

The Topic of Slavery in Dutch Education

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How much are Dutch people taught at school about their country's involvement in slavery? In a 2021 survey of 30,000 Dutch citizens, 4 percent reported knowing "a lot" about the history of slavery and 23 percent said they knew "quite a bit." Forty-two percent said they were taught "a little," 28 percent "almost nothing," and 3 percent "nothing." The majority (68 percent) believed that it would be beneficial to have more lessons on this topic in schools.¹

It is no easy task to ascertain exactly what students learn in school. There are guidelines for what should be taught and textbooks that most teachers use, but their actual implementation in the classroom is unclear. Having said that, textbooks do guide the curriculum and are therefore the primary source of information about the content of history education. Another important source is teacher training manuals, which show us what prospective teachers are expected to know about certain topics.

Core Objectives

The history of slavery has been a mandatory topic in Dutch education for thirty years. The Basic Education Act (1992) authorized the government to specify which topics all students must be taught in primary education and the lower grades of secondary education by issuing guidelines (core objectives).² In the upper grades, where about half of the students take history, nationwide examination requirements apply. Because freedom of education is enshrined in the Dutch constitution, these guidelines may only specify what students must learn, not how these topics are taught. The first set of core objectives from 1993 mentioned "the colonial and postcolonial

relationship between the Netherlands and the East and West Indies.”³ New core objectives were introduced in 2006, which were still in force as this chapter was written in 2023.⁴ They refer to the following topics: (1) the VOC (Dutch East India Company), slavery, and the decolonization of Indonesia, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles (and since 2020: both the VOC and the WIC, or Dutch West India Company, slavery, Anton de Kom, and the decolonization of Indonesia, Suriname, and the Caribbean) and (2) slave labor on plantations and the rise of abolitionism.⁵

The way these topics are referenced (as “windows of the Dutch canon” and “characteristic aspects of historical periods”) gives teachers considerable discretion in how to treat them in primary and lower secondary education. Moreover, while the second topic is explicitly mentioned in the HAVO and VWO exam programs, it is not part of the VMBO exam program.⁶

In 2021, a committee proposed future core objectives with a limited scope, replacing the mention of plantation slavery and abolitionism with the less Eurocentric term “the emergence of intercontinental human trafficking.”⁷

