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Urban - Rural Educational Inequality in Vietnam: An Analysis of Structural Barriers and Policy Implementation Practices

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the system of structural barriers and policy implementation practices and policy implementation practices regarding educational inequality between urban and rural areas in Vietnam from 2020 to 2025, with a primary focus on middle schools and high schools in Vietnam. By employing document analysis, secondary data synthesis, and policy evaluation, the study reveals that the regional educational gap encompasses not only disparities in physical infrastructure and the rate of permanent school buildings but also the digital divide, which includes connectivity infrastructure and teachers' digital teaching competencies. Additionally, the paper highlights ecological system barriers such as workforce shortages, household livelihood pressures, and outdated cultural practices (e.g: child marriage and child labor). Although national target programs have achieved certain positive outcomes in leveling initial material barriers, implementation effectiveness remains limited due to mass-oriented and urban-centric approaches. Consequently, the study also proposes a set of structural solutions aiming at transforming learners' intrinsic capacities, improving remuneration policies for teachers, and implementing community interventions to ensure substantive and sustainable equity throughout the educational process.

KEYWORDS: Inequality, education, urban, rural, policy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the strategy of sustainable development and integration, education plays a decisive role in the quality of human resources. Economically, it is an important factor in enhancing labor productivity, driving growth, and shaping national competitive advantage. Socially, a progressive educational system is the most effective instrument for enhancing social welfare, multidimensional poverty reduction, and fostering equal social mobility. Ensuring educational equity, from initial access rights and learning processes to educational outcomes, is not only a humanitarian objective but also a foundational prerequisite for maintaining stability, preventing extreme polarization, and mitigating negative social consequences.

In Vietnam, the rapid pace of innovation and urbanization has, on one hand, yielded significant economic achievements and, on the other hand, deepened the development gap between urban areas and rural, underprivileged regions. The disparity in living standards also causes an inevitable consequence: access to high-quality education is becoming significantly polarized geographically. Since most of the resources, technological infrastructure, and highly qualified teachers are largely concentrated in urban centers, students in rural, remote, or ethnic minority areas easily fall into disadvantaged positions. This creates a vicious cycle: low educational quality hinders rural laborers from participating in high-income market segments, thereby diminishing families' motivation to invest in education and prolonging intergenerational poverty, this reality poses an urgent need to elucidate the structural barriers impeding educational equity amidst Vietnam's rapid digital transformation and urbanization.

This research is conducted in order to portray a comprehensive and updated picture of the polarization in access to general education (specifically middle schools and high schools) between urban and rural areas in Vietnam. By integrating socio-economic analytical frameworks, the study focuses on identifying the system of structural barriers, ranging from infrastructural discrepancies and teachers' digital competencies to household economic pressures and specific cultural biases. Thereby, the paper evaluates the effectiveness and limitations of current policies, serving as a basis to propose substantive solutions with an aim to enhancing the intrinsic capacities of disadvantaged learners. The research addresses two major questions: First, how is the current gap in access to and completion of general education between urban and rural or mountainous areas specifically manifested through empirical data? Second, what infrastructural, digital, human resource, cultural, and livelihood barriers are directly perpetuating this inequality? The

research subjects are the accessibility and quality of the general educational process. The spatial scope emphasizes the contrast between major cities and rural, remote areas. Temporally, the study is confined to the 2020-2025 period to accurately reflect the fluctuations in Vietnam's education system under the dual impacts of the pandemic and the digital transformation wave.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Concept and importance of educational equity

Educational equity is not merely a parity regarding educational attainment within a population, but it also encompasses equality in terms of opportunities given, educational processes, and outcomes. It is a core component of human capital, acting as a driver for labor productivity and economic growth, and serving as a vital tool for poverty reduction and social mobility (Ahmed & Mujahid, 2021; Gabdo et al., 2025). Conversely, an inequitable distribution of educational resources leads to opportunities being concentrated among elite groups, thereby exacerbating the wealth gap and triggering negative social consequences such as rising juvenile delinquency (Li & Wu, 2023; Zamora & Dorado, 2015).

Human Capital Theory

Initiated by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993), this theory is the most important foundation for explaining the relationship between education and income. The Human Capital Theory posits that investing in education is a form of human investment intended to increase productivity and individual economic value. In the context of the rural-urban divide, disparities in the rate of return on education create a significant barrier: rural human capital often holds significantly lower market value than that in urban areas. This is due to inferior training quality and limited employment opportunities (Ahmed & Mujahid, 2021; Fu & Ren, 2010). This generates a vicious cycle in which rural families have little financial incentive to invest higher education for their children (Zhang et al., 2015).

