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Rural–Urban Educational Inequality in Cambodia

Challenges for Equitable Learning Access

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Abstract

Ebetween rural and urban communities remains a significant challenge in Cambodia despite ongoing educational reforms and infrastructure development initiatives. Urban schools, particularly those located in Phnom Penh, generally possess better educational facilities, stronger internet connectivity, more qualified teachers, and broader access to learning resources compared to rural schools. Conversely, many rural educational institutions continue to experience infrastructure limitations, shortages of qualified teachers, limited technological access, and socioeconomic barriers that influence students' educational participation and learning outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these disparities through unequal access to online learning and digital technology. This study aims to explore forms of rural–urban educational inequality in Cambodia, identify factors contributing to unequal learning access, understand the experiences of educational stakeholders regarding educational disparities, and formulate recommendations for equitable educational policies. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine educational inequality from the perspectives and lived experiences of teachers, students, school principals, and local education officers. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis in selected rural and urban schools. The findings are expected to reveal that educational inequality in Cambodia is strongly influenced by disparities in infrastructure, teacher quality, digital access, and socioeconomic conditions. The study also highlights how geographic location shapes students' educational opportunities and learning experiences. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of inclusive educational policies, equitable resource allocation, teacher professional development, and digital infrastructure expansion to support equitable learning access. This study contributes to the broader discussion of educational equity and rural educational development in developing countries.

Keywords: *Cambodia; digital divide; educational equity; rural education; urban education.*

Introduction

Education plays a strategic role in promoting social transformation, economic growth, and human capital development within modern societies. Education not only improves individual knowledge and skills but also contributes to poverty reduction, social mobility, and national competitiveness [1]. In developing countries, educational systems are expected to function as instruments for achieving sustainable development and reducing social inequality [2]. However, despite increasing global attention toward inclusive education, many developing nations continue to face substantial disparities in educational access and quality between rural and urban communities [3]. These inequalities are often influenced by differences in infrastructure development, socioeconomic conditions, public investment, and technological accessibility [4]. As a result, students from marginalized

rural areas frequently experience limited educational opportunities compared to students living in urban centers. Such disparities demonstrate that educational participation alone is insufficient if students do not receive equal access to quality learning environments and educational resources [5].

In Cambodia, educational inequality remains a major challenge despite ongoing governmental reforms and international support aimed at improving educational participation and infrastructure development. Since recovering from the devastating impact of the Cambodian genocide, Cambodia has made significant progress in rebuilding its education system and increasing school enrollment rates [6]. Nevertheless, substantial disparities persist between rural and urban educational contexts. Urban schools, particularly those located in Phnom Penh, generally possess more adequate facilities, better internet connectivity, greater access to educational technology, and more qualified teachers [7]. These schools are also more likely to implement student-centered pedagogical approaches and digital learning strategies that support educational innovation and academic achievement [8]. Conversely, many rural schools continue to experience shortages of learning resources, damaged infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher distribution [9]. Such conditions significantly influence students' learning experiences and educational outcomes because rural students often encounter barriers that limit their academic participation and development opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified existing rural–urban educational disparities in Cambodia. During the pandemic, schools across the country shifted toward online and remote learning systems to maintain educational continuity [10]. However, unequal access to digital technology created major challenges for students living in rural communities. Many rural students lacked smartphones, computers, stable internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills necessary for participating effectively in online learning activities [11]. In some remote regions, poor technological infrastructure and limited electricity access made online education almost impossible to implement consistently. Consequently, many rural students experienced learning loss, reduced academic engagement, and educational exclusion during the pandemic period [12]. Meanwhile, urban students generally had greater opportunities to continue learning through digital platforms and technology-supported educational resources. These differences illustrate how the digital divide contributes to broader educational inequality by reinforcing existing socioeconomic and geographic disadvantages [13]. Researchers have emphasized that unequal technological access may lead to long-term disparities in educational achievement, workforce readiness, and social mobility if inclusive digital policies are not implemented effectively [3].

