

INEQUALITIES IN VIETNAM'S GENERAL EDUCATION:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL PRACTICES

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Summary

Educational inequality in Vietnam has existed since the earliest stages of its history, influenced by each period's socio-political situation. Educational disparities in contemporary Vietnamese education system are often explained by socio-economic differences and ineffective policy implementation. However, few studies have examined how schooling processes contribute to specific types of educational inequality. This study addresses a central research question: "How do Vietnamese public schools generate educational inequalities?" by identifying and understanding the mechanisms of producing inequality currently present at both lower and upper secondary school levels. Specifically, the study examines official discourses on educational equality, analyzes how these institutional narratives influence educational practices at the organizational level (schools and classrooms), and understands the mechanisms that lead to educational inequality in opportunities and quality of learning.

Educational inequality has long been a classic research topic and one of the central focuses of the sociology of education. Dominant theories, typically represented by social-cultural reproduction theories, often locate the site of inequality production in families and social backgrounds. However, the institutional turn in educational inequality research, for example, the theory of categorical inequality and the perspective of institutional production, directs scientific attention to schools as active sites of inequality production. This theoretical perspective encourages examinations of the mechanisms, practices, and reasoning through which educational inequalities occur and become legitimized.

This study applies qualitative research, specifically the Constructivist Dispositive Approach, a combination of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) and Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). This approach enables connections to be drawn across macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis, showing how school practices are bound by institutional regulations and socio-economic contextuality. Interviews with teachers are the main source of data, supplemented by policy texts and online news articles. Theoretical sampling and self-reflexivity were applied during data collection. The concept of dispositive, as proposed by SKAD, functions as an analytical lens to analyze the broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts that shape and are shaped by discourses related to the issue of educational inequalities. Constant comparison and seeking processes by applying the technique of coding with gerunds were mainly used in data analysis, supported by doing relational mapping to identify contextual and structural elements.

The research findings first show how schools sort students into different types of classes and integrate students into school environments in different ways. Student classification forms one of the main operational features of schools, which works closely with teaching and other functional aspects of schools. More importantly, the research findings reveal the two main operational logic of inequality mechanisms in Vietnam's contemporary public school system: achievement-oriented logic and commodification. In an achievement-oriented education system, teaching underperforming students become superficial, and inequality in the quality of learning arises. For students with disabilities, learning inequality manifests itself in the form of (recognition and learning) invisibility. The growing commodification of general education generates socio-economic segregation among students inside schools, particularly in access to infrastructure, facilities, and learning programs. In addition, the findings also show a disjunction between official discourses on educational equality and inclusion and actual circumstances. Rather than fostering holistic development and inclusive education for all students, school practices tend to promote imbalanced student development and hidden exclusion and privatization. This study concludes that schools can function as active generators of educational inequalities, especially school operational aspects can be resonated with the socio-economic gaps of students to amplify unequal learning environment. The study highlights schools' situatedness, meaning how they function and generate inequality depends on educational policies, administrative management, and the state's welfare model. Inequality does not always stem from the actions of individual teachers, but from the institution of the school itself.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on educational inequalities, a paradigm of interconnected mechanisms that produce educational inequalities inside schools. Therefore, this study contributes to clarifying an important sociological argument regarding educational inequality: schools are active operators of educational inequalities. Methodologically, this study highlights the importance of qualitative sociological research in investigating educational inequality, particularly in understanding mechanisms. Constructivist Dispositive Approach is a methodological effort and potential for future research. In terms of practical application, this study invites the key stakeholders in Vietnam's general education system to reconsider, revisit and reconstruct the guiding logic that drives teaching and learning, and produces educational inequalities as consequences.