 61-64).

Third, the community or youth social interactions constitute an educational arena that shapes the social and leadership dimensions of children. Interactions with peers, organizations, and other social activities serve as means to develop solidarity, empathy, and collective responsibility. According to Dewantara, these social experiences are essential for educating humans as civilized social beings (Dewantara, 2009, p. 66-68).

Dewantara emphasizes that these three centers of education cannot be separated. Educational success will only be achieved if family, school, and community work integratively and harmoniously. This *Tripusat* reflects a holistic approach to educating free human beings who are capable of thinking and acting autonomously while remaining socially responsible (Dewantara, 2009, p. 71-73).

Pendidikan Nalar Merdeka: Integrating Freedom and Cultural Identity in Education

After studying pedagogy and obtaining formal credentials as an educator in Europe, Dewantara began formulating an educational system rooted in the cultural context of the Indonesian archipelago (Dewantara, 2009, p. 12-13). Dewantara established Perguruan Taman Siswa on July 3, 1922, in Yogyakarta upon his return from studies in the Netherlands. This initiative reached its pinnacle through the development of the Trikon theory, which offered a convergent method for absorbing European pedagogical models while maintaining concentric connections with local cultural foundations. From this theory emerged various fundamental concepts that continue to influence the world of

education today, such as the Three Centers of Education (*Tri Pusat Pendidikan*: family, school, and community), Tri-N (*niteni, nirokke, nambahi* – observe, imitate, improve), and Tri-Ngo (*ngerti, ngrasa, nglakoni* – understand, feel, practice) (Dewantara, 2009, p. 15-18).

In his monumental work *Toward Free Human Beings (Menuju Manusia Merdeka)*, Ki Hajar Dewantara did not limit the concept of freedom to political aspects alone. He emphasized that true freedom must also encompass cultural liberation (Dewantara, 2009, p. 21). This idea aligns with the spirit of "Indonesia Raya," the national anthem composed by Wage Rudolf Supratman, which emphasizes that the soul must be built before the body: "*Bangunlah jiwanya, bangunlah badannya, untuk Indonesia Raya.*" Thus, Dewantara's vision of "free human beings" can be read as a thesis for developing the intellect and moral character of the Indonesian nation amid the materialistic and pragmatic currents of globalization.

The principle of freedom became central to Dewantara's thought and serves as the primary marker of his educational philosophy. For Dewantara, freedom was not merely liberation from physical slavery, but more profoundly, the ability to stand independently, free from dependence on others (Dewantara, 2009, p. 26). He argued that freedom should not be understood narrowly as mere autonomy, but as the physical and spiritual capacity to organize life in an orderly and peaceful manner. Freedom that fails to produce social order and inner tranquility, according to him, is not true freedom, but rather an immature or shallow form of freedom (Dewantara, 2009, p. 27).

Therefore, Dewantara's concept of freedom must be understood as a fundamental principle that affirms the rights and obligations of every individual to achieve independence—both physically and spiritually—while upholding human dignity (Dewantara, 2009, p. 26-27). This personal freedom represents a cultural principle inherent in every human being. Thus, Dewantara's definition of freedom must be continuously affirmed and manifested—as freedom that is not merely declared, but also realized in human behavior and life attitudes (Dewantara, 2009, p. 27).

To strengthen this argument, it is relevant to refer to Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire, who stated that "education is the practice of freedom." Freire criticized the banking model of education, where teachers merely "deposit" information into students' minds passively. In his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he advocated for dialogical education rooted in students' life experiences and aimed at awakening critical

consciousness (*conscientização*) as a path to liberation. Freire's vision strongly aligns with Dewantara's, who also emphasized that education must liberate, not subjugate students (Freire, 1985, p. 72-74).

As a practical manifestation of freedom rooted in self-awareness and individual autonomy, Dewantara also emphasized the importance of liberating thought and behavior from feudalistic legacies (Dewantara, 2009, p. 33-34). Educational culture, according to him, must have tangible and participatory impact on social structures, transcending mere democratic rhetoric. Therefore, the concept of "free human beings" in his thought reflects collective integration aimed at building fundamental and substantive understanding of human and societal development.

From this perspective, Dewantara's reasoning of free human beings can be understood as a method of thinking grounded in freedom and independence, both in the process of acquiring and applying knowledge. This epistemology offers not only a theoretical framework but also a practical foundation for an educational model aimed at transforming individuals and society (Dewantara, 2009, p. 38-39). This philosophy positions intellectual freedom as the primary prerequisite for civilizational progress and remains highly relevant today, as it positions every individual as a free and sovereign subject over their own life direction through legitimate, empirical knowledge rooted in universal human values (Dewantara, 2009, p. 40).

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that Ki Hajar Dewantara's concept of *Free Human Reasoning* (*Nalar Manusia Merdeka*) offers a transformative epistemological foundation for the reconstruction of Indonesian education. Three principal findings demonstrate: first, Dewantara's epistemology represents a paradigmatic shift from colonial educational models toward a pedagogical framework that integrates empirical observation, rational thinking, and local cultural consciousness. Second, the Three-Center Education System (*Sistem Pendidikan Tri-Pusat*: family, school, community) provides a holistic solution to contemporary educational fragmentation and the disconnection between formal education and social needs. Third, Dewantara's concept of freedom transcends political liberation to encompass intellectual and cultural emancipation, positioning free human beings as autonomous yet socially responsible individuals. The reconstruction of Indonesian education requires fundamental paradigmatic transformation with *Free Human Reasoning*

as the philosophical foundation for developing an educational system that is liberating, culturally authentic, and globally competitive.

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