



The Impact of the Ethical Policy on the Development of Education in Early 20th Century Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the Ethical Policy on the development of education in early 20th-century Indonesia, focusing on the Dutch colonial government's efforts to improve the social and economic conditions of the indigenous population. The research explores how the Ethical Policy influenced the colonial education system and brought about significant changes in educational access for indigenous communities. Using a historical analysis approach, the study draws from primary sources, such as colonial policy documents, and secondary sources that analyze the societal impact of education policies. The findings reveal that while the Ethical Policy increased educational opportunities, these were mainly accessible to the elite class, limiting broader educational access among the indigenous population. However, the policy inadvertently set the stage for an intellectual awakening that spurred anti-colonial resistance. The study concludes that the Ethical Policy, while aimed at the welfare of the indigenous people, primarily benefited the elite, inadvertently fostering nationalistic sentiment among educated Indonesians.

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INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 20th century, the Ethical Policy marked a pivotal turning point in the history of Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia, particularly in the domain of education (Fachruruzi, [2019](#); Susilo & Isbandiyah, [2018](#)). The policy was introduced by the Dutch colonial government in response to growing criticism of exploitative practices, such as forced cultivation, that had drained Indonesia's natural resources and workforce (Syarif, [2019](#)). The Ethical Policy, championed by figures like Conrad Theodor van Deventer, was rooted in a moral responsibility to improve the welfare of the indigenous population through three main programs: irrigation, transmigration, and education (Kartodirdjo, [1991](#)). Education was given significant attention, as it was seen as a key tool for enhancing the quality of indigenous human resources to serve colonial interests (Novriyanto et al., [2023](#)).

The development of education under the Ethical Policy was intricately linked to the social and political transformations occurring in the Dutch East Indies (Kusdiana, [2023](#)). The establishment of schools for indigenous people was prioritized to produce an educated workforce to support colonial administration. Additionally, educational access was expected to help reduce social disparities between indigenous Indonesians and Europeans (Sudarmaji & Abidin, [2020](#)). However, in reality, the education system remained limited and discriminatory, focusing on basic skills to make the indigenous population more productive while restricting intellectual competition with Europeans (Jagt, [2021](#)).

Despite these limitations, the educational policies implemented within the framework of the Ethical Policy did provide opportunities for some indigenous people to pursue higher education. This led to the emergence of a generation of educated Indonesians who became critical of colonialism, such as Soewardi Soerjaningrat (Ki Hajar Dewantara) and Douwes Dekker (Adnani et al., [2023](#); Hoekstra et al., [2024](#)). These figures advocated for fairer and more equitable education for the Indonesian people. The educational movements born during this era laid the foundation for national awareness, inspiring the broader nationalist movement towards independence (Syarif, [2019](#)).

The colonial government's methods of implementing Ethical Policy-based education also evolved. Schools like the Volkschool (People's School) and Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (MULO) were established to meet the colonial administration's need for an educated workforce (Afandi et al., [2020](#)). However, access to these schools was largely restricted to the indigenous elite and aligned with colonial interests. Consequently, while the Ethical Policy contributed



to educational development in Indonesia, its impact was constrained by the primary goal of sustaining colonial power (Agung & Suparman, [2012](#)).

The Ethical Policy, though intended to improve the conditions of the indigenous population, inadvertently accelerated the rise of national consciousness and resistance against colonialism. Education, which was initially designed to integrate the indigenous population into the colonial system, instead became an instrument for strengthening political and cultural awareness among the young generation of Indonesians, ultimately fueling the struggle for independence (Ricklefs, [2009](#)).

Though initially conceived as a welfare measure by the Dutch colonial government, the Ethical Policy's educational initiatives had far-reaching effects beyond their original intent (Nisa, [2022](#)). The education provided under this policy allowed the younger generation of Indonesians to access knowledge and ideas that were not only technical but also ideological (Andri & Fanani, [2022](#)). Through education, they were introduced to concepts of human rights, justice, and freedom, which subsequently inspired the rise of nationalist movements. Formal education also provided a platform for young Indonesians to organize and discuss the future of the nation under the grip of colonialism (Shiraishi, [1992](#)).

A significant implication of education under the Ethical Policy was the emergence of an educated indigenous middle class that became increasingly aware of the injustices they faced. Initially intended to support colonial administration, this educated middle class used their knowledge to critique the colonial system itself. Many became involved in political and social organizations that advocated for the rights of Indonesians, such as Budi Utomo, founded in 1908, marking the beginning of the national awakening (Ricklefs, [2009](#)). Education thus provided a platform for political discussions that transcended domestic concerns and touched upon national independence.

