

Review of Teacher's World

Volume: 5 Issue:3 Year: 2026

ISSN: 2957-4145



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v5i3.rtw.5>

Review of Teacher's World

RESEARCH ARTICLE



OPEN ACCESS

Freely available online

Received: 2 May 2026

Accepted: 25 June 2026

Corresponding author:

*Rosy Jacob Gonsalves

¹Department of Sociology & Anthropology,

Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology
Dhaka, Bangladesh.

E-Mail:

rossy.gonsalves@gmail.com

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information

Cite this article as Gonsalves, R.J., Khan, S., & Farhana, K.M. (2026). Access and Inequality in Education: A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Rural and Urban Divides. Review of Teacher's World, 5(3), 1-15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v5i3.rtw.5>

Access and Inequality in Education: A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Rural and Urban Divides

Rosy Jacob Gonsalves^{1*}; Shahida Khan¹; Khandaker Mursheda Farhana¹

Abstract: Educational inequality across rural and urban contexts is deeply shaped by sociolinguistic hierarchies that privilege dominant language varieties while marginalising rural linguistic repertoires. This study examines how language functions as a structural determinant of educational access, employing a qualitative sociolinguistic framework rooted in Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital and contemporary theories of linguistic justice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis in two rural and two urban schools. Findings reveal that dominant language policies disproportionately benefit urban learners, whose linguistic resources align with institutional expectations, while rural students face misrecognition, restricted participation, and internalised linguistic stigma. Structural inequalities such as resource disparities and limited multilingual pedagogical support further compound rural disadvantage. The study argues that linguistic hierarchies reproduce broader patterns of social stratification, shaping learners' identities, confidence, and future aspirations. It concludes that equitable education requires context-sensitive multilingual policies, teacher training in inclusive pedagogies, and recognition of rural linguistic diversity as a legitimate resource. By foregrounding the sociolinguistic dimensions of rural-urban divides, the study contributes to global debates on educational justice and provides pathways toward more equitable language-in-education reforms.

Keywords: educational access, language hierarchies, linguistic diversity, rural education, sociolinguistic justice, social stratification

INTRODUCTION

Educational access has long been recognised as a foundational determinant of social mobility, economic advancement, and civic participation. Yet in many national contexts, access to high-quality education remains deeply uneven, shaped by entrenched structural inequalities linked to geography, socioeconomic status, language, and cultural background. While material disparities—such as school funding, teacher shortages, and infrastructural gaps—have received significant scholarly attention, a growing body of sociolinguistic research highlights that language is an equally powerful determinant of educational inequality (Bourdieu, 1991; Piller, 2016). Language not only mediates classroom communication and curriculum comprehension but also functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that regulates legitimacy, status, and future opportunity. As a result, rural–urban disparities in language practices, linguistic capital, and access to multilingual resources significantly shape educational trajectories.

Urban environments are typically characterised by exposure to dominant or official languages, linguistic heterogeneity, and the proliferation of digital and print media (Selwyn, 2016). These conditions contribute to what sociolinguists describe as linguistic capital-valued forms of language use that align with institutional expectations and socioeconomic power (Bourdieu, 1991). Urban students, due to their environment, often acquire these valued linguistic practices through daily interactions, schooling, and digital communication. This positions them

advantageously within the linguistic hierarchies embedded in educational and labour markets (Blommaert, 2010).

In contrast, rural students often grow up speaking local, indigenous, or non-standardised language varieties that differ markedly from the dominant languages used in schooling and assessment. This linguistic distance is frequently misinterpreted as a deficit rather than a reflection of rich cultural and linguistic diversity (Hornberger & McCarty, 2012). When educational systems privilege standardised or official languages—often those associated with colonial histories, national identity, or economic mobility—they inadvertently marginalise rural learners. Consequently, rural students frequently confront barriers to comprehension, limited participation in classroom dialogue, and lower academic achievement (Heugh, 2015).

These disparities are not merely pedagogical; they are deeply political. Language policies that enforce monolingual norms are frequently rooted in ideologies of nation-building and cultural homogeneity, privileging urban, educated, and elite linguistic practices while devaluing rural repertoires (Irvine & Gal, 2000). Such policies reinforce broader patterns of social stratification by disproportionately benefiting learners with access to linguistic capital, typically urban middle- and upper-class students (Piller, 2016). The rural–urban divide thus becomes a sociolinguistic divide, where access to quality education is mediated by a learner's proximity to dominant language practices.

