

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN THAILAND: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

Piyathida Wongsuwan & Piyawadee Makpa

*First & Corresponding author

Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand,
(firstfrinks@gmail.com, piyawadee@g.swu.ac.th)

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyse educational inequality in Thailand from a structural perspective, linking the analysis to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, with particular emphasis on SDG 4: Quality and equitable education. The study employs a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, drawing on selected Thai- and English-language academic articles that met predefined inclusion criteria. The review synthesises the current situation, structural determinants, and impacts of educational inequality in Thailand, and compares these findings with international trends. The synthesis reveals that educational inequality in Thailand is the outcome of multiple, overlapping structural factors, including family socioeconomic status, spatial disparities, the quality of schools and teachers, the digital divide, and the lack of comprehensive social protection systems. Vulnerable learner groups- such as children from low-income households, children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, and students in rural areas- are disproportionately and persistently affected. Such inequalities extend beyond academic achievement, generating systemic consequences in economic, social, and health dimensions. These dynamics contribute to the intergenerational reproduction of inequality and undermine the country's long-term human development potential. The article proposes strategies to reduce educational inequality within the SDG 4 framework, emphasising system-level reforms. These include equitable resource allocation, teacher development and school quality in disadvantaged areas, narrowing the digital divide, and providing integrated support for vulnerable learners. Collectively, these measures are essential for enhancing human quality of life and advancing Thailand's long-term sustainable development.

Keywords : *inequality; education; SDGs 4; educational equity.*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, the world is confronting severe educational inequality, particularly the disparities between developed and developing countries. Structural factors-such as wealth, educational background, and access to basic services-constitute the primary drivers of inequality, rather than individual behaviour or learners' abilities. Studies from sub-Saharan Africa indicate that inequalities in health and education are almost entirely attributable to structural factors, constituting what is described as "illegitimate inequality," often closely linked to family socioeconomic status from early childhood (Structural Drivers of Health Inequality, 2023). This trend reflects a global reality in which inequality is not confined to specific regions but represents a shared structural challenge faced by many countries worldwide.

Overall, Thailand and the global community are confronting the same fundamental challenge: deeply entrenched educational inequality rooted in structural conditions rather than individual learner capacity. A global perspective reveals that Thailand is not facing this problem in isolation; it is part of a broader international structural issue that requires comprehensive, integrated solutions. Nevertheless, education holds genuine potential as a key determinant of human quality of life when it is designed on an equitable basis. A substantial body of research confirms that high-quality and equitable education can reduce poverty, expand social opportunities, and cultivate citizens capable of driving social development. Structural reform is therefore a critical pathway for Thailand to escape the inequality trap and advance toward sustainable human development in line with the SDGs.

Thailand itself is an integral part of this global phenomenon. The country's educational inequality mirrors patterns observed in many developing nations, where economic and spatial disparities lead to unequal educational opportunities. Urban schools tend to possess greater resources than rural schools, while schools in highland areas and ethnic communities face persistent shortages of teachers and learning materials, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers (Phra Udombandit & Kwanchanok Laosasunthorn, 2024). As a result, children in remote areas often begin their educational journeys at a disadvantage, regardless of their individual potential. Family background is also a critical variable. Numerous Thai studies indicate that household income levels and social capital significantly influence academic achievement and access to further education (Napaphat Bannakarn, 2018). Families with greater economic resources are better able to invest in their children's education, such as providing books, private tutoring, or digital learning tools, whereas low-income families must prioritise basic livelihood concerns over education. This dynamic widens opportunity gaps from an early age. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand has experienced an intensified digital divide. The shift to online learning became a catalyst that further disadvantaged children from low-income households, who often lacked adequate devices and internet access (Chattawat Chatchanathaphat, 2021). This pattern mirrors experiences in many low-

income countries worldwide, where severe “digital learning loss” has been widely documented. Consequently, educational inequality lies at the core of multiple Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. Reducing these disparities is therefore essential to enabling more inclusive and just development across societies worldwide (UNESCO).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Situation and Significance of Educational Inequality

