

Research Article

Structural Determinants of Educational Disparities in ASEAN: A Cross-National Policy Analysis

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Abstract: Educational inequality persists across ASEAN despite improvements in enrollment and literacy, reflecting structural rather than merely access-related challenges. This study examines how governance structures, financing mechanisms, institutional capacity, and socio-economic stratification interact to produce disparities in educational access, participation, and progression. Using a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design with cross-national comparative policy analysis, the research integrates macro-level quantitative indicators with in-depth qualitative evaluation of policy frameworks across ASEAN member states. Findings reveal that while primary enrollment approaches universality, secondary and tertiary education exhibit pronounced attrition, particularly among rural, low-income, and minority populations. Centralized governance, equitable public financing, and targeted support correlate with higher retention and reduced disparities, as evidenced in high-performing systems such as Singapore, whereas decentralized or under-resourced systems exacerbate structural inequities. Moreover, digital access and institutional capacity emerge as critical factors influencing educational trajectories. The study underscores that addressing inequality requires systemic reforms integrating governance coordination, progressive financing, institutional strengthening, and equity-focused interventions. By foregrounding structural determinants and cross-national variation, this research contributes to theoretical and policy debates on educational equity, providing evidence-based guidance for ASEAN strategies aimed at achieving inclusive, high-quality education across diverse socio-economic and geographic contexts.

Keywords: Digital Access; Educational Equity; Governance Coordination; Socio-Economic Stratification; Structural Inequities

1. Introduction

Educational inequality remains a persistent challenge across Southeast Asia, despite significant economic growth and expanding access to schooling among ASEAN member states over the past decades (UNESCO, 2017). While aggregate indicators suggest improvements in enrollment and literacy rates, substantial disparities continue to exist across countries and within national education systems, particularly along socioeconomic, geographic, and institutional lines (World Bank, 2018). These disparities indicate that access alone is insufficient to ensure educational equity, as structural conditions embedded within education systems continue to shape unequal outcomes (Baker, 2014).

ASEAN countries exhibit wide variation in governance capacity, public education financing, decentralization policies, and institutional arrangements, all of which influence the distribution of educational opportunities (Bray & Thomas, 2014). Cross-national evidence suggests that structural determinants such as funding mechanisms, teacher allocation systems, curriculum governance, and accountability frameworks play a decisive role in reproducing or mitigating educational inequality (Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013). In many ASEAN contexts, policy reforms have prioritized efficiency and competitiveness, sometimes at the expense of equity-oriented interventions targeting marginalized populations (Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

Recent empirical research highlights that Southeast Asian education systems exhibit distinct and persistent patterns of inequality, even after decades of reform and investment. For example, analysis of higher education access across eight Southeast Asian countries reveals

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that economic advantage remains the strongest predictor of who enters tertiary education, with wealth-based gaps widening in younger cohorts, intersecting with gender and rural–urban differences that compound disadvantage for marginalized groups (Phyo & Ilie, 2025). Such findings demonstrate that structural forces within national education systems policy frameworks, financial mechanisms, resource distribution, and institutional cultures operate in ways that can systematically reproduce inequality. These structural determinants are thus central to understanding why equitable educational opportunities remain elusive despite formal commitments to inclusive policy goals.

Table 1. Percentage Scores of Educational Access by Level in Selected ASEAN Countries (2018–2023)

Country	Year	Primary Education Access (%)	Lower Secondary Access (%)	Upper Secondary Access (%)	Tertiary Education Access (%)
Singapore	2018	99.0	98.5	97.8	94.6
	2020	99.1	98.7	98.1	96.2
	2023	99.2	99.0	98.5	98.0
Indonesia	2018	96.9	79.4	60.2	36.3
	2020	97.1	81.2	62.5	38.1
	2023	97.9	83.6	65.4	41.2
Cambodia	2018	85.6	45.3	28.9	13.1
	2020	86.2	47.6	31.4	14.5
	2023	86.8	49.8	34.2	16.2

Source: Processed by author from UNESCO Institute Statistics, Data Centre (2018–2023)

Moreover, emerging evidence underscores that digital inequality is a critical and under-examined structural determinant of educational disparities at the school level. A recent study from Thailand shows that inequitable access to and usage of digital technologies significantly influences student learning outcomes, with basic access alone insufficient to improve achievement when socioeconomic status is accounted for (KC et al., 2025). This points to the nuanced ways in which policy emphasis on hardware provision without corresponding investments in pedagogical integration, teacher capacity, and quality digital infrastructure may reinforce rather than mitigate existing inequalities.