Moreover, sociolinguistic inequality is amplified by disparities in digital literacy

and technological access. Urban students often engage more frequently with digital platforms that expose them to global linguistic norms, multimodal texts, and English-dominant online content (Selwyn, 2016). Rural learners, lacking comparable digital access, are doubly disadvantaged: they receive fewer opportunities to acquire dominant languages and are less able to participate in digital learning, an increasingly central component of educational participation, particularly in the post-pandemic era (UNESCO, 2022). Thus, linguistic inequality compounds digital inequality, further widening the gap between rural and urban learners.

This study investigates these issues by examining how sociolinguistic factors shape access to education across rural and urban contexts. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in sociolinguistic and sociological theory, the research analyses interviews, classroom observations, and educational documents to explore how language practices, teacher beliefs, linguistic ideologies, and institutional policies intersect to structure educational access. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

- How do linguistic hierarchies in schools shape learning experiences for rural and urban students?
- In what ways do teachers and administrators interpret and enforce language policies that affect access to learning?
- How do students perceive their own linguistic repertoires in relation to dominant educational expectations?

- What structural factors amplify or mitigate sociolinguistic inequality across rural and urban schools?

By foregrounding language as a central lens for understanding educational inequality, this study contributes to broader debates on linguistic rights, social justice, and equitable schooling. It challenges deficit-oriented perspectives that treat rural language practices as obstacles to learning and instead highlights how sociolinguistic diversity represents a rich resource for pedagogical innovation, if appropriately recognised and supported (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The study also argues that addressing rural–urban educational divides requires context-sensitive language policies, multilingual pedagogies, and community-driven approaches that respect rural linguistic identities.

In sum, the introduction positions the rural–urban educational divide not solely as a material disparity but also as a sociolinguistic structure in which language serves as both an index of inequality and a mechanism of exclusion. By analysing these dynamics empirically, this study aims to illuminate pathways toward educational systems that embrace linguistic diversity, foster equitable academic participation, and promote social mobility for all learners regardless of geographic context.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative sociolinguistic methodology to examine how language practices and linguistic hierarchies shape educational access across rural and urban learning environments. Qualitative

methods are well-suited to sociolinguistic inquiry because they allow researchers to capture the complexity of language use, identity, and power as they unfold in naturalistic contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The methodological design is informed by interpretivist epistemology, which emphasises understanding the meaning participants assign to their lived experiences.

Research Design

The study employed a multi-method qualitative design incorporating semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. This triangulation approach enhances credibility by enabling convergence of insights across different data sources (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' linguistic backgrounds, perceptions of language policy, classroom experiences, and beliefs about linguistic diversity. Because participants inhabited linguistically diverse settings, interviews were conducted in the language preferred by each participant, with translators supporting rural participants when necessary.

Classroom observations allowed for analysis of real-time language practices, teacher–student interactions, and the extent to which multilingualism was acknowledged, tolerated, discouraged, or supported. Observations focused on:

- instructional language use,
- correction practices,
- code-switching,

- student participation patterns,
- material availability (e.g., bilingual textbooks, multilingual posters).

Document analysis included school language policies, curriculum guides, administrative memos, and assessment tools. These documents provided insight into institutional language ideologies and the formal expectations placed upon teachers and students.

Research Sites and Sampling

The research was conducted across four schools, comprising two rural and two urban institutions, selected through maximum variation sampling to capture the widest possible differences in linguistic diversity, school resources, and socioeconomic environments. This approach ensured that the study reflected the complex realities of educational access across distinct geographical and sociolinguistic contexts.

The rural schools were situated in linguistically homogeneous communities where local languages shaped daily interaction and cultural life. These schools faced persistent structural challenges, including limited access to trained teachers, inadequate digital resources, and a shortage of multilingual teaching materials. Notably, instructional language practices often reflected the linguistic mismatch between teachers, many of whom were not native speakers of the local languages, and the student population. This discrepancy frequently created additional barriers to comprehension and participation for rural learners.