Educational inequality remains one of the major global challenges, continuing to affect human quality of life and social development. Although many countries have made progress in their education systems in the twenty-first century, international evidence indicates that gaps in access to education and learning quality persist and are widening in many regions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. UNESCO reports that more than 258 million children and youth worldwide remain out of school, a figure that reflects structural constraints rather than individual learners’ deficiencies (UNESCO, 2020 GEM Report). Socioeconomic disparities continue to be a primary determinant of educational access; in countries with high levels of inequality, children from low-income families are several times less likely to enrol in secondary education than their more affluent peers. Beyond inequalities in access, disparities in learning quality represent another critical dimension of educational inequality. In many low-income countries, large numbers of children attend school but fail to achieve basic competencies—a phenomenon UNESCO describes as learning poverty. This crisis has intensified in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when education systems were forced to shift rapidly to online learning. As a result, the digital divide has expanded significantly, with children lacking devices or reliable internet access experiencing interrupted schooling or insufficient instructional time. The World Bank estimates that this disruption has led to a global decline in learning outcomes and may have long-term consequences extending over the next decade.

Education is a fundamental pillar of human development and a decisive factor shaping long-term quality of life. However, within the Thai context, educational inequality remains a deeply entrenched structural problem. Despite Thailand’s relatively high level of public investment in education compared to many countries in the region, disparities in educational opportunity and quality persist and tend to be reproduced across generations. This issue is closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4: Quality Education, which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all and to leave no one behind by 2030. A review of Thai research literature consistently indicates that Thailand continues to face substantial gaps in quality, access, resource readiness, and educational accessibility, placing the country far from achieving SDG 4 targets. Educational inequality is therefore a persistent

structural issue within Thailand's education system. Although compulsory education policies and opportunity expansion have been implemented at the policy level, empirical evidence demonstrates that economic disparities, geographic location, family background, and unequal distribution of school resources remain key factors preventing many children and youth from accessing quality education on an equitable basis (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2022). These structural inequalities have long-term implications for life opportunities, including economic prospects, workforce skills, quality of life, and overall well-being.

This study aims to analyse educational inequality in Thailand across multiple dimensions—namely, access, quality, and learning outcomes—through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals, with particular emphasis on SDG 4: Quality Education. It further examines the root causes of systemic inequality, including economic and social structures, poverty, the digital divide, spatial disparities, and inequities in learning environments. The synthesis of evidence from Thai and international research highlights that these factors compound educational and health inequalities among children and youth, particularly among vulnerable groups such as children from low-income households, children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, and students in rural areas. The article proposes system-level reform strategies aligned with SDG 4, including weighted budget allocation, teacher development, narrowing the digital divide, strengthening educational welfare systems, and fostering multisectoral collaboration to promote educational equity. Consistent with the National Education Plan (2017–2036), Thailand's educational vision is articulated as follows: “All Thai people shall receive quality education and lifelong learning, enjoy a good quality of life, and live in harmony with the philosophy of sufficiency economy and the changes of the twenty-first century.”

METHODOLOGY

The findings from the systematic literature review, conducted in accordance with Systematic Review guidelines, were derived from selected Thai- and English-language academic articles that met the predefined inclusion criteria. The literature search was conducted across international and national academic databases, including Scopus (Quartile 1–2 journals) and the Thai Journal Citation Index (TCI 1–2). Keywords related to inequality, education, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were used in the search. Eligible studies had to be experimental or quasi-experimental research or systematic reviews, and available in full text, published between 2018 and 2025.

Across the selected studies, educational inequality was consistently identified as a structural problem manifesting in both the Thai context and international settings. Although contextual details varied across countries, several common dimensions of inequality were evident, including socioeconomic status, geographic location, school quality, access to digital resources, and the extent of social protection available to

vulnerable learner groups. These shared structural characteristics underscore the systemic nature of educational inequality across diverse educational systems.