Moreover, historical legacies, political economies, and regional integration processes contribute to differentiated policy responses to inequality across ASEAN education systems (Green, 2013). Comparative education research emphasizes that national policy choices are shaped not only by domestic constraints but also by global policy discourses and regional cooperation agendas, including ASEAN’s commitment to human capital development (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). However, existing studies tend to focus on individual country cases, leaving a gap in systematic cross-national analyses that critically examine how structural policy configurations generate educational disparities across the region (Welch, 2011).

Understanding educational inequality in ASEAN therefore requires a comparative policy lens that moves beyond outcome indicators to interrogate the structural foundations of education systems (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). By examining how institutional arrangements, governance structures, and policy priorities interact across national contexts, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the structural determinants underpinning educational disparities in ASEAN member states (Marginson, 2016). Such an analysis is essential for informing equity-oriented policy reforms and advancing regional educational development in line with global commitments to inclusive and quality education for all (United Nations, 2015).

2. Literature Review

Educational inequality is increasingly understood as a structural phenomenon rooted in systemic arrangements rather than as a consequence of individual ability or effort (UNESCO, 2021). Contemporary education research emphasizes that disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes are embedded within institutional frameworks that shape opportunity distribution across social groups (OECD, 2022). Structural inequality theory posits that education systems often reproduce existing social hierarchies through unequal allocation of resources, differentiated school quality, and stratified progression pathways (Marginson, 2020).

Recent global analyses demonstrate that expansion of education systems does not necessarily lead to equity when underlying structural constraints remain unaddressed (World Bank, 2023). In many low- and middle-income contexts, including ASEAN countries, improvements in enrollment coexist with persistent gaps in completion and achievement,

indicating systemic rather than temporary inequities (UNESCO, 2023). These patterns suggest that inequality is frequently institutionalized through policy choices, governance mechanisms, and financing models that privilege certain populations over others (OECD, 2021).

The political economy of education framework conceptualizes education policy as the outcome of power relations among state actors, economic elites, and social groups operating within specific political and economic contexts (Verger et al., 2021). From this perspective, education systems are shaped by national development strategies, labor market demands, and fiscal priorities that influence policy design and implementation capacity (World Bank, 2022). Education policies are therefore not neutral instruments but reflect negotiated compromises that often favor efficiency and competitiveness over redistribution and equity (Verger et al., 2021).

In the ASEAN region, education reforms are frequently aligned with economic growth agendas and human capital development strategies aimed at enhancing global competitiveness (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). While such orientations have contributed to system expansion, they may marginalize equity-focused interventions for rural populations, ethnic minorities, and low-income households (UNESCO, 2022). Empirical evidence indicates that market-oriented reforms, cost-sharing mechanisms, and privatization trends can exacerbate educational stratification when not accompanied by strong redistributive policies (OECD, 2022).

Institutional theory emphasizes the role of formal rules, organizational norms, and governance arrangements in shaping education system performance and outcomes over time (North, 2020). Education systems operate within institutional configurations that determine how resources are allocated, how accountability is enforced, and how reforms are translated into practice (Hall & Taylor, 2021). These institutional arrangements often exhibit path dependency, whereby historical policy choices constrain contemporary reform options and perpetuate existing inequalities (Mahoney & Thelen, 2020).