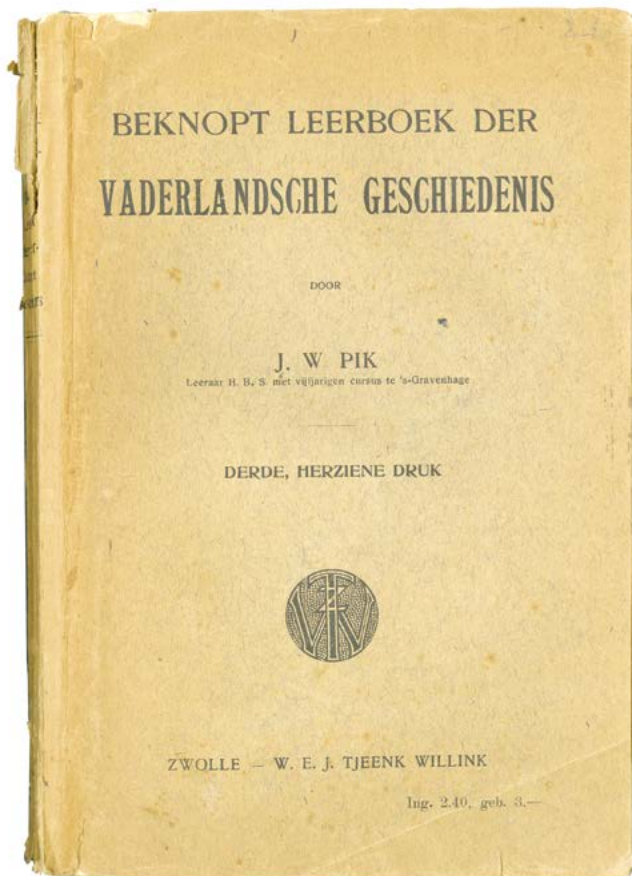
Textbooks

In the Netherlands, roughly six commercial educational publishers produce history textbook series (both in print and digital form). These publishers and their authors are free to determine the content of their books, but it is obviously in their interest to comply with government guidelines and core objectives. Since textbooks are typically revised every five years, freedom fighter Anton de Kom, for instance, has been included in all textbooks since the last revision in 2020.⁸ However, the manner in which the mandatory topics are treated remains diverse and ranges from meticulous to superficial. Therefore, it can make a big difference which textbooks the history teachers at a school decide to use, and much also depends on the extent to which individual teachers can or want to focus on a particular topic.

From 1878 to around 1960, National History was a separate subject in schools, with textbooks that gave limited space to slavery in the context of Dutch overseas expansion. For example, the 1919 textbook *Leerboek der Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis* [National History Textbook] stated:

In order to supply the plantations with sufficient numbers of negro slaves—because even Johan Maurits deemed slavery neces-

sary—he conquered St. George del Mina on the Guinea coast. ... Only the trade in slaves, war supplies, and Brazilian wood was reserved for the Company. ... Around 1750, there were (in Suriname) about 400 plantations with 80,000 slaves. The cultivation of coffee, cocoa, and cotton was successful, and the trade in coffee and other colonial products became very important; sometimes goods worth millions were traded on the Amsterdam market. The biggest trouble in Suriname came from the Bush Negroes or Ma-rooms, as the runaway slaves were known; they banded together, raided the plantations, and often took bloody revenge. Slave uprisings also occurred.⁹



Between 1878 and 1960, all Dutch schools taught National History as a separate subject.

From 1960 onwards, Dutch history was integrated into general history in schools, which in the textbooks was described from a European perspective. In *Wereld in wording* [World in Development] (1959), for example, the author placed “our” slave trade in an international context and also addressed its inhumane aspects:

This slave trade was particularly profitable, not only for us but also for other European peoples. Between 1500 and 1800, more negroes were transported across the oceans from one continent to another than Europeans moved during the Migration Period.¹⁰ The slaves were often bought from African negro kings and chiefs. These continuously waged wars among themselves to obtain prisoners for sale. The prisoners were herded to the coast, branded like cattle, chained in pairs, and attached in groups of fifty to a heavy chain. They were packed so tightly in the ship’s hold that soon an appalling filth and stench arose in the slave quarters. Often, many died of suffocation en route. But... the profits were so enormous that this partial ‘spoilage’ of ‘goods’ could easily be borne.¹¹

Generally, the broader orientation on the topic did not lead to more specific attention to the Dutch involvement in slavery. For instance, plantation slavery in North America was often discussed more extensively than plantation slavery in the Dutch colonies. This changed only when the core objectives were introduced in 1993.

Departing from the Eurocentric textbooks, *Sprekend verleden* [The Past Speaks] (1987) started to present topics related to what was then called non-Western areas from those areas’ own perspective. In the chapter on “Black Africa,” for example, there is a section that discusses how the “Europeans come and mainly trade in slaves.” This includes an excerpt from the autobiography of the “former slave” Equiano, in a section that asks, “How did Africans become slaves?” The chapter on Indonesia briefly addresses slavery: “During colonial times, the Dutch also began to use slaves as domestic servants and craftsmen.” The chapter on Suriname contains an extensive and richly illustrated description of slavery. A boxed text discusses Anton de Kom, who viewed Surinamese history “through the eyes of the colonized.” The chapter on the Netherlands Antilles includes a boxed text on slave resistance.¹² Some aspects of this innovative approach have been adopted in other textbooks.