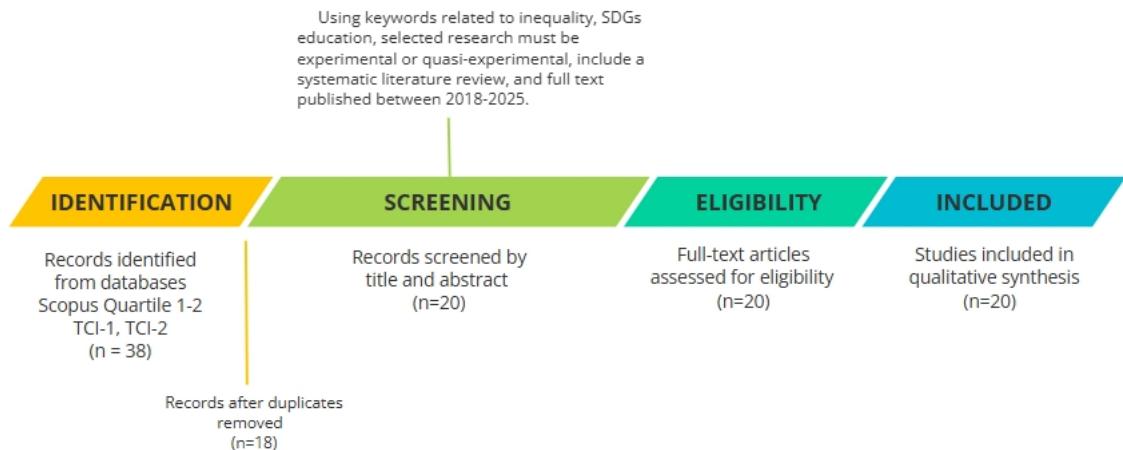


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the study selection process.

Dimensions of Educational Inequality

Table 1 presents the synthesised findings, which can be categorised into the following key dimensions.

Dimension of Inequality	Findings in Thailand	Findings in International Contexts	Common Synthesised Issues / Differences
Family Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Household income and social capital strongly determine educational opportunities, learning achievement, and access to further education; children from low-income families exhibit high dropout rates.	Social status and life security significantly affect academic performance and mental health.	Consistent across contexts: socioeconomic status is the fundamental root of educational inequality.
Spatial Inequality	Marked disparities between urban-rural areas, highland regions, and ethnic communities, with clear differences in school resources.	Spatial disparities are observed but are mitigated by welfare-state mechanisms in many countries.	Inequality is more severe in Thailand, particularly due to geography and ethnic factors.

Vulnerable Groups	Children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, and children from low-income families receive inadequate and uneven services.	Emphasis on special educational needs among learners from vulnerable households.	Consistent finding: vulnerable groups are systemically disadvantaged.
School and Teacher Quality	Small schools face shortages of teachers and instructional materials; many teachers also teach outside their areas of specialisation.	School quality is closely linked to area-level income and government policy.	Similar school patterns exist in both contexts, but the educational gap is wider in Thailand.
Digital Inequality	Lack of devices and internet access, particularly during the COVID-19 period.	Developed countries experienced less severe impacts.	Inequality in access, use, and outcomes of information and communication technologies acts as a key accelerator of educational gaps.
Mental Health and Well-being	Limited attention is given to mental health and well-being issues.	A major focus is particularly on housing security and overall well-being.	International studies address these issues in greater depth and priority than Thai studies.
Impact of COVID-19	Severe impacts on children from low-income and rural backgrounds.	Support systems were implemented, though not comprehensively.	Thailand experienced more severe impacts than many other countries.
Policy Approaches	Resource redistribution, teacher development, and reduction of the digital divide.	Equity-based policies and systematic monitoring and evaluation of SDG targets.	Shared policy goals, differing primarily in the intensity and effectiveness of implementation.

(Source: Calculated by author, (2025).)

An analysis of the selected studies indicates that educational inequality encompasses multiple, interrelated dimensions that are systematically connected. Educational inequality can be understood as the outcome of overlapping structural factors operating at multiple levels, including economic structures, poverty, education financing systems, and state resource allocation mechanisms. Thai studies clearly demonstrate that family background and social capital are critical determinants shaping educational trajectories. In contrast, international research, particularly from Europe and

North America, highlights housing insecurity, mental health, and access to social welfare as key structural variables influencing long-term learning outcomes. Digital factors have emerged as another prominent structural dimension in the post-COVID-19 context. Both Thai and international studies consistently confirm that the digital divide functions as an “accelerator,” intensifying pre-existing inequalities, particularly among learners from low-income backgrounds.