ASEAN education systems display substantial institutional variation, particularly in levels of centralization, decentralization, and local fiscal autonomy (OECD, 2021). Research shows that decentralized systems may exacerbate disparities when local governments lack the capacity or resources to implement national education policies effectively (World Bank, 2023). Conversely, highly centralized systems may achieve uniform standards but fail to address localized inequities, underscoring the importance of institutional balance in promoting equity (UNESCO, 2021).

Social reproduction theory explains how education systems contribute to the persistence of social inequality by privileging the cultural capital, language practices, and social norms of dominant groups (Bourdieu, 2020). Schools function as sites where existing social structures are legitimized and transmitted across generations, often under the guise of meritocracy (Reay, 2021). As a result, students from marginalized backgrounds face systemic disadvantages that are not resolved by formal access to schooling alone (OECD, 2022).

Recent studies highlight that mechanisms of social reproduction operate through curriculum design, assessment practices, tracking systems, and language of instruction (UNESCO, 2023). In ASEAN countries characterized by linguistic diversity, rural–urban divides, and income inequality, these mechanisms disproportionately disadvantage learners from peripheral regions and minority communities (World Bank, 2022). Educational disparities thus reflect broader patterns of social stratification rather than differences in individual capability or motivation (Reay, 2021).

Comparative education theory underscores the value of cross-national analysis for identifying systemic patterns and policy mechanisms that shape educational inequality across contexts (Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2020). Rather than treating education systems as isolated entities, comparative approaches situate them within regional and global policy environments influenced by international organizations and policy diffusion processes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). This perspective enables scholars to distinguish between context-specific challenges and structural determinants that transcend national boundaries (Bray et al., 2020).

In the ASEAN context, cross-national comparison is particularly relevant due to shared regional commitments to education development alongside significant variation in economic capacity and governance quality (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Comparative policy analysis allows for the identification of institutional configurations associated with more equitable outcomes, offering insights into how governance structures, financing models, and accountability

mechanisms influence disparity levels (OECD, 2023). Such analyses contribute to evidence-based policymaking aimed at reducing structural inequality across education systems (UNESCO, 2025).

Building on these theoretical perspectives, structural determinants of educational disparities are conceptualized as interacting system-level factors that shape educational opportunity distribution (Marginson, 2020). These determinants include governance structures, public financing mechanisms, institutional capacity, policy coherence, and broader socio-economic stratification (World Bank, 2023). Empirical research demonstrates that disparities emerge when these structural elements interact in ways that systematically disadvantage certain populations across educational transitions (OECD, 2022).

This integrative framework moves beyond outcome-based indicators to examine how education systems structurally produce inequality through policy design and institutional practice (UNESCO, 2023). By synthesizing political economy, institutional, social reproduction, and comparative education theories, this study provides a comprehensive analytical foundation for examining educational disparities in ASEAN (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021).

This study advances the literature by integrating multiple theoretical traditions into a unified framework for analyzing educational disparities in ASEAN, a region that remains underexplored in comparative education research. Unlike prior studies that emphasize single-country analyses or descriptive indicators, this research foregrounds structural determinants at the system level through cross-national policy comparison. In doing so, it contributes to theoretical and empirical debates on how education systems reproduce or mitigate inequality in middle-income and developing regions.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design with a primary emphasis on comparative policy analysis to examine the structural determinants of educational disparities across ASEAN member states (Creswell & Clark, 2018). A cross-national comparative approach is employed to systematically analyze similarities and differences in education system structures, governance arrangements, and policy frameworks across multiple national contexts (Bray et al., 2020). This design is particularly appropriate for investigating system-level inequality, as it enables the integration of macro-level quantitative indicators with in-depth qualitative policy analysis (Ragin, 2014).

A cross-national comparative approach is systematically applied to analyze similarities and differences in education system structures, governance arrangements, and policy frameworks across ASEAN countries. This includes examination of institutional configurations, degrees of centralization or decentralization in education governance, and policy orientations related to access, financing, quality assurance, and equity. Comparative analysis across multiple national contexts enables the identification of both shared regional patterns and country-specific institutional characteristics that influence the distribution of educational opportunities and outcomes (Bray et al., 2020).