In contrast, the urban schools were located in linguistically diverse neighbourhoods influenced by patterns of labour migration, urbanisation, and social mobility. These environments offered students richer exposure to dominant national languages, English, and various heritage languages, fostering more complex multilingual repertoires. Urban schools also benefitted from comparatively stronger infrastructures, including greater availability of digital technologies, structured digital literacy programmes, and routine exposure to multilingual media. Such conditions contributed to the accumulation of linguistic capital among urban learners, aligning more closely with institutional expectations and academic assessments.

Across all sites, participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of key demographic and linguistic variables relevant to the study. The sample included 24 students (12 rural and 12 urban), 12 teachers evenly distributed between rural and urban contexts, 4 school administrators, and 4 parents or community members. This composition allowed for a multifaceted understanding of how language practices, educational experiences, and institutional policies intersect across diverse educational settings. Participants were intentionally selected to reflect variation in gender, grade level, linguistic repertoire, and roles within the school community, thereby enhancing the depth and reliability of the qualitative findings.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred over 12 weeks. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75

minutes and were audio recorded with consent. Classroom observations were conducted for two full school days at each site, yielding detailed field notes on linguistic interactions. Document analysis was conducted concurrently, focusing on:

- explicit language policy statements,
- school rules on language use,
- teacher training manuals,
- curriculum materials reflecting language expectations.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by the hybrid inductive–deductive approach proposed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Deductive codes were derived from sociolinguistic theory (e.g., linguistic capital, language ideologies), while inductive codes emerged from participant narratives and observed classroom interactions. Analysis involved:

- Transcription and translation of interviews,
- Initial coding in NVivo,
- Grouping codes into categories reflecting patterns of inequality,
- Developing thematic clusters,
- Iterative refining of themes, and
- Cross-case comparison between rural and urban data.

Reflexive memos documented analytic decisions and the researcher's positionality, ensuring transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and

withdrawal. Pseudonyms preserve anonymity, and data were stored securely. Special attention was given to ethical engagement with rural communities where power differentials between researcher and participants may be pronounced. Linguistic sensitivity was prioritised, ensuring that interpretations honoured participants' intended meanings.

FINDINGS

The findings of this qualitative sociolinguistic study reveal significant disparities in educational access across rural and urban school settings, shaped largely by linguistic hierarchies, resource inequalities, and institutional ideologies. Analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and school documents generated four major thematic clusters: linguistic hierarchies and legitimacy in the classroom; structural constraints and resource disparities; teacher beliefs, language ideologies, and pedagogical practices; and student identity, linguistic confidence, and aspirations. These themes illustrate how language mediates learners' everyday academic experiences and contributes to broader patterns of rural–urban educational inequality.

Linguistic Hierarchies and Legitimacy in the Classroom

Across all sites, a pronounced hierarchy of language use was observed, with dominant languages positioned as legitimate and academically appropriate, while rural linguistic varieties were treated as informal, peripheral, or unsuitable for learning. In urban schools, dominant national languages and English were the expected mediums of

instruction, and these languages were consistently reinforced through textbooks, assessments, and classroom discourse. Students in these settings frequently engaged in code-switching involving English and dominant national languages, often indexing academic competence and social prestige. This aligns with broader sociolinguistic arguments that dominant languages serve as forms of linguistic capital linked to educational and economic mobility (Bourdieu, 1991; Piller, 2016).

In contrast, rural schools primarily served students who spoke local, non-standardised linguistic varieties as their first language. Yet instruction was rarely delivered in these varieties. Teachers frequently corrected rural students' speech for not aligning with the standard language used in official curricula, reinforcing what Irvine and Gal (2000) describe as processes of “erasure” and “iconisation” that devalue local linguistic forms. Rural students often hesitated to speak in class, citing fear of being corrected or misunderstood. Observations showed that when rural students attempted to answer questions in their local language, teachers either reformulated their answers in the standard language or discouraged the use of local varieties altogether. The classroom thus became a space where rural linguistic repertoires were associated with error, inadequacy, or lack of intelligence, echoing findings from multilingual education studies highlighting the marginalisation of minoritised linguistic repertoires (Heugh, 2015).

Urban students, by contrast, rarely experienced such linguistic disalignment.