ANALYSIS

A Comparative Analysis of Educational Inequality: Thailand and International Contexts

The findings from the systematic literature review conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines indicate that educational inequality in Thailand exhibits fundamental patterns consistent with global trends. In particular, socioeconomic status (SES) emerges prominently in both Thai and international research as a primary structural determinant shaping educational opportunities, learning outcomes, and learners' long-term life trajectories. Children and youth from low-income families or those with limited social capital tend to enter the education system with structural disadvantages. Consequently, educational inequality should not be understood as a result of individual differences in ability, but rather as a product of unequal social and economic contexts.

Research in both contexts further converges in highlighting vulnerable learner groups—including children from low-income households, children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, and learners living under conditions of life insecurity—as those least able to access quality education on an equitable basis. Although many countries have expanded educational access at the policy level, structural constraints, such as inadequate welfare systems, limited resource readiness, and insufficient mechanisms for individualised learner support, continue to reproduce educational inequality from early childhood into adulthood.

Digital inequality (the digital divide) is identified as a shared and significant factor in both Thai and international studies, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning became the dominant mode of educational delivery. Shortages of devices, technology, and digital infrastructure function not merely as technical barriers but as mechanisms that accelerate and amplify pre-existing learning gaps. As a result, learners from low-income families have experienced significantly higher levels of learning loss.

From a theoretical perspective, the reviewed studies support the concept of social reproduction, demonstrating that education systems in many countries, including Thailand, remain limited in their capacity to function as mechanisms for reducing inequality. Instead, educational systems often advantage learners who already possess greater economic and cultural capital, while those from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds face multiple, overlapping structural barriers. This situation underscores the strong systemic link between educational inequality and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), which is closely interconnected with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

From a comparative standpoint, educational inequality in Thailand appears more severe than in many countries in several context-specific dimensions:

First, spatial inequality, reflected in pronounced quality gaps between urban schools and rural schools, small schools, and schools in highland areas. Schools in these contexts often face persistent shortages of teachers, learning materials, and financial resources, placing students at a greater structural disadvantage than their urban counterparts. In contrast, many countries have partially mitigated spatial inequality through welfare-state mechanisms and equity-based resource allocation.

Second, inequality in school resources represents a deeply rooted structural problem in Thailand's education system. Budgetary and human resource allocation remains highly centralised and insufficiently responsive to the diverse needs of schools across different contexts. As a result, disparities in educational quality not only persist but tend to widen over time.

Third, the impact of COVID-19 **and the transition to online learning**, which affected Thailand more severely than many other countries due to pre-existing economic and digital inequalities. The abrupt shift to online learning disrupted educational continuity for many students, leading to widespread learning loss, particularly among learners from low-income households and rural areas.

Fourth, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural inequality constitutes a particularly pronounced and severe dimension in the Thai context. Ethnic minority children and students in highland areas face language barriers, curricula, and pedagogical approaches that are misaligned with their lived experiences and cultural contexts. These structural conditions significantly constrain their ability to access quality education on an equitable basis.

Structural Determinants of Educational Inequality in Thailand

Educational inequality in Thailand reflects broader social structures that shape human quality of life from early childhood. Children born into different families and geographic contexts are positioned on unequal educational trajectories from the outset. Numerous Thai studies indicate that disparities in household income and family social capital are critical factors leading to significant differences in academic achievement and educational opportunities (Napaphat Bannakarn, 2018). When families are unable to provide sufficient resources, such as time, learning materials, study space, or supplementary tutoring, children are more likely to fall behind their peers within a highly competitive education system.

Educational inequality is not generated solely at the family level, but is deeply embedded in spatial and institutional structures. Rural and highland schools face persistent shortages of teachers, learning materials, and supportive learning environments, resulting in consistently lower student achievement compared with urban schools (Phra Udombandit & Kwanchanok Laosasunthorn, 2024). Research further indicates that ethnic minority children encounter linguistic, cultural, and geographic barriers that function as structural constraints, limiting their access to education to a greater extent than other groups.