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework from micro to macro levels. At the microsystem level, the rural family environment, which is characterized by low income, limited parental education, and parenting styles that are more authoritarian or less supportive than those in urban areas, directly impacts children's cognitive development (Naureen et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2025).. At the macrosystem level, traditional cultural stereotypes such as son preference or household registration have also created systemic barriers to accessing high-quality education (Ahmed & Mujahid, 2021; Fu & Ren, 2010). Particularly, the chronosystem, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has exposed and deepened digital and mental health fractures between rural and urban students (Naureen et al., 2025; Sarma & Das, 2021).

Spatial Inequality and Accessibility

Educational inequality also possesses a spatial nature, manifested through the uneven distribution of infrastructure (Han et al., 2023; Sharma & Patil, 2022). The theoretical framework of accessibility mainly focuses on three dimensions: Availability (the total number of schools in an area), Proximity (the physical distance from home to school), and Diversity (the variety of school types available for choices) (Petre et al., 2025). In rural areas, a school network planning that centers on urban areas has created "educational deserts", where students face high commuting costs and safety risks, thereby increasing dropout rates (Han et al., 2023; Petre et al., 2025).

Digital Divide Theory

In the digital era, educational inequality extends to the concept of the digital divide, consisting of three levels: The first level is the disparity in access to devices and the internet; the second level is the difference in skills and utilization capabilities (especially teachers' digital teaching competencies); and the third level is the variance in benefits derived from technology use (Lin et al., 2023; Naureen et al., 2025). Rural teachers often exhibit lower digital teaching competencies and data processing skills compared to their urban peers, a consequence not only of inadequate infrastructure but also a lack of appropriate professional development programs (Lin et al., 2023).

Policy Implementation and Systemic Barriers

The implementation of educational policies frequently encounters barriers due to an "urban priority" bias. For instance, policies adjusting school mapping to optimize resources (such as merging village schools into commune centers), despite good intentions, often trigger waves of dropouts among vulnerable groups due to heightened financial and psychological burdens (Rao & Ye, 2016). Furthermore, delays in budget disbursement, deficient monitoring mechanisms, and the brain frain of excellent teachers from rural to urban areas are practical obstacles hindering the success of educational equity goals (Gabdo et al., 2025; Khan & Khan, 2025; Rao & Ye, 2016).

2.2. Literature Review

Many empirical studies have discovered five main barriers which lead to educational inequality. The first barrier relates to disparities in physical infrastructure and material resources. It is one of the primary causes of educational inequality between the two sectors. According to Song (2023), Chinese universities located in urban areas are often prioritized for access to modern

technological facilities, whereas many rural schools still lack basic computer labs and libraries. Gabdo et al. (2025)'s study also adds that over 60% of schools situated in remote areas lack Information Communication Technology (ICT) facilities and frequently face dilapidated classroom conditions Moreover, Li an…. Highlighted an alarming statistic, indicating that the total area of damaged primary schools in rural China accounts for up to 72.65% of the national total. In India, Kumar observed that rual students encounter significant barriers in accessing science and mathematics education due to insufficient government funding. Simultaneously, Petre et al. (2025) demonstrated that in Romania, 84.1% of the school network planning in urban areas has created educational deserts in rural regions. Similarly, Sharma and Patil (2022) affirmed that in Mumbai, access to educational services via public transportation in impoverished areas is also substantially lower than in private or affluent areas.

The second barrier relates to the quality of the teaching workforce and digital competencies. The gap in teaching quality is a major hurdle to the development of rural students. Gabdo et al. (2025) reported that the proportion of qualified teachers in Nigeria is only 58%, in comparison with 86% in urban areas, which is mainly driven by the tendency of highly skilled teachers to migrate to cities in search of better benefits. According to Song (2023), the shortage of skilled teachers in remote areas has directly impacted the efficiency of knowledge transmission. Notably, the study by Lin et al. (2023) also emphasized the second-level digital divide, where rural teachers in China exhibit significantly lower attitudes toward and skills in using Information technology compared to their urban counterparts, thereby exacerbating educational inequity in the digital age.