Knowledge and Skills

When the Basic Education Act was implemented in 1993, students were also expected to develop certain academic skills. For example, they were required to “consider the bias of sources and their own bias.” As a result, history became a subject that students had to interactively engage with rather than one for which they had to memorize facts. The role of textbooks dwindled and made way for assignments, often in separate workbooks. The government-led requirement to address “the relationship between the Netherlands and the East and West Indies” meant most textbooks included sections on the Dutch transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery. However, due to other requirements, such as the obligation to discuss “European overseas expansion” and “the emergence of a world economy,” the history of slavery was still mainly discussed from a Eurocentric mercantile perspective.

Based on the new 2006 guidelines, history teachers were expected to cover more mandatory topics. In practice, they had a hard time properly implementing these changes, because history education was in dire straits. Many schools decided to reduce the teaching time for history, and many primary and VMBO schools resorted to combining or integrating history with other subjects, a decision based in part on pedagogical arguments. Publishers responded by creating textbooks on umbrella subjects like *Wereldoriëntatie* [World Orientation] and *Mens en Maatschappij* [Social and Human Development].

The amount of space devoted to the history of slavery varies greatly between textbooks written for students who take history as a separate subject and the books written for those who are taught history in combination with other subjects. For example, the primary school textbook *Wijzer! Geschiedenis* (2014), in its eighth-grade edition, devotes seven pages to this topic, featuring short texts, images, and assignments:

You will learn about a newly discovered continent: America. Many Europeans went to live there to trade products with Europe. Slaves did the work on the plantations and in the mines. ... Due to ideas about equality and democracy that arose during the time of wigs and revolutions,¹³ the slave trade and slavery in the colonies were abolished.¹⁴

One of the texts discusses Tula's revolt in Curaçao and is accompanied by a photo of the Tula Monument and an assignment about Tula's statement: "They have treated us very badly. We don't want to harm anyone, but we want freedom. Isn't everyone on earth a descendant of Adam and Eve? Even an animal receives better treatment." The authors of this textbook chose to give relatively ample space to the history of slavery and focused on the perspective of the enslaved.

Because there is more available teaching time in the upper grades of VWO, the history textbooks for these grades also devote more attention to the topic and give more space to multiperspectivity and multivocality. For example, *Feniks* (2012) quotes Equiano and gives some context about him and then asks students whether Equiano's life story is a representative and reliable source on the slave trade and slavery.

While most textbooks primarily address the economic and political aspects of slavery, the slave trade, and abolition, and discuss disagreements among white men (and the exceptional Black defender of slavery, minister Jacobus Capitein), others, such as *Memo* (2011), take a different approach based on new insights in historiography:

In the course of the 19th century, more and more countries abolished the slave trade and slavery. For a long time, these events were seen as the successful outcome of abolitionists' efforts. This traditional, Eurocentric view is now criticized. ...

For historians who study slavery from the perspective of the slaves, abolitionism is a tainted term. It implies action by whites only. They prefer to see the abolition of slavery as part of a longer emancipation struggle, which is primarily the result of the slaves' own efforts. A second point of contention among historians is the extent to which historiography is influenced by the late 18th century image that abolitionists created of the slave trade and slavery. ... Some historians believe this image is not incorrect, but incomplete. ... Other historians see these views as an example of colonial historiography.¹⁵

Forum (2019) extensively covers the Dutch role in slavery in the wider context of the global history of slavery starting in antiquity. Students are presented with disagreements among historians. For example, one assignment

asks how it is possible that historians sometimes draw different conclusions from their research: “Do they use different data, or is there another reason?”

Like most textbook authors, the authors of *Forum* do not use the term “enslaved” and explain why:

These days, some people avoid the word “slave” and replace it with “enslaved.” This is intended to express that slaves were unwillingly turned into slaves by others and were not naturally or actually slaves. The authors of this book choose to use the word “slave.” If you avoid using a historical term because you disagree with it, you are essentially trying to change the past retroactively. Historically, it was common for people to be pushed into a role against their will, such as medieval serfs, servants of wealthy landowners, or conscripted soldiers in wars. It would be cumbersome to call all of these “enserfed,” “those made to serve their masters,” and “people made to serve in the army against their will.” The authors of this book find it self-evident that slavery is morally wrong and that slaves did not choose to be slaves. Assignment: “Which term do you prefer and why?”¹⁶