In addition, digital inequality has intensified as a critical issue, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to online learning prevented many children from low-income households from accessing adequate devices and internet connectivity, thereby widening pre-existing learning gaps (Chattawat Chatchanathaphat, 2021). In contrast, evidence from developed countries suggests that technological readiness is a key factor influencing disparities in learning outcomes (Educational Inequality: OECD vs. Non-OECD, 2023), underscoring the urgency for Thailand to accelerate digital investment in order to promote educational equity.

Mental health and life stability constitute another important dimension influencing educational inequality. Research from the United States demonstrates that children experiencing housing instability are at greater risk of anxiety and depression, which negatively affect concentration and academic performance (Investigating the Effects of Housing Instability, 2023). Unequal access to mental health services thus represents an additional mechanism through which vulnerable children are further excluded from the education system. This finding is consistent with regional-level analyses indicating that household wealth and parental educational attainment are structural determinants of both health and learning inequalities (Structural Drivers of Health Inequality, 2023).

When viewed through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), educational inequality extends beyond pedagogical concerns and is deeply interconnected with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). International studies suggest that when education is high-quality, equitable, and responsive to learners' contexts, it can enhance human quality of life, reduce long-term poverty, and promote overall well-being (SDG 3–Related Inequalities, 2021). Education thus holds strong potential as a mechanism for social mobility and improved life outcomes, provided that it is designed to be inclusive and free from structural barriers. A substantial body of research confirms that equitable education systems increase opportunities for disadvantaged children to develop their potential and enter quality employment. Consequently, equity-oriented investment in education represents an investment in human quality of life and forms a foundational pillar of a sustainable society. In alignment with the National Education Plan (2017–2036), Thailand's educational vision is articulated as follows: "All Thai people shall receive quality education and lifelong learning, enjoy a good quality of life, and live in accordance

with the philosophy of sufficiency economy and the transformations of the twenty-first century."

Impacts of Educational Inequality in Thailand

Educational inequality in Thailand is not merely a problem confined to the education sector; rather, it constitutes a structural issue that undermines human capital potential, constrains sustainable economic development, and increases long-term social costs. Its consequences extend beyond schooling to affect the country's economic performance, social cohesion, and overall well-being.

Economic Impacts

At the economic level, educational inequality results in a large segment of the Thai workforce lacking the skills required for a modern economy, particularly digital competencies, analytical thinking, and lifelong learning skills. As a result, workers from low-income households or rural areas are more likely to remain in the informal sector, receive low wages, and experience job insecurity. This situation reflects a "low-income trap" directly linked to educational attainment and limits Thailand's capacity to enhance labour productivity and national competitiveness in the long term.

Social Impacts

At the social level, educational inequality exacerbates unequal opportunities and social inequity. Children and youth from low-income families, remote areas, or ethnic minority groups often face constraints related to school quality, teacher availability, learning resources, and access to technology. Consequently, their chances of pursuing higher levels of education are substantially lower than those of students in urban areas or from more affluent households. As these individuals transition into adulthood, educational disparities translate into unequal employment opportunities, income levels, and social status, thereby reinforcing difficult-to-break cycles of intergenerational inequality.

Impacts on Well-being and Quality of Life

In terms of well-being and quality of life, educational inequality in Thailand is significantly associated with health disparities. Individuals with lower levels of education tend to have limited health literacy, reduced capacity for disease prevention, and poorer access to quality healthcare services. This increases their vulnerability to chronic illnesses, mental health problems, and life insecurity. At the systemic level, these outcomes contribute to rising public expenditures on healthcare and social welfare, as the state is compelled to allocate substantial resources to addressing downstream problems rather than investing in preventive strategies through equitable and high-quality education from the outset.