Their home languages overlapped with or approximated the languages of schooling, granting them privileged access to comprehension, assessment, and teacher approval. As one urban student noted, “We speak the language teachers expect, so it is easier to follow lessons.” By comparison, a rural student reflected, “My home language is not allowed in school... when I speak it, the teacher says I am not serious.” These contrasting experiences reflect how linguistic hierarchies perpetuate unequal participation and reinforce academic stratification.

Structural Constraints and Resource Disparities

Resource disparities between rural and urban schools also shaped the sociolinguistic landscape of educational access. Urban schools had greater access to trained teachers, multilingual learning materials, and digital technologies, directly influencing students’ exposure to dominant languages. Observations in urban schools revealed classrooms equipped with projectors, digital literacy programmes, English-language reading corners, and multimedia learning tools. Teachers routinely incorporated digital resources into lessons, providing students with regular exposure to multimodal texts.

These opportunities effectively widened the repertoire of linguistic inputs available to urban students and strengthened their command of dominant and global languages. This aligns with Selwyn’s (2016) argument that digital environments significantly enhance learners’ exposure to prestigious linguistic forms, thereby reinforcing educational advantage.

Rural schools, however, lacked comparable infrastructures. Classrooms had limited printed materials, and digital devices were either unavailable or non-functional. Teachers frequently taught using chalkboards and outdated textbooks that did not reflect local linguistic diversity. Rural teachers also reported having limited opportunities for professional development in multilingual pedagogy, indicating systemic neglect in teacher training provision.

Furthermore, rural learners’ access to assessment preparation resources was significantly limited. Several rural students explained that exam formats required proficiency in dominant languages, yet they lacked materials or instruction that would support their language development. This mismatch between instructional resources and assessment standards compounded rural learners’ sense of academic exclusion.

The structural disparities documented in this study echo existing research on educational inequities tied to geography, socioeconomic status, and institutional resources (Akyeampong, 2018). Importantly, these disparities intersect with linguistic inequalities, reinforcing the systemic disadvantage experienced by rural students.

Teacher Beliefs, Language Ideologies, and Pedagogical Practices

Teacher beliefs played a crucial role in shaping classroom linguistic norms. In both rural and urban schools, teachers tended to prioritise standardised language forms as the preferred medium for academic work. However, urban teachers were more likely to view multilingualism as an asset, whereas

rural teachers expressed concerns that allowing local varieties in the classroom would “dilute academic standards” or “confuse learners.” These beliefs resonate with dominant language ideologies that equate standard languages with intelligence, discipline, and economic opportunity (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Piller, 2016).

In urban classrooms, teachers frequently shifted between multiple languages to facilitate understanding, often using English to explain new vocabulary or employing translanguaging strategies to connect concepts across languages. These practices reflect pedagogical approaches aligned with contemporary multilingual education research, which argues that translanguaging supports cognitive development and equitable participation (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Conversely, rural teachers adopted more rigid language practices. Only the standard language was used for instruction, and local language use was discouraged. Teachers cited curriculum demands, exam pressures, and administrative expectations as reasons for maintaining monolingual norms, even though they acknowledged that many students struggled with comprehension. This tension illustrates the constraints educators face when institutional expectations conflict with students’ linguistic realities.

Teacher interviews also revealed the role of professional identity in shaping linguistic attitudes. Urban teachers saw proficiency in English and dominant languages as markers of professional competence. Rural teachers, especially those from outside the local community, reported

difficulty understanding students’ local linguistic repertoires, creating communication gaps that affected pedagogical effectiveness.

Student Identity, Linguistic Confidence, and Aspirations

Students’ expressions of identity, linguistic confidence, and aspirations revealed how sociolinguistic inequality affects psychosocial dimensions of learning. Urban students generally displayed confidence in their linguistic skills and described their multilingual repertoires as advantageous. They associated proficiency in dominant and global languages, especially English, with future success, reflecting the neoliberal valorisation of English as a language of mobility (Piller, 2016).

In contrast, rural students often viewed their home languages as barriers to academic achievement. Many reported experiencing shame, embarrassment, or self-consciousness when speaking in school. Their narratives suggest internalised linguistic stigma, a phenomenon well documented in sociolinguistic research on minoritised language communities (Hornberger & McCarty, 2012). For example, one rural student stated, “I feel small when I speak my home language here. People laugh, so I only speak when necessary.”

