



Sekolah Rakyat during the Colonial Period: An Instrument of Colonial Control and a Space of Emancipation in the History of Indonesian Education

Risma Juniati Tambunan*, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia
Yudha Rivaldo Silalahi, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia
Nadia Ramadhani, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia
Muhammad Ardiansyah Rasuna, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia
Hobblinnardo Simanullang, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia
Arfan Diansyah, Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article examines Sekolah Rakyat (Volksschool) within the structure of the Dutch colonial education system in Indonesia, situating it in the broader context of colonial governance and the Ethical Policy. The study addresses how Volksschool functioned simultaneously as an instrument of colonial control and as a site that generated unintended emancipatory consequences for the indigenous population. Employing historical research methods with a qualitative library approach—comprising heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography—this research analyzes colonial education regulations, curriculum documents, and statistical reports from the early twentieth century. The findings reveal that Volksschool was designed to produce a disciplined, low-skilled indigenous labor force through a restricted curriculum focused on basic literacy, numeracy, and practical knowledge. Archival data, however, indicate measurable increases in literacy rates and school participation, which facilitated access to printed media and engagement in early nationalist organizations. The study argues that while Volksschool reinforced colonial administrative structures and social stratification, it also unintentionally laid structural foundations for the growth of national consciousness and the subsequent development of Indonesia's national education discourse.

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*CORRESPONDENCE AUTHOR

✉ rismaajuniati@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Education plays a strategic role in shaping social structure, for through this process a society reproduces the knowledge, values, and patterns of thought that sustain subsequent generations. From the perspective of the sociology of education, schools do not merely transmit technical skills; they also distribute cultural capital and cultivate a social *habitus* that influences individual prospects for mobility. Education simultaneously reflects the power relations operating within society and shapes the trajectory of its social development (Sembiring & Achiriah, 2025). During the Dutch colonial period, the education system in Indonesia was administered in an uneven manner, with access differentiated according to race and social status. This pattern demonstrates that colonial education functioned as a mechanism of social segmentation designed to sustain the administrative and economic interests of the colonial regime.

A shift in educational policy became visible in the early twentieth century with the implementation of the *Politik Etis*, inspired by Van Deventer's idea of a "Hutang Kehormatan" and articulated through the *Trilogi Van Deventer*, which encompassed education, irrigation, and emigration. This policy encouraged the expansion of primary education for the indigenous population, notably through the establishment of *Sekolah Rakyat (Volksschool)*, whose simplified curriculum emphasized reading, writing, and arithmetic (Harahap et al., 2025; Marpaung et al., 2024). The presence of the *Volksschool* broadened access to elementary education, yet it remained confined within colonial structural limits that restricted the social mobility of its graduates. This primary education track was designed as a terminal pathway, offering no broad access to Dutch-language secondary education. Such a structure underscores that the expansion of schooling did not equate to the equalization of social opportunity.

Within the historiography of colonial education, scholarship on the *Volksschool* generally follows two main trajectories. The first situates it as a colonial instrument for producing low-level labor and reinforcing social differentiation. The second interprets it as an initial gateway to improved literacy among the indigenous population and

as an embryonic form of national education. Nevertheless, most of these studies examine the *Volksschool* only partially, treating it as a component of broader colonial policy rather than as an institution analyzed independently in terms of its social practices. Few studies have simultaneously examined its structural control function and its transformative consequences through measurable historical indicators.

Education in the colonial context can be understood as a mechanism for reproducing social structures through the distribution of cultural capital and the deployment of disciplinary practices. Curriculum design, language of instruction, and educational progression pathways were structured to regulate social differentiation and restrict vertical mobility among indigenous communities. The *Volksschool* operated within this configuration, expanding basic literacy while simultaneously limiting access to further education. Educational inequality under colonial rule reflected a governance strategy grounded in social segmentation, positioning education as an instrument for stabilizing the colonial economy and bureaucracy (Sofiani et al., 2025). The *Politik Etis* appeared normatively progressive, yet its implementation remained oriented toward colonial administrative and labor needs.

Studies of colonial education reveal an inherent ambivalence between its function as a tool of control and its emancipatory consequences. Research on indigenous access to education during the *Politik Etis* period (1901–1930) confirms that school expansion remained embedded within a framework of dualism and racial segregation that primarily served colonial labor interests (Fakhriansyah & Patoni, 2019). A microhistorical study of the development of *Sekolah Rakyat* (*Volksschool*) in Gunung Kencana shows that the elementary curriculum was designed to produce low-level administrative personnel and reinforce social control, although the literacy it generated created limited opportunities for mobility at the village level (Suherman, 2019). An economic-historical analysis of the educational legacy of the Dutch East Indies from 1871 to 1942 further demonstrates that limited financial commitment and a cautious approach to mass education reflected priorities of colonial control and efficiency rather than social equalization (Frankema, 2013). Taken together, these three studies have not simultaneously positioned *Sekolah Rakyat* as an arena of tension between colonial governmental control and social transformation within the history of Indonesian education.