When textbooks like *Sprekend verleden* started paying some attention to the history of Dutch slavery in Asia and this was picked up and discussed by the media in 2015, more textbooks followed suit.¹⁷ For instance, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* [History Workshop] (2018) states:

But during the VOC period, the Dutch also transported many hundreds of thousands of slaves in Asia. This slave trade began already when the [Dutch] Republic officially still condemned slavery. Just like in Africa, an extensive indigenous slave trade had existed in Asia for centuries. For example, the VOC brought slaves from India to plantations on the Banda Islands after the population was massacred there in 1621. Slaves were also used for the construction of trading posts (*factorijen*) and other heavy labor. Even larger numbers of slaves were personal property of VOC personnel, working in their households and as personal servants. Men bought slave women for sex and companionship. Children from relationships between Europeans and Asians were called

Indos [Eurasians] in Indonesia. ... But the VOC also got many of its slaves from slave markets on the coasts of East Africa, India, Bangladesh, and from Malaysia and the Philippines.¹⁸

A small number of textbooks explicitly state that slavery involved racism. For example, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* (2 VWO, 2019) includes an assignment asking students to indicate whether a Dutch plantation owner's statement, made in 1804 in Suriname, is an example of white Dutch people's superiority complex and racism.¹⁹

Some textbooks draw connections between the history of slavery and present-day issues. For example, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* (2 VMBO, 2019) states:

Since the abolition of slavery, Ketikoti (broken chains) has been celebrated on July 1 in Suriname and the Antillean islands. But in the Netherlands, there was little interest in the history of slavery. It took until 2002 for a national slavery monument to be erected in Amsterdam. Books, films, and websites about the history of slavery were published, and in 2007 slavery became a mandatory subject in education. In 2013, the Dutch government expressed deep remorse for its role in slavery.²⁰

In *Tijd voor geschiedenis* [Time for History] (2 VWO, 2019), there is an assignment about how the Netherlands deals with its own historical role in slavery: "The history of slavery is a dark chapter in the history of the Netherlands. Think carefully and give your own opinion on how we can/should best deal with this past."²¹

Memo (2011) offers multiple perspectives by posing various questions about a photo of the Dutch National Slavery Monument:

- Why was the establishment of this monument important for the Surinamese and Antillean communities in the Netherlands?
- Think of two things a slavery commemoration might mean to a Surinamese Dutch person.
- What significance could the Dutch government lend to a slavery commemoration by attending it?²²

Teacher Training

When the core objectives of history education were formulated in 2006, the framework of ten time periods and their characteristic aspects devised by the De Rooy Commission became a predominant influence in all teacher training programs. The influence of the “Canon of the Netherlands” was less extensive.²³ The Canon was used more in primary education teacher training (PABO) than in secondary education teacher training at university level.

Before 2006, there had only been a handful of Dutch compendiums for prospective secondary education teachers, which had devoted little space to the history of slavery. This changed when *Oriëntatie op geschiedenis* [Focus on History] was published in 2009 (fourth edition 2020). This compendium treats the history of Europe’s involvement in slavery in a broad context with room for different perspectives. Despite the attention to slave revolts and quotes from enslaved people, however, the description remained Eurocentric. For example:

After purchase, the infamous Middle Passage followed, and then the sale in slave markets. The Middle Passage was notorious for its harsh conditions and high mortality rates. It should be noted that in this period, the number of casualties among ship crews was also high. While on average one in five slaves did not survive the journey, the crews on the slave ships lost lives at the same rate. ... In any case, slave ship captains did their best to keep as many slaves alive as possible. After all, each death meant an economic loss.²⁴

For PABO, there are two compendiums, both of which appeared in a fifth edition in 2021. *Geschiedenis geven* [Teaching History] devotes extensive space to the history of slavery, providing a multifaceted picture of the tasks of plantation slaves, cruel treatment, revolts, and offering side texts about figures like the black slave owner Elisabeth Samson. On the subject of the Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade, it states:

The mortality rate aboard the slave ships was high—ranging from 40 to 70 percent—because the ships were overcrowded and the conditions on board were appalling. In total, more than half a mil-

lion Africans were transported as slaves to the Dutch colonies in the West Indies. ...