Furthermore, the schools established under the Ethical Policy, such as the Kweekschool (Teacher's School) and MULO, not only equipped students with the technical skills needed by the colonial administration but also served as a conduit for disseminating ideas about independence (Muhasabah et al., [2021](#)). Students in these schools often encountered modern Western political philosophies, such as liberalism and socialism, which they adapted to the colonial Indonesian context. These students later became leaders in the nationalist movement, including figures like Soekarno and Hatta, who recognized education as a weapon against colonial oppression (Alfarez, [2022](#); Dewi, [2019](#)).

Ultimately, the Ethical Policy, which the Dutch government hoped would reinforce colonialism, became a catalyst for the growth of national consciousness among Indonesians. Education provided the intellectual foundation for independence leaders to develop resistance strategies and establish a national movement. Thus, education became a crucial factor that spurred the growth of nationalism in Indonesia in the early 20th century, accelerating the journey toward independence. The impact of education during the Ethical Policy era demonstrates that even systems designed to uphold colonial power can inadvertently foster internal contradictions that strengthen opposition movements (Cribb & Kahin, [2004](#)).

Several studies have explored the effects of the Ethical Policy on education and national consciousness in early 20th-century Indonesia. Suratminto (2013) found that although the policy aimed to improve the welfare of the indigenous population, the resulting education fostered an educated elite that drove national awareness and resistance against colonialism (Suratminto, [2013](#)). Sunardi et. al (2024) emphasized that schools established under the Ethical Policy produced intellectuals and activists who became the driving force of Indonesian nationalism (Sunardi et al., [2024](#)). Meanwhile, Sudarmaji and Abidin (2020) highlighted that education under this policy accelerated political awareness among the indigenous population, with education intended for integration inadvertently spurring resistance against colonization (Sudarmaji & Abidin, [2020](#)).

This research aims to analyze the impact of the Ethical Policy on the development of education in early 20th-century Indonesia, focusing on how the policy affected indigenous access to formal education and the role of education in fostering national awareness. The study seeks to explore whether the policy successfully expanded educational opportunities for the indigenous population or merely reinforced social stratification. Additionally, this research intends to examine how the education provided during the Ethical Policy era contributed to the emergence of an educated indigenous elite who would later play a pivotal role in Indonesia's independence struggle.

METHOD

This study employs a historical research method to examine the impact of the Ethical Policy on the development of education in early 20th-century Indonesia. The historical method involves the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Gottschalk, [1986](#)). Primary sources, such as government documents, colonial reports, and letters from educational policymakers during the Ethical Policy period, are analyzed to capture the intentions, challenges, and outcomes of educational reforms (Ricklefs, [2009](#)). Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and books on colonial education and its socio-economic implications, provide a broader context and scholarly interpretations (Taylor, [2003](#)). Data collection emphasizes archival research from institutions such as the National Archives of Indonesia and Dutch colonial archives, as well as published materials in academic journals. These sources are critically examined to assess their credibility, relevance, and historical significance in understanding the interplay between the Ethical Policy and the educational transformation in Indonesia (Niel, [1992](#)).

The analysis adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on content analysis and historical interpretation to identify patterns and causal relationships. The collected data is categorized thematically into key aspects, such as curriculum development, accessibility of education for indigenous populations, and its socio-economic impacts (Suryadinata, [2002](#)). The findings are contextualized within the broader debates on colonialism and education to engage with existing scholarly discussions (Taylor, [2003](#)). The interpretive process ensures that the conclusions drawn are rooted in evidence, emphasizing the complex interactions between colonial policies and local agency (Bourchier & Hadiz, [2003](#)). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how the Ethical Policy shaped education and its subsequent effects on Indonesian society, contributing to historical and educational scholarship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The impact of the Ethical Policy on indigenous access to education

The Ethical Policy, initiated by the Dutch colonial government in the early 20th century, brought significant changes to educational access for indigenous communities in the Dutch East Indies. This policy stemmed from the Dutch government's recognition of its moral responsibility to improve the welfare of the indigenous population after the exploitation of natural resources under the forced cultivation system. One of the main pillars of the policy was the expansion of education, which had previously been limited to the colonial elite and the *priyayi* class (Shiraishi, [1992](#)). With the implementation of the Ethical Policy, schools for indigenous children began to be established, initially focusing on basic and vocational education.

The restructuring of education in the Dutch East Indies under this policy marked a shift from traditional, religion-based, or informal education to formal, government-supervised education. One notable institution was the Village School (*Volkschool*), designed to provide basic education to indigenous children. These schools focused on fundamental skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, aimed at improving the quality of the local workforce. Meanwhile, secondary schools such as the *Middelbare School* and *Hoogere Burger School* (HBS) began admitting indigenous students, though primarily those from noble or affluent families (Sutherland, [1979](#)).