The third barrier involves the impact of family factors and the socio-economic context, which lies in the fact that parents' economic backgrounds and parenting styles play a decisive role in students' success. Yan, Sun, and Zhang (2025) found that urban Chinese parents typically adopt a warmer and more protective parenting style, whereas rural parents tend to lean toward a more authoritarian style due to time and educational constraints. According to Fu and Ren (2010), the household registration (Hukou) system in China has created systemic discrimination, resulting in rural children receiving inferior compulsory education, which leads to lower incomes in adulthood. Zamora and Dorado (2015) also pointed out that in the Philippines, household income is the primary factor causing the educational gap between rural and urban areas. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, Ahmed and Mujahid (2021) noted that educational inequality is particularly severe for females due to the influence of outdated gender norms. Furthermore, Li and Wu (2023) added that high-income parents coming from urban areas can afford supplementary classes, creating an overwhelming advantage over rural students. Finally, Zhang, Li, and Xue (2015) affirmed that the academic performance of rural children and the children of migrant workers is significantly lower than that of urban children, even after controlling for factors such as nutrition and parenting styles.

The fourth barrier is the divide in scientific and technological accessibility and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which constitute a substantial barrier to educational equality across regions. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified preexisting inequalities. Naureen et al. (2025) indicated that in Bangladesh, owning a personal device is a crucial factor in maintaining academic performance

The fifth barrier also involves spatial accessibility and policy impacts. According to Petre et al. (2025), 32% of the school-age population in rural Romania have to travel more than 10 kilometers to get to the nearest high school. Rao and Ye (2016) analyzed that China's Rural School Mapping Adjustment (RSMA) policy from 2001 inadvertently triggered a wave of mass school closures in villages, increasing the financial and psychological burden on families as children had to commute far from home. On the other hand, Han et al. (2023) proposed a GIS-based spatial optimization model in Changyuan (China), which significantly improved educational equity by replanning school locations. In the United States, Burdick-Will and Logan (2017) indicated that the educational boundary between urban and rural areas is gradually blurring in the suburbs, creating new challenges in educational resource management.

2.3. Research Methodology

The study employs qualitative data collection and analysis methods to assess the current state of educational inequality between urban and rural areas. The data for the study are collected from two primary sources. Regarding quantitative data, the article synthesizes indicators from relevant authorities and official surveys in Vietnam, including the General Statistics Office (GSO), the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS). The indicators primarily focused on utilizing the completion rates for lower secondary and high school education, as well as the rate of permanent school buildings, categorized by urban and rural areas. For qualitative data, the paper gathers regulatory documents, national target programs on education, and studies regarding education, and researches related to cultural and livelihood barriers in disadvantaged regions.

After collecting data, the information is processed using descriptive statistical analysis combined with textual content analysis. Statistical data are utilized to calculate and compare the degree of disparity in learning opportunities and infrastructural conditions across regions, as well as providing empirical evidence for the study's arguments. Concurrently, policy analysis and literature review methods are applied to link these data with the foundational theoretical framework, helping to elucidate how non-material factors, such as household economics or local customs, impact children's education.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Current Status of the Regional Educational Access Gap

Prior to a detailed analysis, Table 1 below synthesizes the completion rates across general education levels and the out-of-school (OOSC) rates, disaggregated by urban and rural areas, which serves as the foundation for the subsequent arguments

Table 1. Educational level completion rates and out-of-school rates by area

Indicator	Urban	Rural	National
Primary completion	98%	98%	98%
Secondary School completion	91%	85%	87%
High school completion	75%	47%	59%
OOSC - Primary	1%	1%	1%
OOSC - Secondary	4%	6%	5%

Source: UNICEF Vietnam & General Statistics Office, 2022

Disparities in education completion opportunities: Data from the Survey on Sustainable Development Goals for Children and Women in Vietnam (SDGCW/MICS6), conducted in 2020–2021, reveals a distinct pattern of disparity across educational levels. At the primary level, there is virtually no gap in completion rates between the two areas standing at 98% in both urban and rural settings reflecting Vietnam's success in achieving universal primary education (UNICEF Vietnam & General Statistics Office, 2022). However, a gap begins to emerge at the lower secondary level, where the completion rate is 91% in urban areas compared to 85% in rural areas, and widens significantly at the upper secondary level: 75% in urban areas versus only 47% in rural areas (UNICEF Vietnam & General Statistics Office, 2022). This indicates that equitable access is relatively well-assured for compulsory education (primary and lower secondary levels); yet, as students progress to non-compulsory education involving higher opportunity costs (upper secondary level), the urban-rural divide becomes pronounced. This aligns with the human capital theoretical framework, which posits that rural families tend to reduce investment in higher levels of education when the expected rate of return does not justify the costs incurred.

