

## Transformation of the Education Curriculum in Indonesia during the Dutch East Indies Rule: A Historical and Conceptual Review

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the enduring impact of colonial legacies on Indonesia's national education system. The main objective is to analyze how structures, language policies, and bureaucratic frameworks inherited from the Dutch colonial era continue to shape educational access, quality, and equity today. Using a qualitative research approach, the study reviews secondary data, including academic articles and policy documents, combined with thematic analysis to identify key patterns and influences. The findings reveal that the dual-track curriculum system, separating academic and vocational education, perpetuates social segmentation, particularly disadvantaging students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, the colonial use of Dutch as the primary language of instruction has created a longstanding preference for foreign languages, such as English, in formal education, which exacerbates learning inequalities between urban and rural areas. The study also highlights how the rigid, hierarchical educational bureaucracy inherited from the colonial period limits innovation and local adaptation in schools. Overall, the research concludes that addressing these challenges requires more than superficial curriculum revisions; it calls for deep systemic reforms that prioritize inclusivity, local relevance, and greater flexibility in educational management. By transforming these inherited structures, Indonesia can move toward a more equitable and high-quality national education system that better serves its diverse population.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia cannot be separated from the long history of the Dutch East Indies rule, which formed the initial foundation of the formal education system in the country (Ferary, 2023; Nurazizah et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025). The system built by the colonial government at that time was not designed to educate the indigenous people as a whole but to produce a workforce that was loyal, obedient, and supportive of the interests of the colonial administration (Komariah, 2022). Schools such as the

Europeesche Lagere School (ELS), Hollandsch-Inlandsche School (HIS), and Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs (MULO) have curricula specifically designed to form basic administrative skills and instill the values of obedience and discipline, with a curriculum that is highly discriminatory for indigenous people (Soniadewi & Charismana, 2024). This situation forms an unequal socio-political structure, where education becomes an instrument of power, not just a means of individual capacity building (Abdullah et al., 2024). This background underscores the importance of an in-depth study of colonial educational legacy to understand the current forms and challenges of the national education system.

Previous studies by Soetomo, Alisjahbana, and Kleden have looked at the history of colonial education, but they mostly just describe historical facts without exploring how these facts have affected the development of today's national curriculum (Nurazizah et al., 2025). There is not much research that focuses on how the transformation of the curriculum occurred from the colonial era to the independence era, let alone one that maps the elements of the colonial legacy that still influence today's educational practices, such as memorization orientation, curriculum centralization, and the educational gap between regions. This is where the gap analysis of this research lies: filling the gap in conceptual studies that connect the transformation of the educational curriculum from the Dutch East Indies period to the present, so that it can provide a historical understanding that can be used as a basis for national curriculum reform (Prayogi et al., 2023).

The problems this study focuses on include three main areas: what the curriculum looked like during the Dutch East Indies rule, what parts of the colonial curriculum still exist in today's national education system, and how this historical understanding can help create curriculum reforms that fit Indonesia's social and cultural context. The research uses a historical-conceptual approach that combines ideas about how curriculum develops and the impact of colonial history to trace how education has changed in Indonesia (Purba & Saragih, 2023). By looking at education as an arena of social power and reproduction, this study also adopts a critical approach to uncover the political, cultural, and ideological roles that work behind the preparation of the curriculum over time (Khanifah & Mudzakkir, 2024).

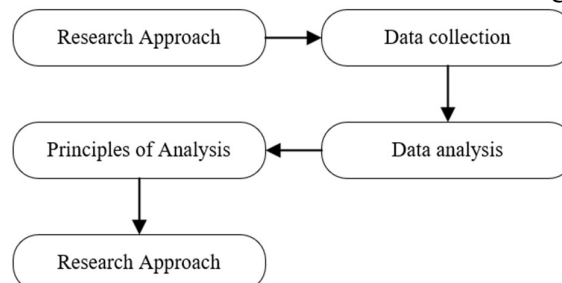
The expected result of this study is a map of curriculum transformation that shows how colonial patterns—for example, obedience orientation, order, and access gaps—continue in new forms in the era of independence. With this understanding, the research can provide a conceptual contribution to policymakers, academics, and education practitioners in building a framework for curriculum reform that is not only technical but also rooted in historical and social awareness (Khanifah & Mudzakkir, 2024). This research emphasizes that an in-depth analysis of the colonial legacy in education is essential for Indonesia to be able to design a curriculum that is more contextual, inclusive, and in accordance with the vision of national education. This understanding is also the basis for reducing the educational gap between regions, overcoming the dominance of memorization orientation, and promoting critical and creative learning at all levels of society.