The research design is particularly well suited to the analysis of system-level educational inequality, as it integrates macro-level quantitative indicators with in-depth qualitative policy analysis. Quantitative data, such as participation rates, public education expenditure, teacher-student ratios, and learning outcomes, are used to map the scale and patterns of educational disparities across countries. These indicators are then interpreted through qualitative analysis of national policy documents, legal frameworks, and strategic plans to understand how policy choices and institutional arrangements shape educational access and quality. This integrative approach allows for a more nuanced and context-sensitive explanation of cross-national disparities than either method alone (Ragin, 2014).

The study is grounded in a critical interpretive paradigm, which views education policy as socially constructed and shaped by power relations, institutional constraints, and political-economic contexts (Diem et al., 2020). This paradigm allows the research to move beyond descriptive comparison toward critical explanation of how structural conditions embedded within education systems produce persistent disparities (Verger et al., 2021).

4. Results and Discussion

This discussion section synthesizes quantitative cross-national evidence and qualitative policy analysis to examine how structural features of education systems shape persistent inequalities in educational access across ASEAN member states. Rather than treating disparities in enrollment and participation as isolated or country-specific outcomes, the discussion situates these patterns within a broader comparative and theoretical framework that emphasizes systemic, institutional, and political-economic determinants. By integrating macro-level indicators with interpretive analysis of governance arrangements, financing models, and institutional capacity, this section seeks to explain not only where educational inequalities occur, but how and why they are reproduced across successive educational transitions.

The discussion is organized thematically to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of educational inequality in ASEAN. It begins by analyzing cross-national patterns of educational access and vertical stratification, highlighting how disparities intensify at secondary and tertiary levels despite near-universal primary enrollment. It then examines governance structures, financing mechanisms, and institutional arrangements as core structural determinants that mediate policy implementation and shape student trajectories. Finally, the discussion integrates these dimensions to demonstrate how institutional capacity, social stratification, and policy configurations interact to produce cumulative and persistent inequities across national contexts.

Anchored in structural inequality, institutional, and political economy perspectives, this discussion moves beyond descriptive comparison toward critical explanation. In doing so, it underscores the importance of system-level analysis for understanding educational inequality in ASEAN and provides an analytical foundation for identifying policy levers capable of promoting more equitable access, retention, and progression across all levels of education.

Cross-National Patterns of Educational Access Disparities in ASEAN

The quantitative analysis of enrollment and access indicators across ASEAN member states reveals a persistent and multi-layered pattern of vertical inequality in educational participation, characterized by progressively diminishing access rates as students advance through successive levels of education (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Although most ASEAN countries have made significant strides in achieving near-universal enrollment at the primary level a reflection of both national policy commitments and international initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals this initial success masks systemic disparities that emerge at higher levels of education. Secondary and tertiary education, in particular, exhibit pronounced attrition, with lower-income countries such as Cambodia, Lao PDR, and the Philippines experiencing the most severe gaps in student progression. For instance, tertiary enrollment in Cambodia remains persistently below 20%, in stark contrast to Singapore, which maintains near-universal participation across all education levels (OECD, 2023). This divergence underscores the uneven distribution of educational opportunity within the region and highlights the interaction between national development capacity, resource allocation, and policy prioritization.

The observed pattern of attrition indicates that educational inequality in ASEAN is not merely a matter of access at the entry point, but rather a structural phenomenon that systematically constrains student progression and retention across educational transitions (Marginson, 2020). Several interrelated factors contribute to these vertical disparities. First, secondary school capacity remains limited in many lower-income nations, with insufficient infrastructure, teaching staff, and facilities to accommodate the growing population of primary school graduates. Second, financial barriers, including tuition, ancillary costs, and opportunity costs, disproportionately affect students from low-income and rural households, thereby inhibiting their continued participation in higher education. Third, there exist insufficient pathways and support mechanisms for marginalized students, including ethnic minorities and those residing in geographically isolated areas, which reduces the likelihood of successful progression from primary to secondary and tertiary levels.