Strategies to Reduce Educational Inequality under the SDG 4 Framework

Educational inequality is a structural problem closely linked to socioeconomic status, spatial disparities, school resource systems, and the digital divide. Therefore, strategies to reduce educational inequality within the SDG 4: Quality Education framework must be integrated with other SDGs to achieve the greatest possible impact. The key approaches synthesised from the literature are outlined as follows:

Equity-Based Financing and Resource Allocation (Linked to SDG 4.1 and SDG 10)

Both Thai and international research consistently indicate that allocating equal resources to all schools is insufficient to reduce inequality effectively. Schools in disadvantaged contexts face higher educational costs due to teacher shortages, limited learning materials, and inadequate infrastructure. Budget allocation should therefore be weighted according to learner and area-specific contexts, such as poverty levels, geographic remoteness, and ethnic composition (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2022). In the Thai context, this approach aligns with recommendations from the Equitable Education Fund (EEF), which demonstrates that targeted subsidies can significantly reduce school dropout rates among children from low-income households.

Teacher Development and School Quality Improvement in Disadvantaged Areas (Linked to SDG 4.c)

Cross-mapping analysis reveals that inequalities in school and teacher quality are more pronounced in Thailand than in many other countries, particularly in small schools and those located in highland areas. Efforts to reduce inequality must therefore prioritise qualitative teacher development, rather than merely increasing teacher numbers. This includes strengthening competencies in inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction. International research indicates that teachers who can address learner diversity can effectively reduce achievement gaps (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). This is especially relevant for Thailand, where teachers must be equipped to understand learners' linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts.

Bridging the Digital Divide and Expanding Access to Learning Technologies (Linked to SDG 4.3 and SDG 9)

The literature review highlights the digital divide as a key factor that accelerates educational inequality, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period. Policy approaches should therefore conceptualise access to digital technology as a basic public service rather than a responsibility borne solely by households. Studies in developing countries show that investment in digital infrastructure, combined with the development of digital skills among teachers and learners, can significantly reduce learning loss and enhance

educational equity (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant to Thailand, which experienced severe disruptions during the shift to online learning.

Inclusive and Holistic Support for Vulnerable Learners (Linked to SDG 4.5, SDG 1, and SDG 3)

The synthesis indicates that vulnerable learner groups face not only educational barriers but also challenges related to mental health, life security, and access to basic welfare. Strategies to reduce inequality must therefore adopt an integrated approach that links education policy with social and health policies. International evidence suggests that combining educational support with interventions in nutrition, mental health, and social protection can improve student retention and long-term learning outcomes (BMJ Open, 2021; *The Lancet Global Health*, 2023). This approach is highly relevant for children from low-income households and ethnic minority communities in Thailand.

In summary, reducing educational inequality under the SDG 4 framework requires comprehensive structural interventions encompassing equitable resource allocation, teacher quality improvement, access to technology, integrated support for vulnerable learners, and policy alignment across multiple SDGs. Evidence from both Thai and international research confirms that equity-focused investment in education not only narrows learning gaps but also serves as a critical foundation for enhancing human quality of life and achieving long-term sustainable development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The issue of educational inequality in Thailand is not rooted in individual students but rather in unsupportive "social structures." The key issues can be summarised into four dimensions:

First, structural inequality. The findings clearly demonstrate that educational inequality in Thailand constitutes a deeply rooted structural problem sustained through social and institutional mechanisms, rather than being primarily the result of individual learners' abilities or efforts. This aligns with the theory of social reproduction, which posits that education systems play a central role in maintaining and reinforcing socioeconomic inequalities across generations. Both domestic and international research consistently confirms that family socioeconomic status is a fundamental determinant of educational opportunities, learning outcomes, and long-term life trajectories.

In the Thai context, spatial inequality and disparities in school resources are particularly severe when compared to many other countries. This is largely due to budget allocations and human resource management structures that fail to account for regional differences adequately. Rural, small, and highland schools face persistent shortages of teachers, learning materials, and supportive learning environments. As a result, students

in these areas begin their educational journeys with systemic disadvantages from the outset. Moreover, ethnic minority children encounter additional barriers related to language, culture, and geography—structural conditions that constrain equitable access to quality education and contribute to the continuous reproduction of inequality.