As an initial reference, this research refers to important works such as [Setiawan & Hadi \(2018\)](#) about the history of Indonesian education, [Amelia & Hudaidah \(2021\)](#) about the reform of education, [Widiaryanto \(2021\)](#), which reviews colonial legacies in the national system, and [Jailani & Isma \(2024\)](#), which discusses social and educational change in a global perspective. We will combine all these references with historical archival documents, curriculum policies, and conceptual analysis to produce solid and academically accountable findings. This research is expected not only to enrich the treasures of historical education literature but also to become a practical foothold for the renewal of national education that is more equitable and in accordance with the identity of the Indonesian nation.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a conceptual review approach and historical-critical analysis to explore the educational legacy of the Dutch East Indies government on the national education curriculum in Indonesia ([Manurung, 2019](#)). The technique used is a literature review, which is the collection of secondary data from colonial education historical archives, national curriculum policy documents, and academic literature published in the last five years, including relevant educational journals. The collected data is then examined using content analysis, which involves organizing the information by time, coding themes to find parts of the colonial curriculum's influence, summarizing the results to show changes in the curriculum, and interpreting the findings to make theoretical conclusions about how history relates to current curriculum updates.

Since the method is well-known, the principles of historical-critical analysis serve as a general guideline, while the conceptual review approach emphasizes that one must carefully examine the literature to find gaps in research and new ideas. To maintain validity, this study uses a literature triangulation technique, which compares data from historical archives, academic literature, and education policy documents. Other researchers can repeat the studies by using the same primary literature sources, following the thematic coding framework described, and using similar methods to interpret the findings. This study does not involve sample size or replication of the experiment due to its non-empirical nature, but the transparency of the analysis process is maintained to ensure repeatability and accountability of the research results. The following is a presentation of the research method framework in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Research Method Framework

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

##### **The Influence of Colonial Curriculum Heritage on the National Education Structure**

This research confirms that Indonesia's national education structure is still heavily influenced by the legacy of the Dutch East Indies education system. The curriculum system that separates the academic and vocational education pathways still survives today, as it was designed to meet the administrative and technical needs of the colonial government. This condition has led to the emergence of social segmentation in education, where students from lower economic backgrounds tend to be trapped in vocational paths that are considered less prestigious. This is in accordance with the findings (Nurrohman, 2023), which state that this pattern of differentiation contributes to inequality of access and quality of education in Indonesia. This legacy also makes it difficult to carry out structural reforms in a truly equitable and inclusive national education system.

##### **Language of Instruction and Orientation of Colonial Education**

Dutch, which was used as the main language of instruction during the colonial period, left a long-term impact in the form of the dominance of foreign languages in formal education in Indonesia. Although currently the official language of instruction is Indonesian, the influence of foreign languages is still felt, mainly in the use of English and globally oriented subject matter. This phenomenon has implications for the gap in students' language skills between urban and rural areas. Students in rural areas often have difficulty understanding learning materials that use foreign languages, thus widening the gap of inequality in educational attainment (Mardizal & Ramatni, 2024; Wu & Tarc, 2024). Therefore, education policies need to consider the local context in the selection of the language of instruction to support effective and inclusive learning (Magnússon et al., 2019; Florian, 2022).

##### **Education Bureaucracy as a Colonial Legacy and Its Impact on Education Management**

Indonesian education management still bears the imprint of the hierarchical and rigid educational bureaucratic system from the Dutch East Indies era. A highly formal and centralistic bureaucratic structure leads to a lack of flexibility in curriculum implementation and decision-making at the school level. As a result, innovation in the learning process is often hampered because teachers and education staff are not given enough space to create and adapt to local needs (Purwowidodo & Zaini, 2023; Samuelsson, 2025). This shows the need for educational bureaucratic reform that provides more space for the active participation of teachers and education actors to improve the quality of learning in a contextual and responsive manner (Robinson, 2012; Dimmock et al., 2021).