Previous studies have extensively discussed educational inequality in developing countries, particularly concerning poverty, infrastructure limitations, and unequal educational investment [14]. However, limited research specifically examines the multidimensional nature of rural–urban educational disparities in Cambodia using a qualitative descriptive perspective. Existing research often focuses on quantitative educational indicators such as enrollment rates and academic performance while paying less attention to the lived experiences and perceptions of educational stakeholders within unequal educational environments [15]. Understanding these lived experiences is important because educational inequality is not only reflected in statistical differences but also experienced through daily

interactions, learning conditions, and social realities within schools and communities. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the experiences and perceptions of teachers, students, school principals, and local educational stakeholders regarding unequal learning access in Cambodian rural and urban contexts. Through a qualitative descriptive approach, the study aims to provide deeper insight into how educational inequality is experienced, interpreted, and reproduced within different geographic settings.

Specifically, this study aims to explore forms of educational inequality between rural and urban schools in Cambodia, identify factors contributing to unequal learning access, understand the experiences of teachers and students regarding educational disparities, and formulate recommendations for equitable educational policies. The findings are expected to contribute to educational policy discussions concerning inclusive education, digital equity, and rural educational development in developing countries. Furthermore, the study may provide practical recommendations for improving educational quality and equitable learning opportunities for marginalized communities in Cambodia.

Literature Review

A. Educational Equity

Educational equity refers to fairness in educational opportunities, participation, resources, and learning outcomes among students from different social and geographic backgrounds. The concept emphasizes that students should receive educational support according to their needs and circumstances rather than receiving identical treatment regardless of contextual differences [1]. Educational equity differs from educational equality because equality focuses on providing the same resources to all students, while equity prioritizes fairness in addressing structural disadvantages experienced by marginalized groups [16]. In many developing countries, unequal educational access is strongly influenced by poverty, geographic isolation, and social inequality, which prevent students from participating fully in educational processes [3]. Educational equity therefore seeks to ensure that all learners have meaningful opportunities to achieve academic success and social mobility regardless of their socioeconomic status or location [5]. Researchers also argue that equitable educational systems contribute to long-term national development because education functions as an important mechanism for reducing social inequality and improving human capital quality [7].

The implementation of educational equity requires governments and educational institutions to recognize the diverse needs of learners and provide differentiated support mechanisms. Students from rural communities, low-income families, and marginalized groups often require additional educational assistance due to limited access to educational resources and supportive learning environments [17]. Equity-oriented educational policies therefore involve targeted funding allocation, inclusive curriculum development, teacher support programs, and infrastructure improvement initiatives. According to Freire [15], education should function as a tool for empowerment that enables disadvantaged communities to overcome social oppression and exclusion. Similarly, Bourdieu [14] explained that unequal access to cultural and educational capital frequently reproduces social inequality across generations. Consequently, equitable education is not solely concerned with increasing school

enrollment but also with ensuring equal opportunities for quality learning experiences and educational achievement. In developing countries such as Cambodia, educational equity remains an important policy issue because regional and socioeconomic disparities continue to shape students' educational outcomes [8].

B. Rural–Urban Educational Disparities

Rural–urban educational disparities refer to differences in educational access, quality, and opportunities experienced by students living in rural and urban areas. These disparities are commonly associated with unequal school infrastructure, teacher shortages, transportation barriers, poverty, and limited access to learning resources. Urban schools generally possess more adequate facilities such as libraries, laboratories, internet connectivity, and technological equipment compared to rural schools [2]. In contrast, many rural educational institutions operate with limited infrastructure and insufficient learning materials, reducing the quality of educational experiences available to students [17]. Transportation barriers also create significant educational challenges because students in remote areas often travel long distances to attend school. Such conditions negatively influence attendance rates, learning participation, and educational continuity among rural students [5]. These inequalities demonstrate that geographic location strongly affects students' educational opportunities and future academic outcomes.