This internalisation of linguistic stigma also shaped students’ academic aspirations. Several rural learners doubted their ability to pursue higher education due to perceived linguistic inadequacy. These findings mirror broader sociological arguments that educational systems not only

reproduce inequality through material disparities but also shape learners' sense of possibility and self-worth (Bourdieu, 1991).

Urban students, by contrast, expressed ambitions aligned with careers requiring strong linguistic capital, such as medicine, engineering, or international business. Their confidence stemmed partly from the alignment of their linguistic repertoires with school expectations.

Overall, these findings underscore the deep psychosocial impact of sociolinguistic inequality and highlight that educational language policies affect not only academic performance but also identity formation and long-term aspirations.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal significant linguistic, structural, and psychosocial disparities that shape educational access for rural and urban learners. The discussion interprets these findings through sociolinguistic, sociological, and educational theoretical frameworks to illuminate how language practices, linguistic ideologies, and institutional structures contribute to unequal academic opportunities. Four interrelated dimensions emerge from the findings: the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies and symbolic domination; the intersection of structural inequalities with sociolinguistic disadvantage; the role of educators and language ideologies in shaping classroom practices; and the implications of linguistic identity, confidence, and aspirations for long-term educational mobility. Understanding these dimensions is essential for developing

equitable language-in-education policies and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Linguistic Hierarchies, Symbolic Domination, and the Reproduction of Inequality

The results underscore the centrality of linguistic hierarchies in shaping educational access across rural–urban contexts. These hierarchies reflect deeper structures of symbolic domination, as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1991), wherein particular language varieties—typically those associated with urbanity, educated elites, and political power—are imbued with legitimacy. In both rural and urban schools, dominant national languages and English were positioned as the expected mediums of instruction and academic communication. This positioning reflects what Blommaert (2010) terms “orders of indexicality,” in which language varieties acquire value based on their association with social, economic, and political power.

Such hierarchies have significant implications for rural learners whose home languages differ from the institutional norm. The consistent devaluation of rural linguistic repertoires aligns with Irvine and Gal's (2000) concepts of iconisation and erasure, where non-standardised rural varieties are positioned as markers of backwardness or lack of intelligence. Teachers' corrective practices, observed consistently in rural classrooms, reinforce these ideologies by signalling that rural speech is inappropriate or inferior. This dynamic is not merely pedagogical; it constitutes a form of symbolic violence that shapes learners' subjectivities and academic identities (Bourdieu, 1991).

By contrast, urban learners possess linguistic repertoires more closely aligned with institutional expectations. Their exposure to dominant languages through digital media, educational infrastructures, and urban cultural environments affords them forms of linguistic capital that facilitate academic participation. As Piller (2016) notes, linguistic capital functions as a form of social advantage, reproducing classed patterns of academic achievement. The findings affirm that urban students' linguistic resources align with the "legitimate language" of the educational field, granting them symbolic and practical advantages.

Thus, linguistic hierarchies do not merely reflect differences in language use; they reproduce broader patterns of social inequality by privileging certain learners while marginalising others. This insight reinforces the argument that language must be treated as a central dimension of educational equity, not a peripheral concern.

Structural Inequalities and the Sociolinguistic Dimensions of Educational Access

Structural resource disparities between rural and urban schools compound sociolinguistic inequalities. The findings illustrate how limited resources, such as inadequate teaching materials, a lack of multilingual resources, and minimal digital infrastructure, restrict rural students' linguistic exposure and learning opportunities. These disparities affirm broader research on rural-urban educational divides, which identifies infrastructure, teacher training, and resource distribution as persistent contributors to unequal learning

outcomes (Akyeampong, 2018; UNESCO, 2022).

However, this study demonstrates that these material inequalities intertwine with sociolinguistic disadvantages. Rural students' limited access to multilingual educational materials and digital technologies not only restricts their academic learning but also curtails their exposure to dominant and global linguistic forms. This creates a cycle wherein rural learners lack opportunities to acquire the linguistic competencies valued in assessments, higher education, and labour markets. Selwyn's (2016) argument that digital environments reinforce linguistic hierarchies is clearly reflected in the findings: urban students benefit from sustained exposure to digital linguistic inputs, while rural learners remain constrained within local linguistic ecologies.