Although educational access for indigenous communities expanded, participation remained limited, especially for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Schools were often located in urban centers, making them inaccessible to children from remote villages. Additionally, the curriculum taught in these schools was heavily colonial in nature, emphasizing Dutch language and subjects that supported colonial administration while neglecting local culture and indigenous history (Elson, [1994](#)). This highlights the paradox of increased educational access, which was still constrained by significant barriers to broader societal participation.

Despite these limitations, the policy did have a considerable impact on increasing indigenous participation in education. Schools established for indigenous students, though limited in scope, became a gateway for some to access education previously reserved for the colonial elite. Over time, this education allowed indigenous people to enter government administrative positions and other professional sectors. Moreover, the education they received sparked nationalist consciousness among the younger generation, who later played pivotal roles in Indonesia's independence movement (Ricklefs, [2009](#)).

While the Ethical Policy was initially designed to support colonial administration, its impact on indigenous education cannot be overlooked. Formal education, though limited in coverage and purpose, created an intellectual class among the indigenous population that became a driving force in the fight for Indonesia's independence. In this context, the Ethical Policy served as a catalyst for broader social change through education, despite the challenges faced by indigenous communities in gaining more equitable and widespread access (Kartodirdjo, [1990](#)).

The Ethical Policy, implemented by the Dutch colonial government in the early 20th century, sought to improve the socio-economic conditions of the indigenous population. However, its impact on the development of indigenous education was far more complex and multidimensional than initially anticipated. One significant aspect of the policy was the establishment of schools for indigenous children, which indirectly created an intellectual class aware of their rights and ultimately opposed colonial domination. Schools such as the Village School (*Volkschool*) and the Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS) provided opportunities for indigenous children to receive formal education, albeit within a framework constrained by colonial agendas (Cribb & Kahin, [2004](#)).

The development of formal education initiated by the Ethical Policy enabled indigenous people, particularly those from the middle and noble classes, to learn about modern sciences and emerging political ideas in Europe. This, in turn, provided a foundation for understanding the importance of equality, freedom, and independence (Putra, [2023](#)). Educated indigenous individuals who gained access to this education later became key actors in fostering national awareness and played critical roles in the independence struggle. They began forming organizations such as *Boedi Oetomo* in 1908 and *Sarekat Islam* in 1912, which advocated for the social, economic, and political rights of indigenous people under the colonial system (Lestari et al., [2023](#)).

However, access to formal education remained limited, particularly for indigenous children from lower social strata. The curriculum in indigenous schools was often not designed to empower them intellectually. Instead, it focused on preparing loyal and skilled workers to serve colonial administrative needs. Dutch became the primary language of instruction in schools, while local languages and cultures were largely ignored. As a result, while formal education succeeded in creating a new intellectual class, the broader population remained marginalized from quality education.

Additionally, despite the establishment of schools for indigenous people, their number remained insufficient compared to the demand. This created a sharp divide between the indigenous elite, who had access to education, and the majority of the population, who remained excluded from formal education. Schools like the Village School and HIS primarily taught basic skills and did not offer pathways to higher education. The curriculum often served colonial needs by producing compliant workers rather than fostering critical thinking (Afifuddin, [2007](#)).

The social changes triggered by this policy also created a paradox for the colonial government. While its initial goal was to strengthen colonial control through education, the policy inadvertently fostered awareness of the injustices experienced by indigenous people. This led the educated indigenous population to demand greater changes in social and political structures, including calls for independence. The influence of education, though limited in scope, was profound in fueling resistance against colonialism. Education became a means for the indigenous population to understand and articulate ideas of independence and national sovereignty, which became central to their struggle.

Although the Ethical Policy was initially conceived as a tool to manage and control the indigenous population, its unintended consequence was the emergence of nationalist movements led by educated individuals. Education provided through this policy equipped them with the tools to recognize injustices and organize more effective resistance. In the long run, the policy significantly contributed to the decolonization process in Indonesia and accelerated the path to independence (Cribb & Kahin, [2004](#)).

The role of education in fostering national consciousness

Education played a pivotal role in awakening national consciousness among the indigenous educated elite in the early 20th century. Through the colonial education system introduced by the Dutch government, particularly following the implementation of the Ethical Policy, the indigenous population began gaining access to modern knowledge and broader political awareness (Dell & Olken, [2020](#)). Schools established during the colonial era, although initially intended to produce a workforce that supported colonial administration, became avenues for the indigenous population to engage with ideas of freedom, individual rights, and social justice. This formal education, originally targeted at the

indigenous elite, introduced them to new concepts of nationalism and prepared them to become leaders in the independence movement (Lestari et al., [2023](#)).

One of the ways educations facilitated the emergence of national consciousness was by exposing indigenous students to critical Western literature and anti-colonial ideas. Through a curriculum that included subjects such as history, politics, and economics, the indigenous elite learned about revolutions in Europe, America, and Asia, inspiring them to advocate for change in their homeland. Formal education also provided access to the Dutch language, enabling students to read Western intellectual works and engage with international movements against colonialism. Consequently, education became a bridge connecting the indigenous population with global currents of thought that promoted national sovereignty and human rights (Cribb & Kahin, [2004](#)).