Educational development in many developing countries tends to be concentrated in urban regions due to economic centralization and uneven public investment. Governments frequently prioritize urban educational institutions because urban areas are considered economically strategic and administratively accessible [7]. Consequently, rural schools often receive limited financial support, fewer qualified teachers, and weaker educational infrastructure development. Avalos [18] noted that unequal teacher distribution significantly affects educational quality because rural schools experience difficulties attracting and retaining qualified educators. In addition, poverty among rural communities further intensifies educational inequality because families may struggle to provide transportation, school supplies, and learning support for their children [1]. Researchers argue that rural–urban educational disparities contribute to the reproduction of social inequality because educational achievement becomes closely connected to geographic and socioeconomic conditions [14]. Therefore, reducing rural–urban educational inequality requires comprehensive policies focused on equitable resource allocation, rural school development, and inclusive educational planning [3].

C. Digital Divide in Education

The digital divide in education refers to unequal access to internet connectivity, digital devices, digital literacy, and online learning opportunities among students and educational institutions. This issue became increasingly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools around the world shifted toward remote and online learning systems [16]. Students from urban and economically advantaged backgrounds generally had greater access to laptops, smartphones, stable internet connections, and digital learning platforms [13]. In contrast, many students in rural and low-income communities experienced difficulties participating in online learning due to limited technological infrastructure and financial constraints [11]. These disparities created unequal learning experiences and

contributed to learning loss among marginalized students. Selwyn [12] argued that digital inequality is closely linked to broader social inequality because technological access is shaped by economic conditions, geographic location, and public infrastructure development.

The rapid integration of digital technology into education has transformed learning processes and increased the importance of digital inclusion within educational systems. Educational institutions are increasingly expected to implement online learning platforms, digital assessments, and technology-supported pedagogical approaches [17]. However, unequal technological access continues to create major challenges for students and teachers in underdeveloped regions. Teachers in rural schools frequently experience limited professional training in digital pedagogy, reducing their ability to integrate technology effectively into classroom instruction [8]. Furthermore, students without adequate internet access or digital devices may become excluded from important educational opportunities and skill development processes. Tikly [3] emphasized that digital inequality may deepen educational exclusion if technological advancement is not accompanied by inclusive educational policies and equitable infrastructure development. Therefore, governments must prioritize affordable internet access, digital literacy programs, and technological infrastructure expansion to ensure that educational transformation benefits all learners equally rather than reinforcing existing inequalities [10].

D. Cambodian Educational Context

The education system in Kamboja continues to recover and develop following historical disruptions caused by the Cambodian genocide. During the Khmer Rouge regime, educational institutions were systematically destroyed, schools were closed, and many teachers and educated professionals lost their lives. These historical events severely weakened Cambodia's educational foundation and created long-term challenges for educational reconstruction [10]. In recent decades, the Cambodian government has implemented educational reforms aimed at increasing school participation, improving literacy, and expanding educational infrastructure [17]. However, substantial disparities remain between rural and urban educational systems, particularly regarding educational quality, teacher competency, and technological access. Urban schools generally possess more adequate facilities and educational resources compared to rural schools located in remote regions [5]. These conditions demonstrate that educational development in Cambodia remains uneven despite significant national progress.

Current educational challenges in Cambodia include infrastructure limitations, unequal educational investment, and disparities in teacher quality across geographic regions. Rural schools frequently experience shortages of qualified teachers and limited opportunities for professional development [6]. As a result, teaching practices in some rural areas continue to rely heavily on traditional and teacher-centered instructional methods. OECD [7] reported that unequal educational investment contributes to differences in student learning experiences and educational outcomes between urban and rural communities. In addition, the expansion of digital education during the post-pandemic period has highlighted technological inequalities affecting students in remote areas. Many rural students continue to face limited internet connectivity and inadequate access to digital devices [16]. Freire [15] emphasized that education should function as an instrument of empowerment and social transformation rather than reproducing structural inequality. Therefore, strengthening educational equity through

inclusive policies, teacher development, and rural infrastructure investment remains essential for supporting sustainable educational progress in Cambodia [1].

