

URBAN–RURAL EDUCATIONAL ACCESS INEQUALITY WITHIN ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract - This literature-based study examines educational inequality between urban and rural communities through the interrelation of economic structure, infrastructure, and policy design. A qualitative thematic synthesis of national and international studies was conducted to identify recurring patterns that shape access and learning conditions across regions. The findings indicate that economic concentration in urban areas strengthens local fiscal capacity, allowing better school facilities, richer learning environments, and broader support networks. Rural regions, dependent on low value-added activities, struggle to sustain adequate infrastructure and educational services. Transport networks, school buildings, and digital connectivity strongly influence attendance, continuity of schooling, and the range of learning experiences available to students. Educational policies, including funding schemes, teacher deployment, curriculum, and accountability mechanisms, are often formulated with assumptions closer to urban realities, placing rural schools in a structurally disadvantaged position. These interacting forces reproduce persistent gaps in learning opportunities, aspirations, and future prospects for rural students. The study underlines the need to reorient educational planning toward a stronger recognition of territorial diversity and structural constraints that shape actual access to meaningful schooling.

Keywords: urban education, rural education, access inequality, infrastructure, education policy, economic structure, rural schools

INTRODUCTION

The disparity in access to education between urban and rural areas has long been a concern in the discourse on social development, as it touches on the core issue of equal opportunities for citizens. Cities are often described as places that provide well-equipped schools, highly qualified teachers, and a relatively well-established support network. In contrast, rural areas are often associated with limited resources, long distances to educational institutions, and limited study options. This image shapes the way people perceive their children's future and the direction of their family's social mobility. Education is seen as a way out of structural poverty, but the quality of that path differs for children in cities and villages. Behind the apparent increase in school participation rates lies tension over who actually receives adequate services, who is left behind, and how social structures regulate the flow of resources that support daily learning experiences (Li, 2019).

This inequality does not exist in isolation, but is closely related to the history of economic development that has placed cities as centres of growth and villages as suppliers of cheap labour and primary commodities. The heavy orientation of public investment towards urban areas has resulted in a network of elite schools, training centres and universities concentrated in certain areas. Meanwhile, schools in villages struggle to survive with minimal facilities, a limited number of teachers and limited access to professional development. Public perceptions of urban progress, as shaped by smart city initiatives, indirectly set standards of "quality of life" that are often contrasted with rural conditions, thereby influencing expectations of public services, including education (Rojak, 2022). At the family level, parents in cities are relatively more familiar with information about educational pathways, scholarships, and future competency requirements. This contrasts with many families in rural areas who struggle with daily economic priorities and limited knowledge about their children's educational options. Family support for education, which varies greatly in quality, is an early determining factor that widens or narrows this gap from the most basic stage (Masfufah & Masnawati, 2023). As a result, education becomes an arena where economic structures and resource allocation produce new social distances between groups of citizens (Beach & Öhrn, 2021).

Behind the statistical map of participation rates, graduation rates, and transition to higher levels of education, there are diverse life experiences between children in cities and villages. Children in urban areas are familiar with classrooms equipped with technology, various extracurricular activities, and teachers who are accustomed to accessing digital teaching materials. For working families in cities, these childcare challenges are often overcome with solutions such as childcare businesses, which are part of the urban non-formal education support ecosystem (Sinambela & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Meanwhile, many children in rural areas study in simple spaces, with limited books, and study schedules that must be adjusted to their obligations to help their families. Their relationship with school is shaped by

physical distance, transportation costs, and family expectations regarding the benefits of learning. In their daily lives, they interpret the meaning of school through interactions with peers, teachers, and parents. The social interactions and psychological support built in this school environment have a complex reciprocal relationship with children's well-being, a relationship that needs to be understood across different cultures between cities and villages (Oluwatosin & Darmawan, 2024). The way they interpret the fatigue of walking long distances, the pride of wearing a uniform, or the disappointment when facilities are inadequate, is intertwined with perceptions of who is considered worthy of advancement and who is left to adapt to circumstances (Guo & Li, 2024).