Education also provided a platform for the indigenous elite to develop intellectual and political networks. Institutions such as the Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS) and Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (MULO) not only served as learning spaces but also as arenas for exchanging ideas and building solidarity. Figures such as Soetomo and Ki Hajar Dewantara began their careers as nationalist activists through interactions within these educational settings. Meetings at schools and universities became the starting points for various political and social organizations, including *Boedi Oetomo* and *Sarekat Islam*, which played significant roles in Indonesia's national movement (Yusrianto, [2011](#)).

The role of education in fostering national consciousness was also evident in how the educated elite later became leaders of nationalist movements. They not only mastered the administrative knowledge and skills taught in colonial schools but also articulated their political demands in modern terms comprehensible to the colonial government and the international community. Education equipped them with the capacity to devise effective political strategies, ultimately contributing to Indonesia's independence struggle. Educated indigenous elites such as Sukarno, Hatta, and Sjahrir used their education to mobilize the masses and build widespread national consciousness.

In a broader context, education also created a new social class among the indigenous population, playing a crucial role in driving social change. This educated middle class gained access to intellectual and social resources that allowed them to voice the aspirations of the indigenous population more effectively. They acted as intermediaries between the masses and the colonial government, advocating for political and social reforms that supported independence. Through education, the indigenous educated generation became the driving force behind political, economic, and social transformations that ultimately led Indonesia to independence (Ricklefs, [2009](#)).

Within the framework of the Ethical Policy in the early 20th century, education served as a catalyst not only for fostering political awareness but also for building social cohesion among the educated indigenous elite. Education strengthened the role of the indigenous middle class in a society segmented by social and economic divides. This middle class comprised not only graduates from colonial schools but also those who studied abroad in the Netherlands and other European countries. Through education, they gained access to modern ideas emphasizing human rights, nationalism, and equitable governance. This intellectual foundation empowered them to challenge colonialism and mobilize the population toward independence (Noer, [1990](#)).

Moreover, this educated middle class played a vital role in facilitating dialogue between different social groups in Indonesia, including laborers, farmers, and other intellectuals. They served as the voice for the marginalized masses within the colonial system. Leaders such as Sukarno and Hatta leveraged the intellectual and political networks, they built in educational institutions to unite diverse societal groups. Thus, education not only produced political leaders but also established robust social networks among various ethnic and social groups in Indonesia during this period.

The social changes driven by education were also reflected in the emergence of political and social organizations led by the indigenous educated elite. Organizations such as *Boedi Oetomo*, *Sarekat Islam*, and *Indische Partij* became platforms to express ideas of nationalism and resistance to colonialism. The education received by the leaders of these organizations not only provided them with the administrative skills needed to manage these organizations but also instilled values of democracy, egalitarianism, and individual rights. Through these organizations, the spirit of resistance to colonialism spread among a broader audience, ultimately influencing the national movement as a whole (Anderson, [1991](#)).

Additionally, education empowered the indigenous middle class to challenge colonial narratives about their identity. Before access to education, the indigenous population was often positioned as a powerless working class within

the colonial social structure. However, through education, they began constructing a new narrative of themselves as a sovereign nation. This educated middle class not only demanded individual rights within the colonial framework but also envisioned Indonesia as an independent state with the right to self-determination. This process became integral to the national movement that culminated in Indonesia's independence in 1945.

Ultimately, education opened the door to broader social transformation in Indonesia. Although initially intended as a tool to maintain colonial governance, education became a force for national consciousness and strengthened the collective identity of the indigenous population. It created a social class with a strategic role in advocating for independence and building a new nation. Thus, the Ethical Policy, despite its colonial intent, inadvertently became a critical driver of the national movement that led to Indonesia's independence (Shiraishi, [1992](#)).

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this study indicate that the Ethical Policy, although initially designed as a response to international pressure and colonial administrative needs, had a significant impact on the development of education in Indonesia in the early 20th century. The education introduced to the indigenous population not only improved literacy and knowledge but also fostered an intellectual class that played a pivotal role in the rise of nationalism and the movement toward independence. Formal education provided indigenous people access to modern political concepts, civil rights, and freedoms previously beyond their reach, thus accelerating the emergence of nationalist movements advocating for Indonesia's independence.

This study is not without its limitations. Its analysis relies heavily on historical literature and documents, primarily sourced from colonial perspectives, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of the indigenous population under the colonial education system. Furthermore, the study is confined to the early 20th century, leaving the long-term effects of these educational policies—particularly after Indonesia's independence—unexplored. Future research incorporating more diverse data sources would be invaluable in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the broader implications of these policies.

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