Disparities in education completion opportunities: Data from the Survey of Sustainable Development Goals on Children and Women in Vietnam (SDGCW/MICS6), conducted in the year 2020-2021, reveal a stark polarization across educational levels. At the primary level, the completion rate shows almost no gap between the two regions, reaching 98% in both urban and rural areas, which reflects the fact that Vietnam's fundamental success in universalizing this educational level. However, the gap only begins to emerge in the secondary level, where the completion rate in urban areas reaches 91% compared to 85% in rural areas, and widens significantly in the upper level: 75% in urban areas, in comparison with 47% in rural areas. This indicates that compulsory education (primary and lower secondary) is relatively equitable in terms of accessibility. However, as students advance to non-compulsory levels with higher opportunity costs, the regional gap becomes apparent, aligning with the Human Capital Theory's assertion that rural families tend to curtail investments in higher education when the expected rate of return does not justify the incurred costs.

The trend of diminishing opportunities at higher educational levels is further corroborated by the data from the 2024 Mid-term Population and Housing Census: the national net enrollment rates are 98.7% (primary), 95.6% (lower secondary), and 79.9% (high school), respectively. Simultaneously, the average years of schooling for individuals aged 25 and older in urban areas is 2.5 years higher than that in rural areas. This disparity is even more significant within the context of regional polarization: the Northern Midlands and Mountains region experiences the sharpest decline when transitioning from lower secondary to upper secondary education, plummeting from 85% to 41%, while the Central Highlands region drops from 68% to 32% (UNICEF Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2022). The out-of-school children (OOSC) rate mirrors this trend: at the upper secondary level, the OOSC rate in rural areas is 25%, nearly twice the 13% rate observed in urban areas (General Statistics Office, 2022).

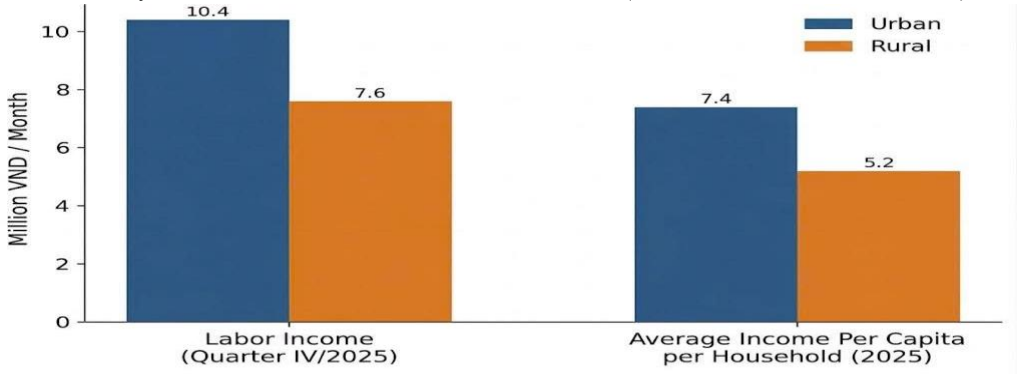

Figure 1. Urban–rural income disparity

Source: General Statistics Office (2026); General Statistics Office (2026) as cited by Dan Tri Newspaper (2026)

Disparities in the expected rate of return on education: The vicious cycle posited by the Human Capital Theory - wherein the market value of rural human capital is undervalued, thereby reducing household incentives for educational investment - is clearly evidenced by regional income data. According to the General Statistics Office (2026), the average income per month of laborers in urban areas in the fourth quarter of 2025 reached 10.4 million VND, approximately 1.37 times higher than that at about 7.5 million VND/month in rural areas, 1.42 times higher than in rural areas, which stood at roughly 5.2 million VND. Notably, the income inequality coefficient (GINI index) in rural areas is also higher than in urban areas (0.370 compared to 0.345 in 2023), indicating that even within rural regions, the income polarization is more significant, which exacerbates the situation where a segment of impoverished rural households struggles to secure sufficient resources to invest in higher education for their children. This empirical foundation reinforces the argument that the disparity in the rate of return on education between the two areas generates a sulf-sustaining cycle: Low income => limited educational investment => low-value human capital => continued low income.