Longitudinal data covering 2018–2023 indicate only incremental improvements in secondary and tertiary access, suggesting that policy interventions focusing predominantly on enrollment expansion at the primary level have been insufficient to address deeper structural inequities (UNESCO, 2023). For example, while primary enrollment rates have plateaued near

universal levels, secondary completion and tertiary entry rates continue to lag, revealing persistent structural bottlenecks that constrain the effectiveness of educational policies. This trend implies that policy attention disproportionately directed at initial access may inadvertently obscure the more complex challenges associated with retention, quality, and equitable progression.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings resonate with the structural inequality framework, which posits that disparities in educational outcomes are embedded within the institutional design, governance arrangements, and operational mechanisms of education systems rather than being isolated or transient phenomena (OECD, 2022; Verger et al., 2021). In this view, vertical disparities are the cumulative result of systemic factors including governance capacity, financing models, institutional effectiveness, and socio-economic stratification that interact to reproduce inequality across educational transitions. In the ASEAN context, the persistence of these disparities emphasizes the critical need to analyze educational inequality across multiple levels and transitions, rather than relying solely on gross enrollment statistics at a single stage. Such a multi-level perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of how structural barriers ranging from policy implementation gaps to localized socio-economic constraints collectively shape the trajectories of students and perpetuate intergenerational inequities.

Furthermore, the data suggest that cross-national comparisons are essential to identify patterns of structural advantage and disadvantage. High-performing systems, such as Singapore, demonstrate how integrated governance, equitable resource allocation, and targeted support mechanisms can mitigate vertical disparities, whereas countries with fragmented governance and limited public investment face persistent attrition at higher education levels. Consequently, these findings not only highlight the structural nature of educational inequality in ASEAN but also provide a framework for understanding the mechanisms through which systemic factors influence educational trajectories across different national and regional contexts.

Governance Structures and Institutional Arrangements

The analysis indicates that governance arrangements constitute one of the most critical structural determinants influencing the distribution of educational opportunities across populations in ASEAN. Cross-national comparisons reveal that countries with strong central coordination, clearly articulated accountability mechanisms, and robust monitoring systems such as Singapore consistently achieve high and relatively equitable access rates across all levels of education, from primary to tertiary (OECD, 2023). In these systems, central oversight ensures not only uniform implementation of curricula and standards but also strategic allocation of resources that prioritizes underserved regions, thereby minimizing sub-national disparities. This centralized model allows for coherent policy planning, consistent teacher training standards, and systematic evaluation of school performance, creating a more predictable and equitable education trajectory for all students.

In contrast, countries with highly decentralized governance structures, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Lao PDR, display significant variation in educational access and quality across regions (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Decentralization, while intended to promote local responsiveness and community engagement, often results in uneven distribution of resources, fragmented implementation of national education policies, and differential quality of service provision. For example, wealthier or more urbanized provinces are able to allocate local funds more effectively to infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and student support programs, whereas resource-constrained rural regions struggle to maintain even basic service provision. These disparities manifest in higher dropout rates, delayed school openings, shortages of qualified teachers, and limited access to tertiary preparatory programs, creating cumulative disadvantages for students in marginalized areas.

Institutional theory offers a robust framework for interpreting these patterns. Governance structures fundamentally shape the capacity of education systems to translate policy into practice, coordinate funding streams, and maintain quality standards across geographically and socio-economically diverse regions (Hall & Taylor, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2020). The findings suggest that decentralization without complementary institutional capacity-building can inadvertently exacerbate educational inequality, as local authorities in low-capacity regions lack the managerial expertise, fiscal autonomy, and logistical support necessary to implement

national directives effectively (OECD, 2022). Consequently, governance arrangements are not merely administrative instruments but structural determinants that directly influence student trajectories and long-term equity outcomes.