Methodology

A. Research Approach and Research Setting

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine educational inequality between rural and urban schools in Cambodia. The qualitative descriptive method is considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand educational realities from the perspectives and lived experiences of participants within their social and educational contexts. Rather than measuring variables statistically, the study focuses on describing educational conditions, interpreting participants' experiences, exploring contextual challenges, and understanding meanings associated with unequal learning access. This approach allows the researcher to capture complex social phenomena related to educational disparities, particularly those connected to infrastructure limitations, teacher quality differences, digital inequality, and socioeconomic barriers. Through qualitative inquiry, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how rural–urban educational inequality is experienced and perceived by educational stakeholders in Cambodia.

The research will be conducted in selected rural schools and urban schools located in Phnom Penh and surrounding regions. The selection of contrasting geographic settings is intended to facilitate comparative exploration of educational conditions between rural and urban communities. Rural schools are selected to represent regions with limited educational resources and infrastructure, while urban schools are chosen to represent areas with relatively greater educational access and technological development. The comparison between these contexts enables the study to identify structural differences influencing learning opportunities and educational experiences. By examining educational realities across diverse school environments, the study seeks to reveal how geographic location contributes to unequal educational access and outcomes within the Cambodian education system.

B. Participants and Data Collection Techniques

The participants in this study consist of teachers, students, school principals, and local education officers who are directly involved in educational activities within rural and urban school contexts. The study applies purposive sampling to select participants who possess relevant experiences and knowledge related to educational inequality and learning access. The criteria for participant selection include active involvement in teaching, learning, or educational administration as well as familiarity with the challenges experienced in rural or urban educational environments. Approximately 15–25 informants are expected to participate in the study, allowing the researcher to obtain rich and in-depth qualitative data from multiple educational perspectives.

Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews are used to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding school facilities, teaching quality, digital learning practices, and barriers to educational access. This technique enables participants to express their views openly while allowing the researcher to investigate specific educational issues in greater depth. Observation is conducted to examine classroom conditions, school infrastructure, learning environments, and technological availability in both rural and

urban schools. Through direct observation, the researcher can understand how educational disparities are reflected in everyday school practices and physical environments. In addition, document analysis is employed to support and contextualize the findings obtained from interviews and observations. Documents analyzed may include educational policies, school reports, UNESCO publications, ministry statistics, and other educational development documents relevant to Cambodia's educational system.

C. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness.

The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to rural–urban educational inequality. The analysis process begins with data reduction, where interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents are organized and simplified according to the research focus. The researcher then conducts coding to categorize significant statements and experiences expressed by participants. After coding, related categories are grouped into broader themes reflecting major dimensions of educational inequality, including infrastructure inequality, teacher disparities, the digital divide, socioeconomic barriers, and policy limitations. These themes are subsequently interpreted to understand the relationships between educational conditions and broader social realities in Cambodia. Finally, conclusions are drawn to formulate comprehensive insights and policy implications regarding equitable learning access.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the study applies several validation strategies commonly used in qualitative research. Triangulation of data sources is employed by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents to increase the consistency and reliability of findings. Member checking is also conducted by asking selected participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpreted data and findings. In addition, prolonged engagement in the research setting allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and contextual realities. Peer debriefing is further applied through discussions with academic colleagues or research supervisors to minimize researcher bias and strengthen interpretive accuracy. These procedures help ensure that the findings accurately represent the educational realities experienced by participants in rural and urban Cambodian schools.

Results and Discussion

A. Infrastructure and Resource Inequality

The findings indicate significant disparities in educational infrastructure between rural and urban schools in Kamboja. Urban schools, particularly those located in Phnom Penh, generally possess more adequate educational facilities such as libraries, science laboratories, multimedia classrooms, and stable learning environments. In contrast, many rural schools operate with minimal infrastructure, including damaged classrooms, limited sanitation facilities, and inadequate learning resources. Several rural schools also experience overcrowded classrooms due to uneven school distribution and teacher allocation. Transportation barriers further exacerbate educational inequality because students living in remote areas must travel long distances using limited transportation infrastructure. Such conditions reduce students' attendance consistency and learning participation. These findings align with previous studies emphasizing that unequal educational infrastructure remains one of the primary determinants of educational disparity in developing countries [16],[17].