3.2. Spatial Inequality and Physical Infrastructure Accessibility

Polarization in the rate of permanent school buildings: During the 2013-2023 period, the national rate of permanent classrooms has increased from 65.9% to a rate of 86.7%, corresponding to 545,375 out of 628,571 public preschool and general education classrooms. However, this outcome is uneven across educational levels: the proportion of permanent structures hit the peat at the high school level (97.0%), and secondary levels (94.9%), whereas preschool and primary levels (the two levels with the highest density of satellite school branches in remote areas) only reached approximately 83%. (Figure 2. Rate of permanent classrooms by educational level, 2023) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024a). In particular, the report by the Ministry of Education and Training (2024b) stated that the Northern Mountainous region, the Central Highlands, and the Mekong River Delta still exhibit rates of permanent classrooms lower than the national average, although detailed statistics were not published. A specific case in point has further clarified this reality: in Lang Son, a mountainous border province, although the overall rate of permanent structures is high, approximately 2.3% of classrooms ramain temporary or borrowed, concentrated in remote and border satellite schools (Nhan Dan Newspapers 2025). The remaining national gap (13.4% of non-permanent classrooms) serves as the basis for the Government's target to achieve 100% permanent construction by 2030, in alignment with the spirit of Conclusion No.91-KL/TW. (Journal of Construction, 2024).

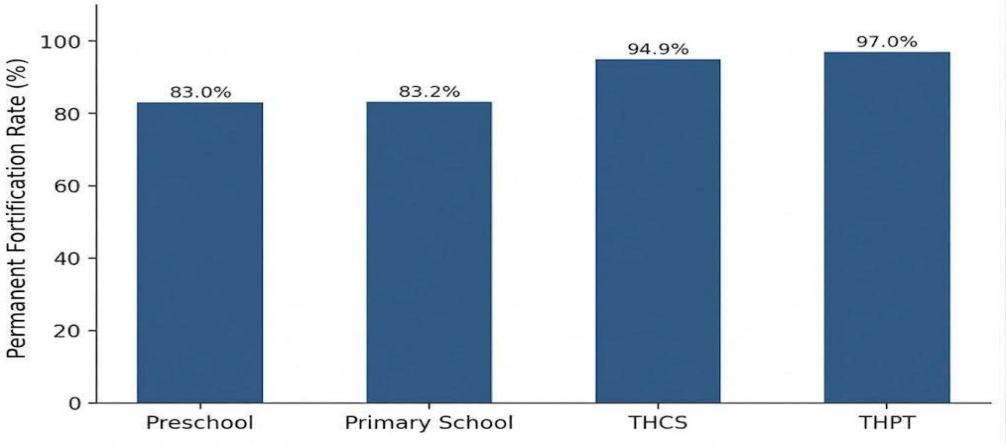

Figure 2. Rate of permanent classrooms by educational level, 2023
Source: Ministry of Education and Training (2024a)

The proportion of schools meeting the national standards - a composite indicator which reflects the quality of physical infrastructure - also demonstrates a gap across educational levels. As of July 2023, the secondary level achieved the highest rate, reaching 72.3%, while the high school level only reached 49.6% (Figure 3. Percentage of schools meeting national standards by educational level, July 2023). In the period from 2020 to 2024, thanks to the implementation of the National Target Program on New Rural Development, the percentage of schools meeting the national standards increased significantly from 10.9% to 62.8% (Cong an Nhan dan Newspapers, 2025). This has demonstrated that policy efforts have generated positive changes, although a substantial gap remains to be closed. Regarding investment resources, from 2013 to 2023, the government has mobilized approximately 33,000 billion VND from socialization to build and make permanent around 36,000 classrooms. However, by the end of 2023, the demand for teachers and official housing still fell short by 10,794 classrooms, primarily concentrated in mountainous and disadvantaged schools (VOV2, 2024). This indirectly highlights the pressures regarding the living and working conditions of teachers in these areas.