This inequality in access to education is also related to the basic infrastructure that supports learning activities, such as transport networks, stable electricity supply, internet access, and the availability of supporting public facilities. In urban areas, the presence of paved roads, public transport, and dense telecommunications networks makes it easier for children to reach school and find additional learning resources. In rural areas, long distances, poor road conditions, and limited digital networks can turn school activities into endeavours that require extra effort and expense. Social stereotypes attached to geographical identity and social class also shape these opportunities and inequalities, affecting not only interactions between groups but also access to education and employment (Sajjapong et al., 2022). This differentiation in infrastructure not only affects the smooth running of learning activities but also how families consider the continuity of their children's education. When physical and digital access is hampered, the decision to continue schooling to a higher level often depends on a combination of family resilience, local social networks, and available policies (Safitri, 2022).

In addition to economic and infrastructure factors, education policy design often contributes to widening the quality gap between urban and rural areas. Programmes designed based on the assumption of urban school conditions can potentially complicate matters for rural educational units facing limitations in terms of teachers, facilities, and administrative support. Graduation standards, quality measurements, and budget management can be burdensome for schools located far from government centres. On the other hand, affirmative policies sometimes focus on quantitative aspects such as the construction of new buildings, without addressing the quality of teaching and long-term support for educators in remote areas. In such situations, the access gap is not only evident in participation rates, but also in the quality of learning experiences and the possibility for children to develop their full potential according to their respective talents and interests.

The main problem that arises from this picture is the clear difference in access to proper learning opportunities between children in urban and rural areas. Formally, both groups are registered as participants in the national education system, but at the everyday level, there are sharp differences in terms of facilities, quality of services, and environmental support. Children in cities face high competitive demands, but are relatively supported by adequate infrastructure and additional services. Children in rural areas often face obstacles such as distance, teacher availability, and limited choices of secondary and higher education pathways. Contemporary social mobility dynamics, reimagined in the landscape of platform economics and automation, further emphasise the importance of adaptive educational readiness, which is less accessible to children in disadvantaged areas (Sulaksono et al., 2025). This disparity creates new vulnerabilities, as individual educational success or failure is heavily influenced by where they were born and raised, rather than solely by personal effort or intellectual capacity.

Another issue relates to the structural nature of this inequality, which is linked to economic development patterns, budget allocation, and policy design that tends to favour regions with stronger political and administrative capacity. When education funding depends on a region's ability to manage its revenue sources, regions with weak economic bases will lag behind in providing quality services. At the school level, principals and teachers often work under pressure to meet national standards, even though the actual support they receive is not commensurate with their workload. At the family level, decisions about continuing children's education are greatly influenced by hidden costs such as transportation, books, uniforms, and extra lessons, which are more burdensome in rural areas. Achieving equitable sustainability, therefore, requires public policies that are responsive to such fundamental social inequalities (Musyafak & Darmawan, 2025). This pattern leads to the reproduction of intergenerational inequality, as children who grow up in disadvantaged conditions tend to repeat their parents' social position.

The topic of educational access inequality between urban and rural areas is important to examine at the present time because Indonesia's social and economic landscape is undergoing rapid changes characterised by accelerated urbanisation, infrastructure expansion, and the digitalisation of public services. These changes present new opportunities for improving educational services, but at the same time can widen the gap between groups that are able to adapt to new demands and those that are left behind. If education policy design does not consciously take into account the diverse conditions of different regions, then accelerated development in cities risks strengthening the concentration of resources in growth centres. Literature studies that highlight the structure of the economy, infrastructure, and policy as an interrelated whole can help explain why inequality persists despite various equalisation programmes that have been implemented over the past few decades.

