

Bringing Together the Puzzle of Hope for Marginalized Children in Sekolah Rakyat: A Comparison of Education Policies During the Old Order and Reform Era Through a Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This review asks what access to education has meant for marginalized children in Indonesia, and it answers by placing Old Order education policy next to that of the Reform Era, then reading both against the current Sekolah Rakyat initiative. Sources were scholarly publications and policy documents found through academic search platforms and official government channels; only those addressing historical education policy, educational equity, or the design and implementation of Sekolah Rakyat were kept. The synthesis was thematic, organized around policy purpose, access mechanisms, governance, and persistent barriers. Working under the severe constraints of the post-independence years, the Old Order focused on nation-building, on putting a national education system together, and on making Indonesian the shared language of instruction. Rights-based guarantees and targeted access instruments arrived with the Reform Era. Gaps in school quality, facilities, teacher deployment, and household conditions stayed. Sekolah Rakyat is best understood as an affirmative policy response, but its contribution to equity depends on transparent eligibility rules, adequate resources, community involvement, child safeguards, and independent evaluation. History, the review contends, does not offer a model to replicate. What it offers is a public mission, one that still needs implementation grounded in rights and checked against evidence.



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INTRODUCTION

Education is larger than schooling. For a child who grows up poor, lives far from public services, carries social vulnerability, or struggles simply to get to class, it is also a question of recognition: does the state see and protect this child, and is a different future actually open to them? That is why Sekolah Rakyat belongs to a longer Indonesian story, the effort to turn education into a public right rather than a service that mostly reaches families able to pay for it (Republik Indonesia, 1945; UNESCO, 2020).

When independence came, the new government inherited what colonial rule and revolution had left of schooling and was asked to build a national system out of it. Schools carried several expectations at once. They were to shape a national identity, open learning to more people, and anchor a shared language and curriculum. Fadli and Kumalasari (2019), Kurnia and Hudaidah (2021), and Nasution (2020) describe 1945 to 1966 as the period when education gained its legal and institutional foundations, marked by the 1947 Lesson Plan and the 1952 Detailed Lesson Plan (see also Aisy & Hudaidah, 2021). Equitable provision was the aim. Thin infrastructure, scarce resources, and unstable politics kept pulling against it.

Under the Reform Era, education came to be framed more and more as a constitutional right and a duty of the state. The constitutional amendments, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System (Republik Indonesia, 2003), and successive assistance and admission policies all point toward rights-based thinking, wider access, and lower socioeconomic barriers. Getting children through the door is one achievement. Giving them equal quality once they are inside is another, and the second has proved harder. Apriliansyah et al. (2026) find that problems of quality, teacher distribution, and facilities persisted even as access policies multiplied, while Heriyadi et al. (2025) record similar gaps and weaknesses in the implementation of education policy between 2015 and 2024.

Placed in this history, today's Sekolah Rakyat looks less like a stand-alone policy and more like the latest chapter in a long sequence of state responses to unequal education. One policy context linked to its emergence is Presidential Instruction No. 8 of 2025 on optimizing poverty alleviation and eliminating extreme poverty (Republik Indonesia, 2025). Akbar et al. (2026) examine the program as an instrument of inclusive education policy and present it as a response to the access barriers poor communities face. They are equally clear that its design and implementation still need critical scrutiny.

Most of the literature falls on one side of a divide. Studies of the Old Order approach education largely as policy history; contemporary research handles access equity, assistance programs, or Sekolah Rakyat in separate compartments. Datumula (2021) partly bridges the divide by following regulation across several regimes, although marginalized children are not its focus. The unanswered question is how lessons from the Old Order might be read against the Reform Era's policy paradigm so that they say something about what marginalized children can realistically hope for. This article addresses that question by connecting educational aims, equity mechanisms, governance, and the lived position of vulnerable groups. What it adds is a cross-period comparison that keeps marginalized children at the center, as subjects whose circumstances define the problem and not merely as recipients of programs.

Three aims guide the article: comparing the policy orientations of the Old Order and the Reform Era, tracing continuity and change in efforts to reach marginalized children, and drawing out what this means for Sekolah Rakyat. Academically, it brings together two bodies of work that seldom speak to each other, the history of education and the study of equity policy. Its practical argument is aimed at policymakers, school leaders, and communities. Counting schools and enrolled pupils is not enough. Success should also be judged by whether children stay in learning, how well they learn, whether they are safe, and whether they have room to flourish.

RESEARCH METHODS

This is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combining thematic and comparative synthesis. Estimating the causal effect of any program was never its purpose. What it does is place three bodies of literature alongside one another: work on Old Order education policy (1945–1966), work on Reform Era education policy (1998 to the present), and work on how both relate to Sekolah Rakyat. The units of analysis were journal articles, scholarly studies, and policy documents concerned with educational history, access and equity, marginalized children, or Sekolah Rakyat.