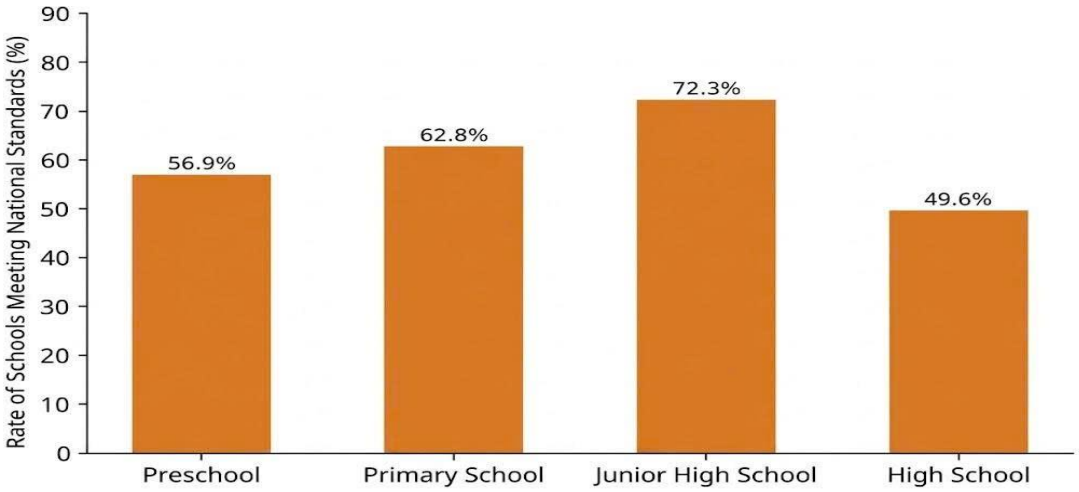

Figure 3. Percentage of schools meeting national standards by educational level, July 2023
Source: Dak Lak Department of Education and Training (2024)

3.3. The Digital Divide in Education

Digital Divide Level 1 (Infrastructure): Regarding telecommunications infrastructure, the proportion of households with fiber-optic coverage rate throughout the nation rose from 79.4% in 2023 to 82.4% in 2024 (Ministry of Information and Communications, 2023). However, this coverage remains uneven across regions; some communes by the border still lacks sufficiently strong mobile network base stations (Journalists and Public Opinion paper, 2023). While major urban centers such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang have heavily invested in 5G infrastructure, data centers, and cloud computing, many remote provinces continue to face unstable Internet connectivity, a lack of terminal devices and outdated telecommunications systems (Journalists and Public Opinion paper, 2023).

Digital Divide Level 2 (Digital Teaching Ability): Data from the SDGCW/MICS6 survey shows that only 39% of youths aged 15 – 24 in Vietnam possess basic information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Notably, the proportion of urban youth with ICT skills is double that of their rural counterparts (UNICEF Vietnam & General Statistics Office, 2022). This gap is even more pronounced when considering economic status: youths from the wealthiest households are nearly seven times more likely to possess ICT skills than those from the poorest households (UNICEF Vietnam & General Statistics Office, 2022).

Cumulative consequences (Level 3) from the post-COVID-19 landscape: The COVID-19 pandemic clearly exposed the repercussions of the digital divide. During the period of mandatory online learning, a survey revealed that only 35% of surveyed ethnic minority students had access to online learning platforms or televised instruction (ictvietnam.vn, 2021). This finding prompted the Information and Communications sector to launch the "Connectivity and Computers for Students" program. The UNICEF Representative in Vietnam at the time, Rana Flowers, stated that the pandemic highlighted the digital technology disparity between children who possessed computers and internet access and those who lacked the equipment necessary for online learning (The People's paper, 2022)

3.4. Barriers from the Ecosystem

Barriers from the pedagogical workforce: The shortage of teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas, continues to be a systemic barrier. As of April 2024, the country still lacks 113,491 teachers at all levels of preschool and general education, while approximately 72,000 allocated positions have not yet been filled, mainly due to difficulties in attracting teachers to work in particularly disadvantaged areas, remote and rural areas (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024c). Previously, data from the 2023-2024 school year showed an even higher shortage, at 118,253 teachers, an increase of 11,308 compared to the 2021-2022 school year (Ministry of Education and Training, 2023). This situation reflects the brain drain of talented teachers from rural areas to urban areas, showing that current compensation and benefits policies are insufficient to keep the teaching staff in disadvantaged regions.