In addition, a focused discussion of educational access inequality at this time is strategically important for formulating long-term development directions that place social justice as the main objective. Education is an arena where the values of equality, citizen participation, and social mobility are tested in concrete terms. If the gap between cities and

villages is allowed to widen, the potential for social conflict, forced migration, and distrust of public institutions may increase. By treating educational access inequality as a structural phenomenon that can be analysed through literature review, researchers and policy makers have a stronger foundation for designing interventions based on the empirical realities of various regions. This study also opens up space for reflection for the academic world, educational institutions, and the wider community to reassess the extent to which the existing system has provided equal opportunities for children from different geographical and social backgrounds.

The objective of this study is to systematically analyse how economic structures and infrastructure conditions in urban and rural areas shape inequalities in access to and quality of education services, and to examine how the design and implementation of education policies contribute to widening or narrowing these gaps. Through qualitative literature study, this research attempts to develop a structured understanding of the relationship between economic development, basic infrastructure provision, and education policy architecture, so that patterns of inequality can be identified as symptoms rooted in resource allocation, rather than solely in the shortcomings of individuals or local communities. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of educational equity by highlighting structural dimensions, while in practical terms, the results can be used as a reference for policy makers, school administrators, and civil society organisations in designing corrective measures that are more sensitive to regional characteristics.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilises a qualitative literature review design oriented towards the compilation of a thematic synthesis of various research findings on educational access inequality in urban and rural areas. This approach views literature as a record of social experiences and policies that can be interpreted through the language, categories, and patterns of argumentation constructed by the authors. The work procedure follows the principles of qualitative synthesis as outlined in the systematic review and meta-synthesis guidelines, with an emphasis on traceability of steps, transparency of source selection, and clarity of the theme formation process. Creswell's framework for qualitative research is used to organise the initial stages, from formulating the focus of the study and determining the unit of analysis to compiling the final narrative. Meanwhile, Braun and Clarke's ideas on thematic analysis were used to design the process of coding and grouping themes that emerged from various articles, research reports, and policy documents that were collected.

The literature search strategy was conducted through international and national scientific databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and accredited national journal portals. Keywords were compiled in Indonesian and English, covering terms related to educational inequality, the urban-rural divide, access to education, educational infrastructure, educational economics, and educational policy. The search process was followed by initial screening based on titles and abstracts, then continued with full reading to assess suitability with the focus of the study. Inclusion criteria included publications that discussed differences in access to or quality of education between urban and rural areas, described the relationship with economic, infrastructure, or policy factors, and were compiled in the form of journal articles, scientific books, or official research reports. Exclusion criteria were applied to opinion pieces without a research basis, highly descriptive project reports without a clear methodological design, and publications focusing on regions or issues unrelated to primary and secondary education.

The analysis process followed the stages of qualitative thematic synthesis with steps recommended by Braun and Clarke, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, as well as Dixon-Woods and colleagues. After the selected literature was collected, the researchers compiled a data matrix containing information on the research location, regional characteristics, focus of the study, methodological approach, and key findings related to economic factors, infrastructure, and policy. From this matrix, initial coding was carried out to capture recurring categories, such as funding patterns, forms of infrastructure support, teacher distribution mechanisms, or affirmative programme design. Similar codes were then grouped into first-level themes, such as budget allocation patterns, digital opportunity structures, or authority configurations in education policy. Quality assurance was carried out by checking code consistency, tracing back to the source text to prevent misinterpretation, and comparing sources to identify consistent and conflicting patterns. The final stage involves compiling a synthesis narrative that links these themes to the research problem formulation, resulting in a structured description of how economic structures, infrastructure, and policies shape educational access inequalities between urban and rural communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Economic Structure, Infrastructure, and Inequality in Access to Education in Urban and Rural Areas

The disparity in access to education between urban and rural areas is rooted in an economic structure that places cities at the centre of capital accumulation, industrial activity and services, while villages more often function as spaces for the extraction of natural resources and labour. In other words, this inequality is a reflection of the unbalanced reconstruction of the Earth's social ecosystem, where socio-ecological inquiry is needed to understand the impacts of the climate crisis and structural injustice (Mardikaningsih, 2025). This pattern has a direct impact on the ability of local

governments to provide adequate education services. Regions with a strong tax base and dense economic activity have greater opportunities to finance the development and maintenance of educational facilities. Conversely, regions that depend on low-productivity primary sectors often face fiscal constraints. As a result, schools in cities tend to receive more stable support in terms of facilities, enrichment programmes, and learning innovations, while schools in villages struggle to survive on minimal budgets. This disparity in resources translates into differences in classroom quality, laboratory facilities, availability of teaching materials, and various facilities that support active learning (Rather, 2024).