The unequal distribution of educational resources reflects broader structural inequalities in public investment and regional development policies. Urban-centered educational development tends to prioritize economically productive regions while rural communities receive limited governmental support. Consequently, students in rural schools encounter fewer opportunities to access quality learning environments and educational enrichment activities. Inadequate infrastructure also influences students' academic motivation and educational aspirations because poor learning environments often reduce engagement and school attachment. Moreover, the absence of libraries and laboratories limits students' opportunities to develop scientific literacy, critical thinking, and inquiry-based learning skills. These findings support the argument that educational inequality is not solely an issue of school participation but also concerns unequal access to meaningful educational experiences and quality learning resources. Therefore, improving equitable educational infrastructure investment is essential for reducing opportunity gaps and achieving inclusive educational development in Cambodia [3],[5].

B. Teacher Quality and Learning Experiences

The findings reveal substantial differences in teacher quality and learning experiences between rural and urban schools in Cambodia. Teachers in urban schools generally have greater access to professional development programs, pedagogical training, and educational workshops compared to their rural counterparts. Urban educators are more frequently exposed to student-centered learning approaches, digital teaching strategies, and curriculum innovation. Conversely, many rural schools experience persistent teacher shortages, forcing some teachers to handle multiple subjects beyond their specialization. Limited professional support and inadequate teaching resources contribute to the dominance of traditional teacher-centered instruction in rural classrooms. Learning activities in rural schools often emphasize memorization and passive learning due to insufficient training opportunities and constrained educational facilities. These disparities significantly influence students' classroom engagement and learning outcomes. Similar patterns have been identified in developing countries where uneven teacher distribution contributes to long-term educational inequality [7],[8].

Professional inequality among teachers also creates broader pedagogical implications for educational quality and social mobility. Students in urban schools tend to experience more interactive and collaborative learning environments that encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, students in rural schools frequently encounter limited instructional variation and lower exposure to innovative educational practices. Such conditions reproduce educational disadvantages because unequal teaching quality directly affects students' academic confidence and future educational opportunities. In addition, inadequate incentives for rural teachers reduce motivation to remain in remote regions, further worsening teacher turnover and instability. The findings suggest that educational inequality in Cambodia is closely linked to unequal teacher capacity development and professional support systems. Addressing these challenges requires long-term policies focusing on equitable teacher recruitment, continuous professional development, and targeted incentives for educators serving rural communities. Strengthening teacher quality in marginalized areas is essential for improving learning experiences and reducing structural educational disparities [10],[18].

C. Digital Divide and Technology Access

The study findings demonstrate that the digital divide remains a major contributor to educational inequality between rural and urban schools in Cambodia. Urban schools generally benefit from stronger internet connectivity, greater availability of digital devices, and broader integration of educational technology into classroom practices. In contrast, many rural schools continue to experience unstable internet access, limited electricity infrastructure, and insufficient technological resources. Students in remote areas frequently rely on shared mobile devices or lack access to digital learning platforms entirely. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these disparities became increasingly visible as rural students encountered significant barriers to participating in online learning activities. Many students were unable to attend virtual classes consistently due to connectivity problems and financial limitations in obtaining smartphones or internet data packages. These conditions contributed to learning loss and widened existing educational achievement gaps. Previous studies similarly emphasize that digital inequality has become a critical dimension of educational exclusion in developing countries during post-pandemic educational transformation [10],[11].

The unequal access to digital technology has important implications for long-term educational inclusion and social participation. Students with limited technological access are less likely to develop digital literacy skills required in contemporary educational and workforce environments. Furthermore, teachers in rural schools often receive minimal training in digital pedagogy, limiting their ability to integrate technology effectively into teaching practices. As education systems increasingly adopt blended and technology-supported learning models, rural communities risk experiencing deeper educational marginalization. The findings suggest that the digital divide is not merely a technological issue but also reflects broader socioeconomic and geographic inequalities. Without equitable digital infrastructure development, educational reforms may unintentionally reinforce social exclusion and widen rural–urban disparities. Therefore, improving internet accessibility, providing affordable digital devices, and strengthening digital literacy programs are essential components of inclusive educational policy in Cambodia. Such initiatives are necessary to ensure that technological advancement contributes to educational equity rather than reproducing existing inequalities [12],[17].