These structural disparities are manifestations of epistemic inequality, defined by Heller (2011) as the unequal distribution of whose language practices and knowledge systems are recognised as legitimate. Rural schools' lack of resources to support multilingual education reflects institutional prioritisation of dominant languages, further marginalising rural linguistic identities. Such inequities undermine the principles of sociolinguistic justice, which call for equitable recognition of diverse linguistic repertoires (Flores, 2020).

The findings thus emphasise that sociolinguistic inequality cannot be addressed without confronting the structural inequities that amplify it. Effective policy

interventions must therefore integrate linguistic justice with resource redistribution.

Teacher Beliefs, Language Ideologies, and Pedagogical Practices

Teachers play a crucial role in mediating linguistic inequality. This study demonstrates that teacher beliefs about language significantly shape classroom practices, often reinforcing existing hierarchies. In rural settings, teachers' conviction that local linguistic varieties "dilute standards" reflects entrenched language ideologies that prioritise standardised languages as vehicles of academic excellence and socioeconomic mobility (Irvine & Gal, 2000). These beliefs also reveal the institutional pressures teachers face, particularly curriculum and assessment demands that require instruction in dominant languages.

Urban teachers, while also reinforcing dominant languages, demonstrated greater flexibility, often employing translanguaging techniques that validated learners' multilingual repertoires. These practices align with contemporary scholarship that views translanguaging as a pedagogical approach that enhances comprehension and fosters equitable participation (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The flexibility observed in urban classrooms suggests that teacher attitudes toward linguistic diversity, combined with access to pedagogical training and resources, play a significant role in shaping inclusive learning spaces.

Teachers' professional identities also influenced their linguistic ideologies. Urban

teachers frequently equated proficiency in English and dominant languages with professionalism, reflecting the neoliberal association between global languages and competitive identity (Piller, 2016). Rural teachers, many lacking training in multilingual pedagogy, experienced tension between their pedagogical intentions and the linguistic mismatches between themselves and their students. This mismatch reflects structural issues in teacher training and deployment, particularly the tendency for rural schools to be staffed by teachers who do not share students' linguistic backgrounds.

These findings highlight the need for comprehensive teacher education that recognises linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a problem. Without addressing teacher beliefs and institutional ideologies, policy efforts to promote multilingual education will remain ineffective.

Student Identity, Linguistic Confidence, and Educational Aspirations

One of the most striking findings concerns the psychosocial effects of linguistic inequality on students' identity, confidence, and aspirations. Rural learners' internalisation of linguistic stigma-evident in feelings of shame, reluctance to speak, and reduced participation-reflects the profound impact of symbolic domination within the educational field (Bourdieu, 1991). When learners perceive their home languages as inferior or inappropriate in academic settings, their sense of belonging and self-worth is undermined.

Such experiences contribute to what Blommaert (2010) describes as "inequality in

voice,” in which speakers of marginalised varieties are silenced not only through external correction but through internalised self-censorship. The rural learners’ narratives indicate that linguistic insecurity affects not only everyday classroom participation but long-term educational aspirations. Several rural students expressed doubts about their ability to pursue higher education due to perceived linguistic inadequacy, a finding consistent with sociological research linking language, identity, and mobility (Piller, 2016).

In contrast, urban students’ confidence in their multilingual repertoires contributed to ambitious educational aspirations. Their linguistic capital enabled them to envision futures aligned with the labour market demands of a globalised economy. This contrast reflects how educational systems reproduce classed and geographical inequalities through linguistic structures, shaping not only outcomes but also learners’ imagined futures.

The psychosocial dimension of linguistic inequality has significant policy implications. Efforts to promote educational equity must include initiatives to strengthen learners’ linguistic confidence, affirm their identities, and legitimate their linguistic repertoires within the classroom.

Implications for Policy: Toward Sociolinguistic Equity in Education

The findings carry several implications for educational policy. First, language-in-education policies must be grounded in sociolinguistic realities rather than in homogenising nationalistic

ideologies. Policies that enforce monolingual instruction in dominant languages disproportionately marginalise rural learners and undermine linguistic diversity. Instead, multilingual education should be institutionalised as a central component of equitable schooling, drawing on research that demonstrates the cognitive and academic benefits of mother tongue–based instruction (Heugh, 2015).