Earlier scholarship on colonial education generally separates the dimensions of control and literacy in its analysis. Macro-level studies focus on the policies of the *Politik Etis* and the broader colonial structure, while local studies tend to be descriptive and seldom connect institutional practices with measurable social impacts. This gap indicates the absence of an integrative reading that situates *Sekolah Rakyat* as an ambivalent institution operating within a structure of domination while simultaneously opening limited spaces for transformation. This article offers a novel contribution by integrating policy analysis, school practices, and historical indicators of impact within a systematic historiographical framework. This approach underscores the position of *Sekolah Rakyat* as a critical node in the formation of the foundations of Indonesia's national education system.

This research advances three principal objectives. First, it reconstructs historically the background and process of the establishment of *Sekolah Rakyat* (*Volksschool*) within the context of the *Politik Etis* and the colonial educational structure. Second, it analyzes its role in shaping an indigenous working class through curriculum design, restrictions on educational access, and a labor-oriented framework integrated with colonial administrative needs. Third, it evaluates its impact on the history of Indonesian education, particularly its contribution to rising literacy rates, evolving social dynamics, and the formation of the foundations of national education. These objectives clarify the analytical position of the article in comprehensively explaining the historical ambivalence of *Sekolah Rakyat*.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical research method through a *library research* approach, which requires systematic scholarly rigor in reconstructing past events in a responsible and critically grounded manner. This approach is not confined to secondary literature; it also encompasses the examination of published written primary sources, such as the *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië*, the annual reports of the *Departement van Onderwijs en Eeredienst*, early twentieth-century colonial educational statistics, and policy documents related to the *Politik Etis* and the administration of the *Volksschool*. Secondary sources include historiographical works on colonial education, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant economic-historical studies.

The heuristic stage was conducted by inventorying colonial education regulations, the curricular structure of the *Volksschool*, and literacy data in order to map the institutional position of *Sekolah Rakyat* within the colonial education

system. Source selection was guided by temporal relevance and the authority of the issuing body (Leoni & Sangster, 2025).

The methodological framework, drawing upon the perspectives of Kuntowijoyo and Daliman, was implemented through the stages of verification, interpretation, and historiography in a critical and contextual manner. Verification involved external criticism to ascertain the authenticity of documents, as well as internal criticism to identify administrative bias and ideological perspectives embedded within colonial reports. The interpretative stage connected curriculum design, funding structures, and the geographical distribution of schools with the social function of *Sekolah Rakyat* in shaping the indigenous working class and with its implications for literacy development and broader social dynamics. A comparative analysis was employed to assess the alignment between the normative objectives of colonial educational policy and the social consequences recorded in official educational reports. The final stage is articulated in an analytical-argumentative narrative that critically reconstructs the role of *Sekolah Rakyat* as a colonial educational institution whose social and cultural impacts were significant for indigenous society (Kuntowijoyo, 2013). The research is historiographical-analytical in character, grounded in written sources and conducted without direct field archival investigation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Institutional Genealogy of *Sekolah Rakyat* (*Volksschool*) within the Colonial Education System

The establishment of *Sekolah Rakyat* during the colonial period cannot be separated from the broader educational policies of the Government of the Dutch East Indies in the early twentieth century. Colonial education was fundamentally directed toward serving the interests of power: preparing a labor force capable of sustaining Dutch political and economic stability. Educational content was deliberately confined to basic knowledge and practical skills deemed sufficient to support colonial administration, rather than to promote intellectual equality among the indigenous population (Aliyah et al., 2025). This policy orientation reflects the instrumental character of education within the framework of colonial governance. Education, therefore, was positioned as part of a broader strategy to consolidate structures of domination.

Several historians interpret the design of colonial education as a mechanism for reproducing a low-level labor force regulated administratively and structurally. This perspective emphasizes the role of schools in maintaining the continuity of the colonial social hierarchy. At the same time, other studies argue that, despite its instrumental orientation, the system nonetheless expanded access to basic literacy that had previously been largely unavailable in rural communities. These divergent interpretations suggest that *Sekolah Rakyat* cannot be understood solely as an instrument of domination; rather, it functioned as an institution with socially ambivalent consequences. Such debate enriches historiographical readings of the position of the *Volksschool* within colonial educational history.