Search terms were written in Indonesian and English, among them “Old Order education,” “Indonesian education policy,” “educational equity Indonesia,” “marginalized children,” “Sekolah Rakyat,” “education access,” and “education policy reform.” The searches ran across scholarly journal websites, publication-indexing platforms, and official government sources. Publications from the past ten years took priority for contemporary questions, but older historical scholarship and primary policy documents stayed in wherever they were needed to explain the 1945–1966 setting.

A source was included if it met four criteria: (a) it related directly to the review's focus; (b) its policy descriptions, findings, or analysis were substantial enough to trace; (c) it came from a scholarly journal, an academic publisher, or an official body; and (d) its bibliographic details were reasonably complete. Sources that only mentioned a relevant term without analyzing it, lacked clear publication details, or repeated other work without adding to it received lower priority. Screening moved through titles, abstracts, and relevance. Whatever survived was coded into an extraction matrix recording period, policy objectives, target groups, implementation instruments, main findings, and limitations.

The synthesis relied on repeated reading, and findings were grouped under four themes: the aims and orientation of education, the mechanisms for widening access, implementation capacity and governance, and the meaning of all this for marginalized children. To compare the two periods is not to claim their contexts are equivalent. The Old Order is read against postcolonial state-building; the

Reform Era against democratization, decentralization, stronger rights frameworks, and expanding social protection. A literature synthesis is limited by the traceable publications it can draw on, and this one is no exception. Search dates, the databases consulted, and the number of records retained at each screening stage are not reported here. They have to be taken from the author's documented search log and added before the manuscript is submitted, and the present text invents none of these figures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Education During the Old Order: Building a National System Amid Constraints

Old Order education policy, the historical record suggests, was born of urgency: once independence had been won, a national system had to exist. Its normative basis came from Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. Its tools were the Indonesian language, a national curriculum, and new educational institutions, all used to move away from the colonial legacy and cultivate a shared identity (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019; Kurnia & Hudaidah, 2021). The 1947 Lesson Plan was an early effort to organize school content around the needs of a sovereign nation, and the curriculum revisions that came after it show a system adjusting again and again to a changing sociopolitical climate (Nasution, 2020; Palupi, 2018; Viana et al., 2024; Zulkarnain, 2020).

From an equity standpoint, the project of building a national system had a consequential implication. Schooling was supposed to form citizens, not stay a privilege of certain groups. Commitment on paper did not put every child within reach of a school, though. The young state was short of buildings, teachers, money, and service reach, and the geographical and social inequalities it inherited had formed long before 1945. Education in this period is better described as a system still being extended and consolidated than as one that already reached every child.

The lesson here is blunt. A public vision of education is worth only as much as the capacity to deliver it. National purpose can give a policy legitimacy, yet whether marginalized children actually benefit turns on concrete things: a school within reach, a teacher in the classroom, indirect costs a family can carry, support for households and communities. The Old Order demonstrates that a policy can be normatively convincing and still produce uneven results when resources and local realities receive too little attention.

The Reform Era: Stronger Rights and Affirmative Instruments

Governance changes and firmer legal guarantees broadened the education framework in the Reform Era. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System laid down the functions, objectives, and principles of education, together with citizens' rights and obligations (Republik Indonesia, 2003). On the ground, various measures have aimed to reduce economic and geographical barriers, among them education assistance, admission arrangements, services for disadvantaged regions, and support directed at vulnerable groups (Datumula, 2021; Wedhatami et al., 2025).

Studies of access in Indonesia indicate that assistance and admission policies do ease entry into school. Inequality persists anyway, because school quality differs, teachers are spread unevenly, and facilities vary (Apriliansyah et al., 2026). This is where formal equality and substantive equity part company. The first gives everyone the same rules and the same opportunities. The second adjusts support to the barriers a particular child actually faces. A child in extreme poverty may need much more than relief from fees: transport, meals, learning materials, psychosocial support, and assistance for the family as a whole (UNICEF, 2023).

Who makes decisions changed as well. Decentralization handed larger roles to local governments, schools, families, and civil-society organizations. Local participation can tune policy more closely to what communities need. It can also lay bare how unequal local capacity is. Clear national standards are needed, then, but only alongside technical support, fair funding, transparent data, and complaint channels people can realistically use.

Sekolah Rakyat as an Affirmative Response: Promise and Critical Questions

In the present policy landscape, Sekolah Rakyat can be read as an affirmative effort to reach children from poor households and from groups facing several barriers at once. Its underlying principle is that the state should go out to the children hardest to serve rather than wait for them to turn up at the school gate. Akbar et al. (2026) link the program, understood as an instrument of inclusive education policy, to the reduction of extreme poverty and the widening of educational opportunity. Still, the program is in formation. Claims about its long-term success are better treated as hypotheses awaiting evaluation than reported as findings.

Targeting is the first unresolved issue. Measuring marginalization by income alone is too narrow, since vulnerability can just as well arise from disability, remote residence, having left school, family circumstances, exposure to violence, or weak access to basic services (UNESCO, 2020). Selection needs transparent criteria, verification procedures that respect families, protection of personal data, and an appeal route. Without these, eligible households can be shut out by nothing more than an administrative error.