Second, digital Divide. The synthesis indicates that digital inequality functions as an accelerating force that significantly amplifies pre-existing educational disparities, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt transition to online learning exposed fundamental structural limitations within Thailand's education system. Many students from low-income households and rural areas were unable to access digital devices, reliable internet connections, or learning-conducive home environments, resulting in substantial learning loss.

International evidence suggests that countries with strong technological readiness, robust digital infrastructure, and comprehensive welfare systems were better able to mitigate the negative impacts of this crisis. In contrast, in Thailand, the digital divide has intensified the disadvantages faced by vulnerable learners, emerging as a new dimension of structural inequality that affects both educational access and long-term learning outcomes.

Third, ealth–Education Nexus. The findings further highlight a profound interconnection between educational inequality and health and quality-of-life outcomes. A substantial body of research indicates that individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health, as well as greater life insecurity. At the systemic level, this contributes to increased public health and social welfare burdens. Educational inequality, therefore, extends beyond academic achievement to become a critical determinant of long-term human well-being and capability.

This nexus illustrates that educational inequality is directly linked to multiple Sustainable Development Goals, not only SDG 4 (Quality Education), but also SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Treating education in isolation from health and quality of life represents a major limitation of past policy approaches and underscores the necessity of an integrated analytical framework that bridges education and well-being.

Fourth, Policy, Financing, and Governance. From a policy perspective, the findings clearly indicate that addressing educational inequality in Thailand cannot rely solely on quantitatively equal resource allocation. Instead, an equity-based approach is required—one that accounts for differences in geographic contexts, population groups, and levels of learner vulnerability. Structural reform must encompass budget allocation mechanisms, human resource management for education, teacher development in disadvantaged areas, and systematic efforts to close the digital divide.

Furthermore, support for vulnerable learners should be implemented through cross-sectoral integration, linking education policy with health and social welfare systems. This discussion reinforces that, if Thailand is to achieve SDG 4, educational

governance and accountability mechanisms genuinely must actively disrupt the reproduction of inequality. The education system must be repositioned as a central mechanism for enhancing human quality of life and advancing long-term sustainable development.

This article does not merely identify educational inequality through isolated dimensions; rather, it advances a systems-based understanding of educational inequality as a multidimensional, deeply interconnected problem closely linked to multiple Sustainable Development Goals. The synthesis clearly demonstrates that educational inequality cannot be fully explained through a fragmented lens, as it is fundamentally structural in nature—deeply embedded and operating through interlocking mechanisms that form a self-reinforcing cycle. Structural inequality functions as the starting point that shapes learners’ “unequal life chances” from an early stage. Family socioeconomic status, residential location, and the capacity of educational institutions to provide resources play a decisive role in shaping educational opportunities and long-term life trajectories. Learners who begin from disadvantaged contexts therefore, face systemic constraints that are difficult to overcome and remain highly vulnerable to the continuous reproduction of inequality.

Building on these structural conditions, digital inequality operates as an accelerator, intensifying and rapidly amplifying existing disadvantages, particularly in an era when learning is heavily dependent on digital technologies and during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and digital skills not only restricts access to learning opportunities, but also leads to cumulative learning loss and increases the long-term risk of dropping out of the education system. Digital inequality should therefore not be understood as a merely technical issue, but as a critical mechanism that reinforces and sustains structural educational inequality.

The impacts of educational inequality extend far beyond academic achievement and accumulate across the life course, manifesting in disparities in health and overall quality of life. Individuals who lack educational opportunities are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health, as well as economic insecurity, reflecting the direct interconnections among education, health, and poverty. This cycle allows inequality to be transmitted from the learning phase into adulthood, ultimately becoming a structural burden on public health systems, social welfare provision, and national development as a whole.