A shift in colonial educational policy became evident with the emergence of the *Politik Etis* (*Etische Politiek*) in the early twentieth century. This policy was influenced by criticisms of socio-economic conditions in the Dutch East Indies, including Van Deventer's articulation of the idea of a "Hutang Kehormatan" in 1899. The substantial profits accrued by the Netherlands through the *Cultuurstelsel* (Cultivation System) were framed as a moral obligation to be repaid to the Indonesian people through education, irrigation, and emigration. Within this framework, education was positioned as a strategic instrument in the reformulation of colonial policy. Its implementation, however, remained confined within the administrative and economic interests of the colonial state.

Sekolah Rakyat (*Volksschool*) emerged within this policy context as a form of basic education for rural communities. Established in 1907 under the directive of Governor-General Van Heutsz, it was initially administered by village authorities rather than directly by the colonial administration. Its teachers were village employees, while colonial government support was limited to certain facilities and subsidies. This administrative model demonstrates that from its inception the *Volksschool* was conceived as a low-cost mass education system. Such an arrangement enabled quantitative school expansion without requiring substantial fiscal commitment from the colonial state.

Colonial educational statistics from the early twentieth century indicate an increase in the number of village schools and indigenous student participation, although graduation rates and continuation to higher levels of study remained low compared to *Europeesche Lagere School* (*ELS*) and *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* (*HIS*). The educational stratification structure—with *ELS* for European children, *HIS* for the indigenous elite, and *Volksschool* for the rural

populace—institutionalized social segmentation in a systematic manner. This differentiation extended beyond curriculum and language of instruction; it also determined the social mobility pathways available to each group. The system effectively restricted *Sekolah Rakyat* graduates from advancing to higher levels of education. Colonial educational stratification thus functioned as an instrument for reproducing the social structure.

After 1920, the colonial government began to provide subsidies for *Sekolah Rakyat*. Nonetheless, budgetary constraints, economic conditions, and limited participation from rural communities slowed its development. The principal objective of establishing *Sekolah Rakyat* remained focused on delivering inexpensive and simplified primary education to produce low- and mid-level workers required by the Government of the Dutch East Indies. Curriculum design and funding structures were calibrated to meet the practical needs of colonial administration. In this context, *Sekolah Rakyat* became an integral component of a colonial educational strategy oriented toward pragmatism and economic efficiency (Aliyah et al., [2025](#); Legimin & Aslan, [2024](#)). This orientation underscores the close linkage between educational policy and the interests of power.



Figure 1. Sekolah Rakyat Building in Sragen Regency, 1956
(Source: National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, 1956)

The basic literacy generated through this system expanded community access to village administration, correspondence, and printed reading materials. Reading and writing skills enabled some graduates to participate in tax record-keeping, letter administration, and official communication at the local level. These developments fostered new patterns of interaction between rural communities and the colonial bureaucratic structure. Access to administrative texts was no longer monopolized entirely by the educated elite. This transformation reveals social effects that extended beyond the original instrumental aims of colonial education.

Literacy did not automatically alter the social position of *Sekolah Rakyat* graduates. The colonial educational structure continued to constrain vertical mobility through differentiated schooling tracks and restricted access to further education. Institutional boundaries remained difficult for village school graduates to cross. Most graduates remained within the spectrum of low-level or simple administrative occupations despite having acquired basic literacy skills. This reality demonstrates that the expansion of literacy was not synonymous with the expansion of social mobility.

Literacy skills nevertheless created new possibilities for social articulation that had previously been inaccessible to some individuals. Access to newspapers, pamphlets, and local organizations broadened informational horizons and fostered new awareness of social positioning. These processes did not unfold uniformly across regions; they were shaped by economic conditions, social networks, and local dynamics. *Sekolah Rakyat* provided a minimal cognitive

infrastructure that enabled certain graduates to forge new social relationships. In specific contexts, this capacity stimulated emerging forms of social negotiation within colonial society.

The Formation of an Indigenous Working Class through the Educational Structure of *Volksschool*

Within the colonial education system of the Dutch East Indies in the early twentieth century, *Sekolah Rakyat* (*Volksschool*) occupied a strategic position as a primary educational institution intended for the indigenous population, particularly rural communities. The educational policy implemented by the colonial government was not designed to promote intellectual equality, but rather to fulfill the administrative and economic needs of the colonial state. Education functioned as an instrument for producing a labor force capable of sustaining Dutch political authority and economic stability. This orientation demonstrates that colonial primary education was structured within the framework of the colonial government's strategic interests. *Sekolah Rakyat* formed an integral component of that system.