Growth-oriented economic structures in certain regions also regulate population migration and the distribution of educators. Cities that offer higher income prospects attract university graduates, including the best prospective teachers who seek career security and professional development opportunities. This condition reinforces the concentration of qualified teaching staff in urban areas, while villages often rely on teachers with limited educational backgrounds or honorary teachers who work in uncertain conditions. These differences in the composition of teaching staff affect the quality of classroom interaction, the variety of teaching methods, and the ability of schools to produce innovations relevant to changing times. At the same time, families in villages with stronger economic resources tend to send their children to schools in cities, putting village schools at risk of losing students with relatively more stable family support (Liu, 2024).

Basic infrastructure serves as a bridge connecting economic structures with concrete experiences of access to education. Decent roads, sturdy bridges, and regular public transport networks in urban areas make travelling to school relatively easy, even though the distance between home and school is not always short. In rural areas, children often have to travel long distances on dirt roads, cross rivers, or rely on vehicles that do not operate every day. These conditions affect student attendance, punctuality, and their physical and mental readiness when attending classes. During the rainy season, these obstacles can increase sharply, causing students to be absent for days. These infrastructure limitations are also linked to biased social constructs, such as those found in modern family law systems, where inequality of rights is often rooted in regulatory bias and unequal social constructs (Assayuthi et al., 2023). A family's decision to continue education to a higher level often depends on their ability to bear the burden of travel and time, not solely on the child's willingness to learn (Tang, 2023).

Educational infrastructure, including school buildings, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and sports facilities, shows a clear disparity between cities and villages (Yang, 2024). Schools in cities are more likely to have permanent buildings with regular maintenance, spacious classrooms, and supporting facilities designed for various learning activities. In villages, there are still many schools with cramped classrooms, poor ventilation, and outdated learning equipment. The idea of active and creative learning is difficult to implement when teachers have to teach in crowded rooms, with limited desks and chairs, and without adequate teaching aids. These limitations are not just a matter of comfort, but also affect the way children interact with knowledge, the extent to which they can experiment, ask questions, and develop their curiosity in a focused manner.

The development of digital infrastructure has introduced a new dimension to educational inequality. In urban areas, schools are increasingly accustomed to using the internet for learning activities, communicating with parents, and managing administration. Access to computers, projectors, and wireless networks allows teachers to integrate various learning resources, ranging from videos and simulations to online learning platforms. This is where the role of parents becomes crucial in preventing gadget addiction while ensuring the healthy and educational use of technology (Masfufah & Darmawan, 2023). In rural areas, limited networks, subscription costs, and device availability create major barriers to the use of technology in learning. Even when device procurement programmes are implemented, the lack of technical support and ongoing training often hinders optimal utilisation. As a result, children in villages are at risk of falling behind in digital literacy, even though these skills are increasingly seen as a prerequisite for entering the modern workforce and participating in the digital public sphere (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska & Stawicki, 2022).

The economic dimension of households adds another layer of inequality in access to education. Urban families with stable incomes are better able to bear the costs of informal education, such as transportation, additional books, courses, or self-development activities. These costs are often seen as a reasonable investment in the child's future. In rural areas, many families rely on fluctuating incomes, for example from harvests or daily work. This situation means that education expenses often become a variable that must be adjusted when other basic needs take precedence. Children may be asked to help with family work during certain seasons, disrupting their school attendance, or even drop out of school early to work. This economic strain has a direct impact on psychological well-being and the quality of social interactions within the family, which are interrelated and influence each other (Darmawan & Gani, 2024). Thus, inequality of access is not limited to the availability of schools, but also includes the ability of families to maintain their children's participation in the long term.