When examined through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals, educational inequality does not affect SDG 4 alone. Rather, it is dynamically intertwined with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). If the education system continues to function as a mechanism that reproduces inequality, it will inevitably undermine a country’s capacity to achieve sustainable development in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

Nevertheless, this cycle of inequality is not inevitable. It is shaped and mediated by policy structures, budget allocation mechanisms, and the quality of educational governance. Conversely, if structural educational inequality can be addressed effectively—through equity-based resource allocation, the reduction of digital divides, and the integration of education, health, and social welfare policies—the education system can be transformed from a “reproducer of inequality” into a genuine “mechanism for inequality reduction.” Breaking this cycle not only enhances learners’ educational opportunities but also reduces long-term risks related to poor health, poverty, and vulnerability, thereby laying a critical foundation for sustainable development at the individual, societal, and national levels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational inequality in Thailand and at the international level has been widely discussed in terms of problem identification and associated factors. However, significant gaps remain in the analysis of structural mechanisms and cross-sectoral linkages, which substantially limit the potential to translate research findings into concrete and effective policy interventions.

The majority of studies converge on the view that educational inequality does not stem from learners’ individual abilities, but rather from the cumulative effects of structural factors such as family socioeconomic status, spatial inequality, school quality, and access to educational resources. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature continues to examine these factors in a fragmented manner, rather than adopting a systems-based perspective that explains how they interact in the process of the “reproduction of inequality.” Moreover, a large body of Thai research remains heavily focused on achievement-based outcomes, while paying comparatively limited attention to learners’ mental health, well-being, and overall quality of life. This stands in contrast to international research, which increasingly demonstrates that health and living conditions are critical variables linking educational inequality to long-term human capital outcomes.

From a policy perspective, although SDG 4 is frequently referenced, many studies still lack rigorous analysis of how budgetary structures, resource allocation mechanisms, and educational governance actually function to reduce—or, conversely, exacerbate—educational inequality in practice, particularly in developing country contexts such as Thailand. Consequently, the key research gap does not lie in a lack of awareness of educational inequality. Rather, it lies in an insufficient understanding of which structural drivers are most influential, which mechanisms sustain inequality over time, and how policies should be designed to disrupt the cycle of inequality reproduction effectively.

REFERENCES

Chatwat, C. (2021). The new normal in education and increasing educational inequality [In Thai]. *Social Studies Review Journal*, 47(2), 1–15.

Napaphat, B. (2018). Educational inequality among students with special needs in schools under the Office of the Basic Education Commission [Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University]. Chulalongkorn University.

Phra Udom Bundit, & Laosasunthorn, K. (2024). Educational inequality among ethnic youth in highland areas [In Thai]. *MCU Journal of Social Development*, 9(1), 45–62.

Watthanachai, K., & Ngampiriyakon, K. (2022). Social class, social reproduction, and educational inequality in Thai society [In Thai]. *Journal of Research for Learning Reform*, 5(2), 23–41.

Björklund, A., & Jäntti, M. (2023). Educational inequality: A country-level comparison between OECD and non-OECD countries. *Sociology of Education*, 96(2), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407231123456>

Coley, R. L., Leventhal, T., Lynch, A. D., & Kull, M. (2023). Investigating the effects of housing instability on depression, anxiety, and mental health treatment in childhood and adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 72(4), 512–520. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.12.009>

Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., et al. (2021). Meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals for mental health: Why greater prioritization and adequately tracking progress are critical. *BMJ Open*, 11(3), e045272. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-045272>

UNESCO. (2021). Promoting inclusion and diversity: Pathways to preparing future teachers. UNESCO Publishing.

Rahman, A., Riaz, N., & Hossain, M. (2022). Socio-economic inequities in mental health problems and wellbeing among women working in the apparel and floriculture sectors: Testing the mediating role of psychological capital and social support. *BMJ Open*, 12(6), e058935. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-058935>

Hosseinpoor, A. R., Bergen, N., Schlotheuber, A., et al. (2023). Structural drivers of health inequality in sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence and policy implications. *The Lancet Global Health*, 11(4), e620–e631. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(23\)00045-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(23)00045-8)

How to cite this article (APA)

Wongsuwan, P.& Makpa, P. (2025). Educational inequality in Thailand: A structural analysis within the framework of the ustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *VISITSILP-Journal of Arts and Culture*, 2(2), 2025, 37-53

Date received: 27 November 2025

Date accepted: 30 December 2025