This policy design was reflected in the curricular structure and the relatively short duration of schooling—three years—with emphasis placed on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Early twentieth-century colonial education reports indicate a significant increase in the number of *Volksschool* institutions after 1907, yet the proportion of graduates advancing to *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS)* remained extremely limited. Statistical data from the *Departement van Onderwijs en Eeredienst* reveal that the vast majority of graduates concluded their education at the primary level and entered the local labor sector directly. This pattern confirms the terminal function of *Volksschool* within the colonial education system. The use of local languages as the medium of instruction broadened access to basic literacy while simultaneously restricting integration into Dutch-language secondary education pathways (Aji et al., 2025; Fitrianto et al., 2025).

Several studies interpret this model as a strategy of fiscal efficiency and social control, since the colonial government was not required to establish an expensive educational infrastructure for the indigenous population. Other perspectives emphasize that the expansion of village schools created opportunities to enhance the administrative capacity of local communities, particularly in economic record-keeping and official correspondence. These differing interpretations indicate that the effectiveness of *Volksschool* cannot be understood in a purely unidirectional manner. Unlike other colonial schools, *Volksschool* was initially administered by village authorities. Its teachers were village employees, supported only minimally by the colonial government, a model that enabled mass expansion at relatively low cost.



Figure 2. Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia Mohammad Hatta visiting a Sekolah Rakyat in Panti, West Sumatra.

(Source: National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, 1954)

This administrative structure reinforced colonial educational stratification. *Europeesche Lagere School (ELS)* offered a comprehensive curriculum for European children, *HIS* prepared the indigenous elite for intermediate administrative roles, while *Volksschool* restricted the social horizon of rural communities through a minimal curriculum. This differentiation did not merely reflect disparities in educational access; it institutionalized class segmentation within

the colonial system (Davin, [2025](#)). The separation of educational tracks constrained the vertical mobility of village school graduates. Structurally, the colonial education system preserved the existing social hierarchy.

Through this configuration, *Sekolah Rakyat* played a significant role in the formation of a partially educated indigenous working class. Colonial labor reports indicate that many village school graduates were absorbed as clerks, administrative assistants, plantation foremen, and low-level technical personnel. They possessed the ability to read written instructions and draft basic reports, yet they were excluded from decision-making levels. This pattern demonstrates a direct linkage between primary education and colonial economic needs. Basic education thus functioned as an efficient and controllable mechanism for supplying labor.

This function did not produce a passive and homogeneous working class in every context. Basic literacy enhanced administrative negotiation capacities at the village level and expanded participation in modern communication practices. Its impact did not unfold uniformly across regions, nor did it automatically generate national consciousness. Economic conditions, social networks, and local dynamics significantly shaped the trajectory of social change. Literacy operated as a structural precondition for transformative processes that developed gradually over time.

Sekolah Rakyat operated as a supplier of labor to the colonial system through an educational design that was inexpensive, functional, and tightly regulated. The system maintained colonial economic and administrative stability while limiting graduates' vertical mobility. This analysis demonstrates that *Volksschool* played a central role in reproducing colonial social structures, while at the same time leaving space for social consequences that could not be entirely controlled by the colonial government (Aliyah et al., [2025](#); Khairiyah, [2025](#)). Such a position situates *Sekolah Rakyat* as a key element in understanding the character of colonial education in Indonesia.

This structure positioned *Volksschool* as a crucial node within the configuration of colonial power. The school did not merely transmit technical skills; it cultivated patterns of compliance, work discipline, and practical orientation aligned with the administrative and economic demands of the colonial state. The restricted curriculum and closed educational pathways reveal a systemic strategy to regulate indigenous social mobility. At the same time, the expansion of basic literacy generated new capacities that exceeded the original instrumental objectives of colonial policy, particularly in terms of access to information and administrative participation at the local level. These dynamics underscore the ambivalent character of *Volksschool* as an institution that reproduced colonial domination while simultaneously opening limited spaces for social transformation that evolved gradually beyond the confines of colonial design.