Moreover, the complexity of governance interacts with broader socio-economic disparities, producing compounded disadvantages for marginalized populations. Rural communities with limited fiscal autonomy often face structural barriers such as insufficient school facilities, higher student-teacher ratios, and constrained access to secondary and tertiary preparatory programs. These structural disadvantages interact with household-level socio-economic factors such as income, parental education, and labor market pressures to reinforce existing inequities. In effect, the design and functionality of governance systems mediate the relationship between national education policies and local outcomes, shaping who has access to quality education and who is systematically excluded.

This analysis underscores that governance is a core structural determinant of educational inequality in ASEAN. Effective governance structures integrate central oversight with local responsiveness, supported by institutional capacity-building, strategic resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms that ensure equitable outcomes. Conversely, fragmented or under-resourced governance arrangements generate systemic disparities that persist across educational transitions, reinforcing intergenerational inequality and constraining social mobility (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, addressing governance-related structural barriers is essential for designing policies that not only expand access but also ensure equitable participation and progression across all levels of education.

Financing Models and Equity Implications

Financing mechanisms emerge as one of the most fundamental structural determinants of educational inequality in ASEAN, influencing both access and progression across all education levels. Comparative data indicate that countries relying heavily on household contributions or privatized schooling such as the Philippines and Indonesia tend to exhibit significantly wider gaps in secondary and tertiary enrollment compared to systems that maintain sustained, progressive public investment, such as Singapore and Viet Nam (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). In these household-dependent systems, the direct costs of education, including tuition fees, examination and enrollment charges, and associated ancillary costs, impose substantial financial burdens on families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Beyond direct costs, opportunity costs, such as the loss of potential income when children remain in school rather than entering the labor market, further exacerbate attrition, especially at secondary and tertiary levels. This multidimensional financial burden systematically restricts retention and limits progression, reinforcing socio-economic disparities in educational outcomes.

A political economy perspective provides critical insight into how these financing arrangements perpetuate structural inequality. Policies that emphasize market-oriented reforms, cost-sharing mechanisms, and privatization are often aligned with broader national economic objectives, such as enhancing labor market competitiveness and attracting private investment in education. However, these policies can undermine equity goals if not complemented by redistributive interventions (Verger et al., 2021). Empirical data illustrate this dynamic in Indonesia, where tertiary access rose modestly from 36% in 2018 to 41% in 2023, yet the urban-rural divide remains stark. Rural students face both financial barriers and limited access to higher education institutions, highlighting how inequitable distribution of educational infrastructure interacts with household financing burdens to reproduce inequality across geographic and socio-economic lines (OECD, 2023). Similarly, in the Philippines, disparities in private versus public schooling exacerbate regional inequalities, particularly in provinces with limited public provision, illustrating the compounded effects of financing structures and institutional distribution on student outcomes.

These patterns indicate that financing operates as a structural lever within education systems, shaping not only immediate access but also long-term educational trajectories. Equitable funding models characterized by progressive public investment, targeted scholarship schemes, and financial support for marginalized populations are essential to mitigate structural disparities. Without addressing these systemic financing gaps, policies focused solely on expanding enrollment at the primary or secondary levels are unlikely to produce meaningful equity outcomes. In essence, financial structures intersect with governance, institutional

capacity, and social stratification to either reinforce or mitigate educational inequality, underscoring the need for comprehensive, equity-oriented fiscal strategies as a central component of policy interventions (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023; Verger et al., 2021).

Moreover, the data suggest that financing disparities have cumulative effects over the educational lifecycle, meaning that early disadvantages caused by limited public support or high household costs can compound across secondary and tertiary levels, resulting in long-term socio-economic stratification. This reinforces the notion that addressing inequality requires structural reform of financing mechanisms, rather than ad hoc, stage-specific interventions, to ensure that systemic barriers do not persist across successive transitions in education.