Human trafficking had existed since antiquity, but slaves were only sold on a large scale to Europeans from the 16th century onward. This transatlantic, large-scale slave trade has determined our image of slavery.²⁵

In *Geschiedenis & samenleving* [History and Society], the history of slavery is discussed more briefly and matter-of-factly, for example: “During the Middle Passage, the slaves are locked in the cargo hold of a ship. Once arrived in the Americas (in Suriname or Curaçao, for example), they are sold at a slave market to plantation owners.” Contemporary debates about slavery are addressed with two recent quotes about the history of slavery:

- “Facts matter. Those who speak loudest about the history of slavery tend to exaggerate. ... We should not view history through today’s lens but through the eyes of contemporaries.” (Piet Emmer, 2018)
- “If a great injustice has been committed with regard to human rights, then every country should apologize for it.” (Aspha Bijnaar, 2019)²⁶

Conclusion

Textbooks determine to a great extent how history is taught in Dutch schools. Those books have never ignored the topic of slavery completely. However, they have mostly dealt with it in brief and from an economic perspective. This begs the question how Dutch people perceive the history of slavery and the Dutch role in it, whether they base their ideas on what they have learned in school, and what possible consequences this has. More research is needed to gain insight into the effects of past and current history education on people’s perception and understanding of the history of slavery.

Prompted by societal, educational, didactic, and historiographical developments in recent decades, textbooks have improved and expanded their sections on this topic. They devote more space to its social and cultural aspects, and to multiperspectivity and multivocality. In this develop-

ment, some textbooks have taken a leading role, while others have followed suit or lagged behind. Textbooks in the first two categories show us how education is changing. However, this does not mean that there is no room for improvement. For example, the history of slavery in Asia and the Dutch role in it deserve far more space.

Most likely, all textbooks will keep being improved, but differences in quality will persist. The biggest structural problem in history education in Dutch schools is the lack of adequate teaching time, which means that many students learn (too) little about important topics. The fact that the history of slavery is discussed so briefly in some textbooks should be seen as a reflection of this time crunch problem.

Notes

- 1 Survey conducted by *EenVandaag* (Dutch public broadcasting news platform) "Onderzoek koloniale geschiedenis: slavernijverleden," September 2021.
- 2 Basic Education Act (*Wet Basisvorming*) 1992. *Basisvorming* is the educational program for Dutch primary education and the first two to three years of Dutch secondary education, intended to provide students at all secondary school levels with the same foundational knowledge for the remainder of their education.
- 3 Besluit vaststelling kerndoelen (*Staatscourant*, October 10, 1997), <https://zoek.officiëlebekendmakingen.nl/stb1997484.html>.
- 4 Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), 'Kerndoelenboekje basisonderwijs,' *Rapport | Rijksoverheid.nl*, March 30, 2022: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2006/04/28/kerndoelenboekje>; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), 'Kerndoelen onderbouw voortgezet onderwijs,' *Besluit | Rijksoverheid.nl*, November 25, 2022, www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/besluiten/2010/09/17/kerndoelen-onderbouwvoortgezetonderwijs.
- 5 P. de Rooy, *Verleden, heden en toekomst: Advies van de Commissie historische en maatschappelijke vorming* (Enschede: Stichting leerplanontwikkeling (SLO), 2001).
- 6 VMBO, HAVO, and VWO are three types of stratified secondary education in the Netherlands. VMBO is pre-vocational education, HAVO is "higher" general secondary education, and VWO is pre-university secondary education.
- 7 "Eindadvies referentiekaders Ruimte en Tijd," SLO, www.slo.nl/publicaties/@20449/eindadviesreferentiekadersruimtetijd.
- 8 De Kom (1898–1945) was a Surinamese freedom fighter and author of the seminal book *We Slaves of Suriname*. The Dutch government regarded him as an enemy of the state, incarcerated him, and banished him to the Netherlands. He was not rehabilitated until 2023.
- 9 J.W. Pik, *Leerboek der Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis*, 2nd ed. (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1919), 148, 258.
- 10 The Migration Period, a.k.a. Barbarian invasions, was a period in European history (2nd to 5th centuries AD) marked by large-scale migrations that saw the fall of the Western Roman Empire and subsequent settlement of its former territories by various tribes.
- 11 Novem, *Wereld in wording 2* (The Hague: Van Goor Zonen, 1959), 116, 117.
- 12 Leo Dalhuisen, ed., *Sprekend verleden. Deel 3 boek ii* (Haarlem: Nijgh & Van Ditmar Educatief, 1987), 203, 247, 259, 264.