The Historical Implications of *Volksschool* for the Transformation of National Education

From its inception, *Sekolah Rakyat* was designed as an instrument of colonial education intended to supply a cheap yet minimally educated labor force. Over time, however, the institution generated consequences that extended beyond the original objectives of the Government of the Dutch East Indies. Early twentieth-century colonial education reports indicate a rise in the number of indigenous students acquiring basic literacy skills, even though overall participation rates remained low relative to the total population. Literacy statistics in administrative education reports reveal an upward trend in reading and writing proficiency in regions with more extensive village school networks. Although the primary education provided was simple and limited in scope, it nonetheless broadened access to literacy for segments of the indigenous population. This evidence points to social consequences that were not entirely anticipated in the initial design of colonial policy.

The ability to read and write constituted an initial form of capital that enabled individuals to engage with worlds beyond their immediate environment and to interpret the social and colonial realities they confronted. Several historians have linked rising literacy rates to the growth of modern organizations in the early twentieth century, including Budi Utomo (1908). Other perspectives emphasize that nationalism did not emerge solely from elementary education but rather from the interplay of economic conditions, political developments, and the networks of an educated elite. *Sekolah Rakyat* did not directly inculcate nationalist values; however, the experience of schooling and the acquisition of literacy skills provided essential social preconditions for participation in modern communication and social organizations (Hidayah & Handayani, [2025](#); Lutfiya et al., [2025](#)).

The growth of awareness during the nationalist movement stimulated criticism of the stratified and discriminatory colonial education system. Colonial schooling was increasingly perceived as serving the interests of the

colonizers while restricting equitable access for the broader population. Such critiques developed within public discourse and increasingly active social organizations. Demands for the establishment of alternative educational systems became integral to the national movement's agenda. This shift in discourse marked a transformation in the orientation of education—from a colonial instrument of governance to a vehicle for shaping a collective national identity.

The emergence of national educational institutions such as Taman Siswa (1922) and the expansion of Muhammadiyah education beginning in 1912 bore a historical relationship to prior experiences within the colonial education system. Movement leaders drew upon their encounters with colonial institutions to formulate educational models that emphasized national culture, independence, and character formation. This response reflected a critical evaluation of the structural limitations embedded in colonial education. The national education models that emerged did not merely represent ideological reactions; they articulated evolving social needs (Fitrianto et al., [2025](#); Shohibuddin & Maimun, [2024](#)).

Private schools established during the nationalist movement, whether nationalist or religious in character, maintained historical connections with the colonial education system, including *Sekolah Rakyat*. Inequality of access and colonial educational stratification encouraged the development of ideas advocating a more inclusive national education oriented toward the interests of the people (Anam et al., [2025](#)). Collective experiences within the colonial system provided a reflective foundation for conceptualizing alternative educational frameworks. This process illustrates how colonial institutions themselves contributed to the emergence of awareness regarding the need to reformulate the educational system. Such historical relationships further underscore the position of *Volksschool* within the broader dynamics of educational transformation.

The impact of *Sekolah Rakyat* in the history of Indonesian education reveals an inherently ambivalent character. The institution functioned as a colonial instrument in shaping a partially educated indigenous working class, while simultaneously expanding the base of basic literacy that influenced subsequent social dynamics. *Volksschool* cannot be regarded as the direct cause of the emergence of national education; rather, it constituted part of the historical infrastructure that shaped collective schooling experiences and broadened access to texts. These conditions provided crucial social preconditions for educational transformation in Indonesia. This analysis positions *Volksschool* as a pivotal node in the transition from colonial education to national education.

CONCLUSION

Sekolah Rakyat during the colonial period functioned as a strategic instrument of the Government of the Dutch East Indies to produce an indigenous labor force that was limited in skill yet effectively integrated into the colonial economic and bureaucratic structure. The minimalist curriculum design, short duration of schooling, and stratified educational pathways indicate that this form of primary education was intended to preserve social stability and administrative efficiency rather than to create broad vertical mobility for the indigenous population. At the same time, the expansion of basic literacy generated through *Volksschool* widened access to administrative texts and modern reading materials, thereby establishing social preconditions for the emergence of collective schooling experiences and an increasing awareness of the importance of education. *Sekolah Rakyat* did not directly cause the birth of national education; however, it provided a cognitive infrastructure that contributed to shaping the dynamics of educational transformation during the nationalist movement period in Indonesia.

Future research should strengthen this analysis through deeper exploration of primary archival sources, including colonial educational statistical reports, financial records of village schools, and data on the regional distribution of graduates. A historical approach grounded in localized case studies would further illuminate the varied and measurable impacts of *Sekolah Rakyat* across different regions. The application of social reproduction theory or comparative colonial studies frameworks would enrich understanding of the position of *Volksschool* within the broader context of colonial education in Southeast Asia, while simultaneously expanding the historiographical contribution of this study.

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