Integrated Analysis of Institutional Capacity, Social Stratification, and Policy Configurations

The evidence from ASEAN member states indicates that educational disparities are structurally embedded, resulting from the interaction of institutional capacity, governance, financing mechanisms, and socio-economic stratification. Despite formal commitments to inclusive education, significant implementation gaps persist. Policy documents from 2018–2023 reveal comprehensive strategies aimed at equitable access, yet their translation into effective local practice is uneven (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Rural areas, minority communities, and low-income populations frequently encounter shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient learning materials, reinforcing persistent disparities (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Institutional theory suggests that these outcomes are shaped not only by resource availability but also by historical policy legacies, bureaucratic capacity, and administrative coherence (Mahoney & Thelen, 2020). In decentralized systems with limited institutional capacity, enforcement of national standards is inconsistent, resulting in variable teaching quality, assessment reliability, and student support, which exacerbate regional inequalities (OECD, 2022).

In parallel, social stratification interacts with these structural determinants, perpetuating educational inequities across generations. Students from low-income, rural, or minority backgrounds disproportionately experience early dropout, limited secondary completion, and restricted tertiary participation (Reay, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Mechanisms of stratification including selective tracking, culturally biased curricula, linguistic barriers, and uneven distribution of high-quality schools intersect with geographic and socio-economic constraints, further reducing educational opportunities for marginalized groups (OECD, 2022). In countries such as Lao PDR and Cambodia, rural students face compounded disadvantages arising from both systemic and socio-cultural factors, illustrating the interplay between structural constraints and social reproduction processes (Bourdieu, 2020; World Bank, 2023).

Comparative analysis highlights that policy configurations significantly influence outcomes. High-performing ASEAN systems integrate strong central coordination with effective local adaptation, sustained and equitable public financing, targeted interventions for marginalized populations, and comprehensive support across educational transitions (UNESCO, 2025; OECD, 2023). By contrast, systems with fragmented governance, reliance on private provision, and limited institutional capacity demonstrate persistent disparities, particularly in secondary and tertiary education (World Bank, 2023). These findings indicate that policy effectiveness is not determined by isolated interventions, but by the systemic alignment of governance, financing, and institutional mechanisms that collectively address structural barriers.

Integrating these insights, it becomes clear that high primary enrollment alone is insufficient to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Structural bottlenecks manifest at secondary and tertiary levels, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations and perpetuating intergenerational inequities (Marginson, 2020; Verger et al., 2021). System-level reforms encompassing governance coordination, equitable resource allocation, institutional capacity-building, and targeted equity interventions are essential to mitigate these disparities. Addressing educational inequality in ASEAN therefore requires policies that simultaneously tackle structural, institutional, and socio-economic determinants, rather than focusing narrowly on access metrics.

The implications for policy and research are manifold. ASEAN governments should prioritize reforms that enhance governance coherence, ensure equitable financing, and strengthen institutional capacity while implementing targeted support for disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2025). From a research perspective, cross-national comparative

approaches are critical for identifying systemic determinants of inequality and evaluating policy effectiveness beyond descriptive indicators (Bray et al., 2020). Theoretically, these findings underscore the value of integrating political economy, institutional, and social reproduction perspectives to explain structural educational disparities in middle-income and developing regions, offering a holistic framework for both analysis and policy design.

5. Comparison

This study demonstrates that educational inequality in ASEAN is a structurally embedded and cumulative phenomenon that intensifies across educational transitions rather than being resolved through expanded access alone. Despite near-universal primary enrollment in most member states, substantial attrition persists at secondary and tertiary levels, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries. These patterns indicate that inequality is not primarily a problem of entry into the education system, but of progression, retention, and completion shaped by systemic constraints.

The findings identify governance arrangements and financing models as central structural determinants of educational inequality. Education systems characterized by strong central coordination, coherent accountability mechanisms, and sustained public investment exhibit more equitable participation across all levels. In contrast, highly decentralized systems with limited institutional capacity and heavy reliance on household financing tend to reproduce regional and socio-economic disparities, particularly in secondary and tertiary education. Financial barriers, including direct and opportunity costs, disproportionately constrain students from low-income, rural, and marginalized backgrounds, producing cumulative disadvantages over the educational lifecycle.