Barriers from socio-cultural norms: From a cultural perspective, the results of the Survey on the socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minority groups show that the rate of child marriage among ethnic minorities in 2018 was 21.9%, although this represented a 4.7 percentage point decrease from 2014 (26.6%), it remained approximately six times higher than the rate among the Kinh majority (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs & UN Women, 2019). More notably, up to ten ethnic minority groups exhibited early marriage rates of 45% or higher, with six groups, including the Brau, Ro Mam, La Ha, Xinh Mun, and O Du, surpassing the 50% mark (VOV4, 2019). Early marriage is not merely a long-standing cultural norm but also directly interacts with

the education system: marrying young often compels children, particularly girls, to drop out of school, thereby cutting off access to higher education and perpetuating a cycle of intergenerational inequality.

Barriers from short-term livelihood pressures: Child labor is the most distinct manifestation of how household livelihood pressures impact children's educational opportunities. According to the second National Survey on Child Labor, in 2018, approximately 5.3% of children aged 5–17 (equivalent to over 1 million children) were engaged in child labor, with 84% living in rural areas, and more than half worked in the agriculture, forestry, and aquaculture sectors (Ministry of Labor, War invalids and Social Affairs & International Labour Organization, 2020). More recent figures, released in early 2025 with 2023 data, indicate that the rate of child labor has dropped to 3.5% (approximately 731,600 children), yet the geographical distribution remains unchanged: 84.6% reside in rural areas, concentrated primarily in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous region and the North Central and Central Coast regions. These two regions account for 52,7% of the national total of child laborers (General Statistics Office, 2025b). When cross-referenced with multidimensional poverty data, a lack of adult educational attainment is one of the most common deprivation indicators among Vietnamese households, standing only behind the deprivation of employment (General Statistics Office, 2024). This further reinforces the argument that poverty, unemployment, and low parental education levels operate as an intergenerational vicious cycle, wherein child labor acts as both a consequence and a perpetuating cause of poverty.

3.5. Assessment of Current Policies in Vietnam

Current policy system: The most significant policy with the largest investment scale is the National Target Program for Socio-Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (2021–2030), approved under Decision No. 1719/QĐ-TTg dated October 14, 2021 (Prime Minister, 2021). The program comprises 10 component projects, with Project 5 focusing directly on education and training development and the enhancement of human resource quality (Prime Minister, 2021). The projected total funding for Phase I (2021–2025) is over VND 137,664 billion (Prime Minister, 2021), and as of 2024, the disbursement of central budget funds reached VND 48,081.298 billion, representing 72.6% of the planned target (Quang Tri Provincial People's Committee, 2025). Concurrently, the education component of the National Target Program on New Rural Development (2021–2025) has also yielded positive results, with the proportion of schools meeting national standards rising from 10.9% in 2020 to 62.8% in 2024 (People's Public Security Newspaper, 2025).

Limitations on implementation: Despite substantial investment, implementation outcomes clearly reveal the limitations of the current approach. The disbursement rate for the National Target Program for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas reached only 72.6% over the three-year period (2022–2024), eflecting obstacles encountered during local implementation (Quang Tri Provincial People's Committee, 2025). More importantly, while the national rate of school facility solid-structure upgrades has reached 86.6%, the Government maintains a target of 100% completion by 2030 (Construction Magazine, 2024), highlighting persistent challenges, including school sites in remote, isolated, and border areas (locations that are the most difficult to reach using existing mass policy tools. This supports the topic’s thesis: current policies largely only address the superficial physical barriers, while deeper barriers related to digital literacy, teacher quality, and socio-cultural norms (such as child marriage and child labor) remain unresolved by current national programs.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For learners and families: To address the root causes of structural barriers and narrow the educational inequality gap between urban and rural areas, the policy system needs to shift its focus from a nominal approach (primarily focused on physical infrastructure) to a substantive approach through the development of learners' and communities' intrinsic capabilities. First, for solutions aimed at transforming learners' capabilities, general education policies should integrate a comprehensive psychological support system and career guidance programs specifically designed for local livelihoods. Instead of simply promoting school enrollment, career counseling linked to regional economic value chains will help rural students and families understand the real value of human capital, thereby increasing motivation for long-term investment in education and reducing dropout rates at the high school level. Simultaneously, digital literacy training programs need to shift from equipping students with basic information technology skills to developing self-learning abilities and applied digital thinking, helping students in disadvantaged areas proactively access open learning resources and gradually overcome barriers of geographical distance and infrastructure shortages. Regarding specific policy tools, a micro-educational credit program linked to attendance and academic performance could be designed, prioritizing high school students in disadvantaged areas with a high risk of dropping out, instead of simply offering tuition fee waivers. For areas without stable telecommunications infrastructure, offline digital learning materials (downloaded beforehand via hard drives, memory cards, or the school's internal network) could be a medium-term alternative to online learning that relies on internet connectivity. Furthermore, boarding schools, community-run dormitories, or inter-communal dormitories should be expanded in areas with low population density and long distances to high schools, aiming to reduce the opportunity cost of commuting – a direct cause of the nearly double dropout rate at the rural high school level compared to urban areas.