### **Educational Inequality between Urban and Rural Areas**

The sharp gap between urban and rural education is a colonial legacy that is still difficult to overcome. Schools in urban areas tend to have better access to facilities and infrastructure, quality teachers, and more diverse educational opportunities. On the other hand, schools in rural areas often lack adequate facilities and resources, so the quality of education received by students also differs significantly (Wang et al., 2019; Idin et al., 2024). This condition strengthens existing socio-economic inequalities and hinders the government's efforts to create equitable education. Therefore, education development efforts must focus on empowering and increasing the capacity of schools in rural areas to reduce this inherent gap (Yu et al., 2024).

### **Implications for Future Curriculum and Education Policy Reform**

Based on the findings of this study, curriculum reform in Indonesia is not enough just to make changes to teaching materials but must include a profound transformation of the structure and education system that is a colonial legacy. We need to develop a more adaptive and inclusive curriculum that takes into account the diversity of cultures, languages, and local needs. Furthermore, we must steer education policies to lessen the disparity in educational access and quality, particularly between urban and rural regions (Zheng et al., 2021). Education bureaucratic reform is also essential so that education management becomes more flexible and participatory, opening up space for teachers and education actors to innovate and contribute significantly to the learning process (Hall et al., 2015). With this holistic approach, it is hoped that education in Indonesia can become more equitable, relevant, and high-quality in the future.

### **Discussion**

This study reveals that a deep colonial legacy still overshadows Indonesia's national education system, both in its structure and practice. One of the main legacies is the segmentation of the curriculum between academic and vocational paths inherited since the Dutch East Indies era. This pattern creates a social hierarchy in education, where students from low economic backgrounds are often stuck in vocational paths that are considered less prestigious. In addition to the structure of the curriculum, the language aspect also reflects the enduring colonial influence. During the colonial period, using Dutch as the language of instruction established a pattern of foreign language dominance in formal education. Although Indonesian has now become the official language of instruction, globally oriented subject matter often uses foreign languages such as English.

Furthermore, a hierarchical and centralistic educational bureaucratic system has also been formed since the colonial period, and until now its influence is still felt in Indonesia's education management. Rigid bureaucratic structures make it difficult for schools to innovate and adapt learning to local needs (Turner et al., 2022; Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025). Teachers and education staff have limited space to be creative, which ultimately negatively impacts the quality of learning (Anderson et al., 2022). The study also highlights the educational inequality between urban and rural areas as one of the

most tangible legacies of the colonial era. Rural schools often lag in terms of facilities, quality of teachers, and learning opportunities compared to schools in big cities. This condition further exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities, as well as hindering efforts to distribute education equity, which is the target of government policies.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that education reform in Indonesia must move beyond just revising teaching materials. Deeper reforms need to target systemic transformation, including curriculum restructuring to make them more inclusive, capacity building in rural schools, and reforming the education bureaucracy to create more participatory and flexible spaces (Smucker, 2024). Thus, Indonesia's national education can move toward being more equitable, relevant, and able to respond to local diversity challenges and global needs in a balanced manner.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the period of Dutch East Indies rule left a significant influence on the education system in Indonesia, especially in terms of curriculum structure, language of instruction, educational bureaucracy, and inequality of access between urban and rural areas. This colonial legacy is still seen in the pattern of differentiation of educational paths, the use of foreign languages that are not always in accordance with the local context, and an education management system that is rigid and less responsive to local needs. Inequality in the quality and access to education between urban and rural areas is also a sustainable impact of the colonial period that needs to be the main concern in national education policy. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of holistic and adaptive education reforms, which update curriculum materials and make structural changes in education management and instructional language policies.

For further research, it is recommended to explore learning innovation models that can accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity in Indonesia, as well as the development of more flexible and participatory education management strategies so that education can be more inclusive and equitable across regions.

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