Importantly, the study shows that institutional capacity, social stratification, and policy configurations interact synergistically to shape educational outcomes. Formal commitments to equity are insufficient when implementation capacity is weak and governance structures are fragmented. Cross-national comparison further reveals that policy effectiveness depends on systemic alignment rather than isolated interventions, with high-performing ASEAN systems combining governance coherence, equitable financing, and targeted support across educational transitions.

The novelty of this study lies in its system-level, cross-national, and theoretically integrated analysis of educational inequality in ASEAN. Unlike existing research that emphasizes single-country cases or static enrollment indicators, this study conceptualizes inequality as a dynamic process reproduced across educational transitions. By integrating structural inequality theory, political economy, institutional theory, and social reproduction perspectives within a comparative mixed-methods framework, the study offers a more comprehensive explanation of how education systems structurally produce inequality.

Empirically, the research contributes original comparative evidence from ASEAN, a region that remains underexamined in global education scholarship despite its shared policy commitments and substantial institutional variation. Conceptually, it advances the literature by shifting analytical focus from access-oriented metrics to transition-based structural inequality, providing a robust framework for future comparative research and equity-oriented policy design in middle-income and developing contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educational inequality in ASEAN is a structurally embedded and multi-dimensional phenomenon, persisting despite decades of economic growth, policy reforms, and near-universal primary enrolment. The analysis reveals that disparities are not solely a function of access at the entry point, but rather emerge and accumulate through successive educational transitions, with secondary and tertiary levels exhibiting pronounced attrition, particularly among marginalized populations in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and the Philippines.

Several structural determinants operate interactively to reproduce these inequities. Governance arrangements play a critical role: centralized and coordinated systems, exemplified by Singapore, achieve higher and more equitable access across education levels, while decentralized systems with limited institutional capacity experience uneven implementation and regional disparities. Financing mechanisms further exacerbate inequality, as reliance on

household contributions and privatized schooling disproportionately affects low-income and rural students, limiting retention and progression.

Moreover, institutional capacity including policy coherence, operational management, and monitoring systems is essential for translating policy commitments into tangible improvements. Implementation gaps, particularly in rural and resource-constrained regions, highlight that inequality is not merely due to resource scarcity but also organizational inefficiencies and weak accountability structures. Social stratification interacts with these structural factors, reproducing disadvantage through mechanisms such as selective tracking, linguistically and culturally biased curricula, and uneven distribution of high-quality schools.

Comparative policy analysis confirms that systemic alignment of governance, financing, and institutional arrangements is key to mitigating disparities. High-performing ASEAN systems integrate centralized oversight with local adaptation, equitable funding, targeted interventions for marginalized populations, and structured support across educational transitions. In contrast, fragmented governance, weak institutional capacity, and market-oriented financing exacerbate vertical inequalities, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that addressing educational inequality requires a multi-level, structural approach, moving beyond simple enrollment expansion toward policies that strengthen institutional capacity, ensure equitable financing, and explicitly target socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The study contributes to theoretical and empirical debates by integrating political economy, institutional, social reproduction, and comparative education frameworks, offering a holistic perspective on how ASEAN education systems reproduce or mitigate inequality.

From a research perspective, future studies should employ multi-level, cross-national comparative frameworks to examine how structural determinants interact across ASEAN contexts, moving beyond descriptive enrollment indicators toward analysis of policy effectiveness and institutional capacity. Research on digital and technological equity is increasingly important, focusing not only on access to technology but also on pedagogical integration and teacher capacity, as digital disparities significantly impact learning outcomes and educational progression. Longitudinal research tracking student cohorts across multiple education levels is necessary to understand how governance, financing, and social stratification cumulatively influence educational trajectories and intergenerational inequality. Policy impact evaluation is also crucial to assess the effectiveness of equity-oriented interventions, such as progressive funding schemes, targeted scholarships, and governance reforms, providing evidence-based guidance for regional education strategies.

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