The economic structure that places villages as suppliers of raw materials often means that rural areas do not enjoy the added value of the production process. Limited regional income has an impact on the ability of local governments to allocate sufficient education budgets to improve infrastructure and service quality. In urban areas, the presence of developed industries and service sectors creates employment opportunities that strengthen the tax base, allowing for increased public spending on education. This condition encourages a mutually reinforcing cycle between economic progress and the quality of education in cities, while villages face the opposite cycle. When the results of rural

education are not strong enough to drive changes in the local economic structure, dependence on traditional sectors remains high and it is difficult to increase regional fiscal capacity.

Inequality is also evident in access to support services such as health centres, counselling, and psychosocial services that affect educational continuity. In cities, schools often collaborate with community health centres, hospitals, or psychological service institutions to support student health and welfare. Nutrition education programmes, routine health checks, and psychosocial problem management are relatively easier to implement. In rural areas, limited health personnel, distance to services, and a lack of professionals in the field of psychology mean that many students' needs are not identified or properly addressed. Children who experience health problems or psychological stress are at risk of declining performance, increased absenteeism, and even dropping out of school, without adequate intervention from the institutions that should be able to help.

Economic differences are also reflected in the social networks surrounding schools (Zreik, 2023). In urban areas, there are more non-governmental organisations, professional communities, and religious organisations that offer learning assistance programmes, scholarships, and talent development programmes. Schools can partner with various parties to enrich students' experiences, from industrial visits to entrepreneurship training. In rural areas, the existence of such supporting institutions is much more limited. Teachers and school principals often rely on personal initiatives and support from local communities that are also struggling with economic constraints. This weak network reduces the opportunities for rural students to learn about various career paths and further education resources, narrowing their horizons compared to their peers in the city.

Infrastructure and economic disparities also influence families' views on the value of education. In urban areas, exposure to a variety of professions, academic success, and narratives of social mobility through school reinforce the belief that education is the main path to improving quality of life. Families tend to plan for their children's education up to higher levels and mobilise resources to achieve these plans. In rural areas, where daily experiences show that many school graduates face employment difficulties, views on the benefits of education can become more uncertain. Parents may question the usefulness of continuing schooling if job opportunities in the area are limited and migration to the city requires significant costs. This uncertainty affects the encouragement given to children and decisions about when to end schooling, perpetuating access inequalities in the form of differences in educational aspirations and planning.

The macroeconomic structure also directs the placement of major infrastructure projects such as ports, industrial estates and motorways that serve to connect production centres with markets. These projects usually intersect more with urban areas or certain corridors, which then experience an increase in land value and economic activity. Schools in these areas enjoy the double effect of easier access, increased business support, and the possibility of programme collaboration. Meanwhile, villages outside the main development corridor are often overlooked, resulting in very slow improvements to roads leading to schools or the rejuvenation of educational facilities. Children who attend school in these areas grow up with the experience that public services, including education, move slowly, which affects their trust in institutions.

At the level of student experience, this entire configuration of economic and infrastructure structures translates into feelings of deserving or not deserving a future. Children who attend school in comfortable spaces, with teachers who are fully present and adequate facilities, will find it easier to develop the belief that their learning efforts will be rewarded. Conversely, children who have to endure a difficult commute every day, study in poorly maintained spaces, and face limitations in teaching materials, may absorb the implicit message that education is provided to them only minimally. These feelings have the potential to shape their relationship with school, the extent to which they dare to dream, and how strongly they persevere in the face of learning difficulties. Thus, the inequality of access to education between urban and rural areas is not only about participation rates or the quality of buildings, but is also related to the formation of expectations, self-confidence, and future horizons for young people from various regions.