Then there is quality, and how children actually experience learning. A separate school model for vulnerable groups makes intensive support possible. It also risks attaching labels that hurt children's dignity and separating them from their peers more than is necessary. The curriculum has to keep academic expectations high while building life skills, social-emotional well-being, digital literacy, and confidence. Teachers need preparation in understanding trauma, poverty, diverse learning needs, and working with families. Enrollment figures, on their own, reveal little about success. Attendance, retention, learning gains, safety, progression to the next level, and the views of children themselves all belong in the count.

The third issue concerns sustainability and governance. Intensive services require multi-year budget planning, a clear division of responsibility between central and local government, procurement oversight, and performance reports the public can follow. Partnerships with families, communities, social organizations, and mainstream schools can broaden support, provided they do not quietly shift the state's core responsibility onto volunteers or families already under strain. Independent evaluations should be published regularly, so that improvement is driven by evidence.

Comparing Policy Across Periods

What Table 1 shows is a persistent aspiration to treat education as a public good, pursued through instruments that have changed over time. The Old Order's energy went into building a national system and a shared identity. The Reform Era holds a broader legal and policy toolkit for addressing barriers to access. Sekolah Rakyat stands at the meeting point of these two legacies: it inherits the state's social mission, but it can fulfil that mission only through implementation that is rights-based, data-informed, tested against evidence, and suited to current challenges.

Dimension	Old Order (1945–1966)	Reform Era (1998–present)	Implications for Sekolah Rakyat
Main orientation	Consolidating national education, national identity, and a postcolonial system.	The right to education, equitable access, democratic governance, and social protection.	Combine the public mission of education with respect for children's rights and dignity.
Policy instruments	A constitutional foundation, institution-building, a national language, and a national curriculum.	Legislation, assistance schemes, access policies, decentralization, and affirmative measures.	Transparent eligibility, adequate funding, cross-sector support, and evaluation.
Major barriers	Scarce resources and infrastructure in a newly independent state.	Uneven quality, teacher distribution, facilities, socioeconomic conditions, and local capacity.	Mapping individual and regional needs, minimum service standards, and teacher support.
Measures of success	A working national education system and broader learning opportunities.	Access, participation, quality, inclusion, accountability, and learning outcomes.	Retention, learning progress, safety, well-being, transition, and children's voices.
Policy risks	National goals partly unrealized because of implementation constraints.	Fragmented programs, uneven implementation, and inconsistent evaluation.	Exclusion through targeting errors, stigma, program dependency, and weak coordination.

Table 1. Education Policy Orientations Across Periods and Their Implications for Sekolah Rakyat

Bringing Together the Puzzle of Hope: A Child-Centered Policy Framework

The phrase “puzzle of hope” captures something simple. Educational barriers rarely come one at a time. Poverty usually arrives entangled with transport costs, poor nutrition, no internet access, caregiving duties, child labor, or discrimination, and no single policy instrument is likely to undo all of that. Sekolah Rakyat will count for more if it operates as a hub, connecting education with social protection, health care, psychosocial support, civil registration, and support for families.

Five principles follow. First, planning should begin with a map of what children and communities need, not with a target for how many schools to open. Administrative records should be checked through home visits and community consultation, because some children never appear in official data and still have to be found. Second, services should be tiered: intensive support for children facing the heaviest

barriers, combined with deliberate pathways into mainstream schools so that transitions and choices remain open. Third, the voices of children and families should inform planning, complaint mechanisms, and evaluation, without burdening them with responsibilities out of proportion to their situation.

Fourth, performance indicators must cover access and quality together. Enrollment matters. Read in isolation, it says little; attendance, retention, learning progress, safety, children's satisfaction, and continuity of schooling need to sit beside it. Fifth, budget transparency and independent evaluation should be seen as part of child protection. Public reporting has to keep children's identities secure and must never turn their stories of poverty into material that erodes their dignity.

Conceptually, the synthesis traces a line from the early independence hope for equitable education to the Reform Era's agenda of educational justice. The periods diverge on how that hope is turned into practice. Early policy concentrated on getting a national system built. Policy now has to ensure that the system recognizes the many shapes barriers take and allocates support according to need. "Bringing the puzzle together" means aligning vision, funding, services, teacher capacity, community participation, and evaluation within an ecosystem built around the child.

CONCLUSION

One aspiration runs through both periods reviewed: education as a public good, with learning opportunity steadily extended. The Old Order directed its effort toward a national education system and a national identity, within the limits of a postcolonial state. The Reform Era reinforced rights-based frameworks, introduced assistance and equity instruments, and made room for participatory governance; inequalities in quality, facilities, teacher distribution, and socioeconomic conditions nonetheless remain. Sekolah Rakyat could serve as an affirmative policy for marginalized children if it is carried out with transparent targeting, services of genuine quality, cross-sector support, the participation of children and families, protection of their data, and independent evaluation. The number of schools opened or pupils enrolled is a weak measure of its worth. A stronger one is tangible change in children's opportunities to learn, their academic progress, their safety and dignity, and the continuity of their education. Evidence on implementation and long-term impact is still thin, and further research should follow students' experiences, institutional capacity, and program outcomes over time.

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