D. Socioeconomic Barriers

The findings indicate that socioeconomic conditions strongly influence educational participation and continuity among rural students in Cambodia. Many families in rural communities experience persistent poverty, limiting their ability to support children's educational needs such as transportation, school materials, uniforms, and digital devices. As a result, some students demonstrate irregular attendance patterns or discontinue schooling entirely. In several cases, students are required to assist family labor activities, including agriculture, household work, or informal employment, particularly during harvest seasons. Such responsibilities reduce study time and negatively affect academic engagement. Financial hardship also influences students' educational aspirations because many families prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational investment. These findings reveal that educational inequality is closely connected to broader structural poverty and social vulnerability. Similar studies have shown that socioeconomic disadvantage significantly increases the risk of educational exclusion and intergenerational inequality in developing countries [14],[16].

The persistence of socioeconomic barriers contributes to the social reproduction of inequality through unequal educational opportunities and outcomes. Students from economically disadvantaged rural backgrounds often face cumulative educational disadvantages beginning from early schooling and continuing into higher education access. Limited financial resources restrict participation in supplementary learning activities, private tutoring, and technology-based education that are more accessible to urban middle-class students. Consequently, educational achievement becomes strongly associated with socioeconomic status rather than individual potential. These conditions create long-term challenges for human capital development because unequal educational access reduces opportunities for social mobility and skilled workforce formation. The findings suggest that educational policy in Cambodia must move beyond infrastructure expansion and address broader socioeconomic inequalities affecting student participation. Social protection programs, educational scholarships, transportation assistance, and school meal programs may help reduce economic barriers and support educational retention among vulnerable populations. Addressing poverty-related educational exclusion is therefore essential for achieving equitable and sustainable educational development [1],[9].

Conclusion

This study concludes that rural–urban educational inequality remains a major challenge within the education system of Kamboja. The findings demonstrate that students in rural areas continue to experience limited educational access and lower learning quality compared to students in urban schools, particularly in Phnom Penh. Educational disparities are reflected in unequal infrastructure development, shortages of qualified teachers, limited digital access, and socioeconomic barriers affecting educational participation and academic achievement. Rural schools frequently operate with inadequate learning facilities, insufficient technological resources, and restricted opportunities for professional teacher development, while urban schools generally benefit from stronger educational investment and broader access to educational innovation.

The study also reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing educational inequalities through unequal participation in online learning. Rural students often experienced difficulties accessing internet connectivity, digital devices, and technology-supported learning environments, resulting in learning loss and reduced educational engagement. These findings indicate that the digital divide has become an important dimension of educational inequality in contemporary educational systems. Furthermore, socioeconomic conditions such as poverty and family labor responsibilities continue to influence school attendance, learning participation, and educational continuation among rural students. Such conditions contribute to the reproduction of social inequality because educational opportunities become closely associated with geographic location and economic status.

Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study provides insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers, students, school principals, and local educational stakeholders regarding unequal learning access in Cambodia. The findings highlight that educational inequality is not solely related to school enrollment but also concerns unequal access to meaningful educational experiences, quality teaching, and supportive learning environments. Therefore, achieving educational equity

requires comprehensive and inclusive policies addressing both structural and contextual barriers affecting marginalized communities.

This study recommends increasing equitable educational investment through rural infrastructure development, teacher professional support, digital technology expansion, and targeted social assistance programs for vulnerable students. Strengthening internet connectivity, improving teacher distribution, and enhancing digital literacy programs are also essential to support inclusive educational transformation. Ultimately, reducing rural–urban educational inequality is crucial for promoting sustainable human capital development, social inclusion, and long-term national progress in Cambodia.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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