For teachers and pedagogical personnel: the group of solutions for developing pedagogical human resources plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning is consistent across regions. Instead of simply supporting income, the Government needs to aim at building a comprehensive and sustainable incentive ecosystem for teachers working in remote, disadvantaged, and particularly difficult areas. This includes improving the system of public housing, improving actual working conditions, combined with preferential career advancement mechanisms and a reasonable personnel rotation policy to limit brain drain to urban areas. At the same time, continuous professional development programs on digital teaching skills and pedagogical methods adapted to multicultural environments should be implemented regularly to narrow the level two digital divide between rural and urban teachers. Specifically, the allowance policy should be designed progressively based on actual years of service in disadvantaged areas, instead of applying a fixed rate as currently, and combined with a time-limited rotation mechanism with priority for promotion and recruitment after rotation to create clear incentives instead of administrative obligations. Because most schools in remote areas have small class sizes and lack specialized subject teachers, it is necessary to promote a model of interdisciplinary, multi-level teacher training suitable for schools with few students. This should be done in parallel with building an online professional learning community network connecting rural teachers with core teachers in urban areas, thereby narrowing the gap in pedagogical methods without requiring geographical relocation.

For local communities and political systems: addressing educational inequality is inseparable from a group of community-based interventions aimed at eliminating barriers from the socio-ecological system. National target programs need to coordinate closely with local political systems and community organizations to promote communication and behavior change, focusing on eliminating outdated practices such as child marriage or early child labor to address short-term livelihood pressures. Integrating conditional social welfare support packages linked to family economic assistance and student attendance rates will directly incentivize poor households to maintain their children's education. Only when cultural norms and household economic pressures are simultaneously removed will investments in infrastructure and educational policies be maximally effective, contributing to ensuring genuine equity throughout the entire educational process. Integrating conditional social welfare support packages, linking family economic assistance to student attendance rates, will directly incentivize poor households to maintain their children's education. Only when cultural norms and household economic pressures are simultaneously addressed will investments in infrastructure and educational policies be maximally effective, contributing to ensuring genuine equity throughout the entire educational process. In practical implementation, behavior change communication should be carried out through reputable community subjects such as village elders, community leaders, influential individuals, and mass organizations, rather than relying solely on mass media channels. It should also be linked to specific sanctions and legal support for cases of child marriage, aiming to both deter offenders and provide a way out for these families. The payment of conditional social security benefits should adopt a periodic disbursement mechanism linked to attendance verification from schools, inheriting the experience of Program 135 and other proven conditional benefit models worldwide to ensure feasibility when implemented on a large scale. In addition, school network planning needs to be carried out in conjunction with rural population and transportation planning, drawing lessons from China's school consolidation policy which caused a wave of school closures and increased the financial and psychological burden on families whose children had to travel long distances to school.

CONCLUSION

The study described the current situation of urban-rural educational inequality in Vietnam from 2020 to present. The analysis results show that the education gap between the two regions is not simply a difference in enrollment rates or physical infrastructure conditions, but is a combined consequence of a system of multi-layered structural barriers. The negative loop of Human Capital Theory is evident in the difference in expected rates of return, causing rural families to tend to reduce investment in non-compulsory education due to the burden of opportunity costs. In addition, the breakdown in technological infrastructure and digital teaching capacity after the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide, while barriers from the ecosystem such as teacher shortages, pressure on child labor and the practice of child marriage continue to maintain intergenerational divides. Although the current policy system, especially the National Target Programs, has made efforts to significantly improve school conditions and initial accessibility for disadvantaged areas, implementation still shows limitations when mainly stopping at solving the physical surface. To achieve the goal of sustainable development and ensure real educational equity, solutions in the coming time need to focus strongly on improving learners' self-efficacy, building comprehensive remuneration policies to retain high-quality pedagogical forces, while minimizing barriers to social and cultural standards in the community.

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