The inequality in access to education between urban and rural communities stems from the close intertwining of macroeconomic structures, the distribution of basic infrastructure and education, and the dynamics of household and community life. Economic structures determine fiscal strength and the direction of investment, infrastructure regulates the smoothness and quality of students' encounters with schools, while family experiences shape attitudes towards education. These three factors reinforce each other in producing patterns of inequality that are repeated from one generation to the next. A structured understanding of these relationships is essential for interpreting how education policies work at the next stage, whether they reduce the gap or perpetuate it in new, more subtle forms.

Education Policy and the Reproduction of Access Disparities in Urban and Rural Areas

Education policy is often presented as the main instrument for expanding access and improving service quality for all citizens, but in practice its design and implementation often reinforce the differences between urban and rural areas. This inequality is in line with the different dynamics of social mobility between urban and rural communities, where access to decisive resources, such as quality education policies, disproportionately affects their mobility paths (Amri & Khayru, 2021). The formulation of national standards, for example, assumes the availability of relatively equitable infrastructure, teaching staff, and institutional support. This assumption is closer to the reality of schools in cities than schools in villages. When graduation standards, performance assessments, and achievement targets are designed without

considering the diversity of regions' abilities to meet these demands, rural schools are in a vulnerable position. They are required to achieve the same indicators as educational units in cities, but operate in an environment fraught with limitations. This difference in scope means that policies intended to drive quality improvement become an additional burden for schools that are already lacking in resources (Okeowhor, 2019).

The pattern of education funding is one concrete example of how policies can create or reduce the gap between urban and rural areas. Budget allocation mechanisms that combine central and regional funds often depend on the administrative capacity, data completeness, and speed of proposal submission by local governments and schools. Urban areas with better-trained officials and well-organised information systems tend to be more responsive in taking advantage of funding opportunities, ranging from physical programmes to non-physical assistance. In rural areas, limited administrative capacity, distance from government centres, and low training frequency make it difficult for many schools to access programmes that are actually available. As a result, policies promoted as equalisation schemes end up concentrating assistance in areas that are already more institutionally prepared, while schools in villages lag behind in the race for support (Xiang & Stillwell, 2023).

Teacher distribution and management policies illustrate another dimension of inequality reproduction. The public teacher placement system, which prioritises starting careers in remote areas, is often seen as a solution to ensure the presence of educators in villages (Zhu, 2024). However, when transfer and promotion policies allow for relocation to cities as a form of career reward, villages often become temporary stops. Experienced teachers who are accustomed to the local environment can move to more advantageous areas, while rural schools are left to rely on new teachers who are still adapting. These differences in infrastructure and opportunities widen the impact of urbanisation on social inequality, creating complex challenges in building social cohesion at the national level (Mardikaningsih, 2021). Policies to improve teachers' academic qualifications are also often more accessible to educators in cities because they are close to universities, training institutions, and online learning facilities. This disparity in professional development opportunities accumulates into differences in the quality of classroom learning, even though formally all teachers are subject to the same regulations.

School operational assistance programmes, scholarships, and various educational social protection schemes are essentially designed to reduce cost barriers for poor families, both in urban and rural areas. However, their implementation is highly dependent on data collection, socialisation, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms. In urban areas, it is easier for the community to access information about eligibility requirements, registration procedures, and complaint channels when problems arise. Educational institutions can rely on the support of civil society organisations or local media to oversee the implementation of programmes. In rural areas, limited information, low administrative literacy, and distance from public service centres mean that families who actually meet the criteria are often overlooked. When data on beneficiary families is inaccurate, education cost compensation policies fail to fully reach the groups most in need, so that access inequalities persist despite claims of equal distribution of assistance.