- 13 The “time of wigs and revolutions” refers to the eighteenth century, and is one of the ten historical periods cyclically taught in the Dutch education system.
- 14 Milicent Kruis, ed., *Wijzer! Geschiedenis. Groep 8* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 2014), 14, 40–43.
- 15 Eelco Beukers and Stephan Klein, *Memo: Bovenbouw vwo* (Den Bosch: Malmberg, 2011), 198, 199.
- 16 Arie Wilschut et al., *Forum: Bovenbouw havo* (Groningen: Noordhoff, 2019), 83.
- 17 Reggie Baay, *Daar werd wat gruwelijks vericht: Slavernij in Nederlands-Indië* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum 2015) and Matthias van Rossum, *Kleurrijke tragiek: Slavernij onder de VOC* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015).
- 18 Tom van der Geugten, ed., *Geschiedeniswerkplaats. Bovenbouw vwo* (Groningen: Noordhoff, 2018), 107.
- 19 Tom van der Geugten, ed., *Geschiedeniswerkplaats. Werkboek 2 vwo* (Groningen: Noordhoff, 2019), 112.
- 20 Tom van der Geugten, ed., *Geschiedeniswerkplaats. 2 vmbo* (Groningen: Noordhoff, 2019), 15.
- 21 Miesje Engels and Mark de Rouw, *Tijd voor geschiedenis, 2 vwo* (Vodix, 2019), 5.2.
- 22 Eelco Beukers and Stephan Klein, *Memo. Bovenbouw vwo* (Den Bosch: Malmberg, 2011), 201.
- 23 The Canon of the Netherlands was included in the school curriculum in 2009. It is an overview of “what everyone ought to know, at the very least, about the history and culture of the Netherlands” and provides a framework for what historical topics need to be taught in Dutch schools. It consists of 50 sections, called “windows.”
- 24 Marcel van Riessen, Frits Rovers and Arie Wilschut, eds., *Oriëntatie op geschiedenis: Basisboek voor de vakdocent* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2011), 297.
- 25 Ron de Bruin and Meereke Bosua, *Geschiedenis geven: Praktische vakdidactiek en vakinhoud voor het basisonderwijs* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2021), 186, 220.
- 26 Kees van der Kooij and Marjan de Groot-Reuvekamp, *Geschiedenis & samenleving: Kennisbasis inhoud en didactiek* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2021), 158, 168.

Abstract

In this chapter, four specialists reflect on how the history of slavery is taught in schools in Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire, in Suriname, and in Indonesia. Schools in the Caribbean islands devote some attention to slavery and its afterlives, but they lack modern, localized teaching materials that students can relate to. In Suriname, historiography was Surinamized after independence, but since 1989, hardly any new insights have been added to the textbooks. The history of slavery is not treated extensively. In Indonesia, the topic of slavery is linked to Dutch colonial rule and the Japanese occupation.

Keywords: education; history education; Caribbean islands; Suriname; Indonesia