Curriculum policies have a major influence on the learning experiences of students in cities and villages. Curricula that are project-rich, discovery-based, and require the use of technology are in line with the demands of the 21st century, but their implementation requires adequate facilities and competencies. Schools in urban areas find it easier to integrate out-of-class activities, collaborate with local institutions, and utilise digital media as part of learning. The transformation of technology-based interaction patterns in urban families also creates different learning experiences that influence children's psychological health and character formation (Evendi et al., 2025). Conversely, schools in rural areas that lack facilities and access to external partners often find it difficult to translate curriculum guidelines into daily practice. Teachers are encouraged to return to lecture methods and written exercises that rely on textbooks, even though official documents recommend other approaches. When national assessments refer to standards designed for urban learning environments, the learning outcomes of students in rural areas risk appearing to lag behind, not because of a lack of ability, but because curriculum policies do not provide enough room for adaptation to local conditions (Cao, 2024).

Education evaluation and accountability policies often focus on measuring numerical achievements such as test scores, graduation rates, and participation rates. These indicators are used to classify schools, award prizes, or determine interventions. In urban areas, schools with complete facilities, high parental support, and access to tutoring have a greater chance of achieving high scores (Song, 2023). The excellent reputation that these schools then enjoy attracts new students from strong socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby increasing the average quality of the student body. Parents in urban areas with certain parenting styles can build their children's emotional resilience and behavioural adjustment, which has an impact on their readiness to face academic evaluation (Hariani et al., 2024). In rural areas, schools face much greater challenges in achieving similar figures. When comparisons are made without considering environmental differences, labelling schools as weak can reduce the confidence of teachers and students, reinforce the public perception that rural schools are of low quality, and ultimately affect families' interest in continuing education at these schools.

The design of regional autonomy policies in the education sector gives local governments considerable authority to manage budgets, regulate institutions, and develop innovative programmes. For regions with strong institutional capacity and a solid economic base, autonomy opens up opportunities to accelerate improvements in education services. Local governments can design regional scholarships, increase teacher incentives, or build learning resource centres that are integrated with regional needs. However, for regions with weak fiscal capacity and limited

human resources, autonomy has the potential to widen the gap with other regions. When differences in governance quality between regions interact with differences between villages and cities within the same region, a complex layer of inequality emerges. This inequality also reproduces patterns of social inequality, as seen in the trend of minimalist consumption, which is both a response to and a reflection of industrial dynamics and inequality (Gani et al., 2021). Rural schools in poor areas face the double burden of local limitations and weak structural support that should be provided through policy (Nihayah et al., 2023).

Affirmative policies that explicitly target disadvantaged, remote and border areas are often cited as evidence of a commitment to equity. These may take the form of special allowances for teachers, the construction of new school buildings, or the provision of boarding facilities for students from remote areas. However, the success of such programmes is highly dependent on consistent funding, oversight and sustainable design. When policies only last for a certain period without clear sustainability mechanisms, the benefits felt by the community are temporary. Schools may receive physical assistance, but they do not receive long-term assistance for management capacity building. Teachers may be attracted by incentives at the beginning of the programme, but then seek new assignments when the incentives are stopped or paid late. Under such conditions, affirmative policies risk becoming a series of short-term projects that come and go without substantially changing patterns of inequality (Mahfud et al., 2023).

The relationship between national education policy and local initiatives at the school level also influences patterns of inequality. Regulations from the centre often set a general framework, while implementation is driven through programmes that rely on the creativity and initiative of headteachers and teachers. In cities, education stakeholders have greater access to school management training, forums for sharing good practices, and professional networks. They can utilise policy space to develop innovative management models, engage with the business world, or build networks with universities. In rural areas, school principals work with limited support, often juggling multiple administrative tasks, and rarely have the opportunity to participate in intensive training. As a result, the flexibility provided by central government policies is utilised more by schools in well-established areas, while rural schools struggle to meet basic administrative requirements (Mahfud et al., 2023).

The role of external supervision and evaluation of policy implementation is also related to the differences between cities and villages. Supervisory agencies, school supervisors, and accreditation bodies find it easier to reach schools in areas that are well connected by transport and communication networks. Visits to rural schools require more time and money, resulting in low monitoring frequency. This makes it difficult to quickly detect various policy implementation problems, such as delays in fund distribution, unclear technical guidelines, or abuse of authority. In urban areas, mistakes or irregularities are more likely to come to light through the media, activist networks, or parent protests. In villages, complaints often stop at informal discussions, without effective formal channels for raising objections. This situation creates a wide gap between policy intentions and the reality experienced by schools and families (Shi & Sercombe, 2020).

In recent years, policies on the digitisation of education and the use of online learning platforms have increasingly come to the fore as innovations that are expected to expand access to knowledge (Liu, 2023). However, policy design that focuses on providing national platforms and digital materials often assumes that the availability of devices and networks is a prerequisite that is already evenly fulfilled. In urban areas, schools and families are relatively able to adapt, although there are still vulnerable groups. In rural areas, limitations in terms of devices, electricity, and networks make it difficult for students to regularly utilise digital materials. Teachers who are not yet trained in the use of technology also feel burdened by the administrative demands that accompany the policy. Thus, initiatives that are expected to expand access have the potential to create new disparities between those who are connected to digital networks and those who still rely on simple face-to-face learning.

Overall, analysis of education policy shows that its design and implementation strongly contribute to the reproduction of educational inequality between urban and rural areas. Funding mechanisms, teacher distribution, aid programme implementation, curriculum, evaluation, regional autonomy and digital initiatives interact with differences in institutional capacity and local resources. When policies are formulated based on ideal conditions that are closer to the reality of cities, schools in villages must struggle to adapt, often without adequate support. This struggle can have psychological effects that require emotional management skills to maintain the well-being of teachers and students in disadvantaged areas (Irfan & Darmawan, 2021). The result is a pattern of inequality that persists over time, even though various policies formally promote the slogan of equity. Understanding these dynamics confirms that efforts to reduce educational access gaps cannot stop at adding programmes, but require a comprehensive review of how policies are designed, distributed, and monitored to be more in line with regional diversity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the inequality in access to education between urban and rural areas is formed through a web of economic structures, infrastructure, and policies that reinforce each other. The economic structure concentrated in urban areas creates differences in regional fiscal capacity, which then has an impact on the quality and completeness of

educational facilities. Basic infrastructure, both physical and digital, plays a decisive role in determining the ease with which students can attend school, with distance, road conditions and network connectivity becoming determining factors in the continuity of learning. Education policies designed at the national level are often based on the assumption of equal availability of resources, putting schools in villages at a disadvantage when it comes to meeting the same standards as schools in cities. This entire process results in a pattern of recurring underdevelopment, in which children growing up in rural areas face multiple obstacles in obtaining a proper learning experience, ranging from the availability of facilities to the variety of social support that accompanies their educational journey.

The findings of this study confirm that discussions on educational equity are inadequate if they stop at expanding participation rates without unravelling the structures that regulate the flow of resources between cities and villages. Improvement efforts require serious attention to how budgets are allocated, how basic infrastructure is prioritised, and the extent to which policy design allows for adaptation in areas with low carrying capacity. Central and regional governments need to re-examine the map of inequality by placing local economic conditions, transportation networks, and institutional capacity as primary considerations, rather than merely additional background information. For academics, further studies can be directed towards more detailed mapping of the experiences of students and teachers in various types of regions, so that the discourse on educational justice is firmly rooted in everyday reality. Meanwhile, civil society organisations and educational institutions can use the results of this study as a basis for building more planned cross-regional synergies.

Based on the findings in this literature review, several steps can be proposed for policy makers and education actors. The central government is advised to review the design of funding and affirmative programme schemes by placing greater emphasis on the needs of rural areas that have been underserved, while strengthening oversight mechanisms to ensure that support reaches vulnerable schools. Local governments need to develop education development plans that prioritise the improvement of basic infrastructure for schools as a shared priority, rather than a separate sectoral issue. Higher education institutions can expand partnerships with rural schools through sustainable community service programmes, particularly in improving the capacity of teachers and school principals. Further research is recommended to explore the experiences of students, families, and educators from various regional backgrounds in more detail, so that the picture of inequality does not stop at numbers but is reflected in narratives that can drive changes in policy and educational management practices.

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