Second, rural schools require targeted investment in multilingual resources, teacher training, and digital infrastructures. Without addressing structural disparities, sociolinguistic inequality will remain entrenched. Digital inclusion initiatives must prioritise rural communities to ensure equitable access to linguistic inputs that support academic success.

Third, teacher education programmes must incorporate training in translanguaging, critical language awareness, and sociolinguistic justice. Teachers need support in understanding how linguistic ideologies shape classroom power dynamics and how inclusive pedagogy can mitigate inequalities.

Fourth, language policy must be approached through a lens of epistemic justice. Rural linguistic repertoires embody rich cultural and cognitive resources that should be recognised as legitimate forms of knowledge rather than treated as barriers. Engaging rural communities in language policy development ensures that local epistemologies inform educational decisions.

Finally, monitoring mechanisms must be implemented to track the impact of language policies on marginalised learners.

This includes assessments of linguistic inclusivity, teacher training outcomes, resource distribution, and learner experiences across different geographical contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to sociolinguistic and educational research by reframing rural–urban educational divides as fundamentally sociolinguistic phenomena. While socioeconomic, infrastructural, and geographic factors undeniably shape educational inequality, the centrality of language has often been overlooked in policy debates. By demonstrating how linguistic hierarchies, ideologies, and identities intersect with structural inequalities, this study affirms the argument that language is not merely a tool of communication but a site of power, identity, and stratification (Bourdieu, 1991; Piller, 2016).

The study also advances theoretical discussions about linguistic justice by illustrating how rural learners experience layered forms of marginalisation: they confront material disadvantages and symbolic exclusion through linguistic devaluation. This dual marginalisation underscores the need for theoretical frameworks that address both structural and sociolinguistic dimensions of inequality.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that rural–urban educational inequalities are not solely the result of material disparities but are deeply rooted in sociolinguistic hierarchies that shape access, participation, and learners' sense of belonging. By examining schools through a qualitative sociolinguistic lens, the

research shows that language operates simultaneously as a medium of instruction, a symbol of legitimacy, and a gatekeeping mechanism that either enables or restricts academic opportunities. Rural students, whose home languages diverge from the dominant languages of schooling, encounter misalignment between their linguistic repertoires and institutional expectations. This mismatch manifests in exclusionary pedagogical practices, reduced participation, and internalised linguistic stigma. Such dynamics highlight that educational inequities are reproduced not only through structural constraints but also through symbolic domination embedded in language ideologies.

At the same time, urban learners benefit from linguistic capital gained through exposure to dominant and global languages. Their command of institutionally valued linguistic forms aligns with assessment standards, curricular materials, and teachers' expectations. This advantage illustrates how language becomes a form of social capital that reinforces existing class and geographic divisions. The findings confirm broader sociological arguments that educational systems contribute to stratification by legitimising certain languages and marginalising others.

The study also emphasises the critical role of teachers, whose beliefs and pedagogical decisions shape how linguistic diversity is interpreted in the classroom. While some educators adopt flexible multilingual practices, others reinforce restrictive monolingual norms, often due to curriculum pressures, resource limitations, or

perceived threats to academic standards. These practices underline the need for teacher education that centres linguistic justice, critical language awareness, and translanguaging pedagogies.

To address the inequalities outlined in this study, educational policies must shift away from assimilationist language models toward inclusive multilingual frameworks that recognise the cultural and cognitive value of rural linguistic repertoires. Structural investment is equally essential: rural schools require access to multilingual materials, digital technologies, and sustained teacher professional development. Without addressing both structural and symbolic dimensions of inequality, rural–urban divides will persist.

Ultimately, this study contributes to sociolinguistic and educational scholarship by reframing language as a central axis of inequality. It calls for a reimagining of educational systems that embrace linguistic diversity, affirm marginalised identities, and foster equitable opportunities for all learners, regardless of geography or linguistic background.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the participating communities and individuals who contributed their insights to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

Akyeampong, K. (2018). Reassessing international education goals:

Reflections on policy, practice, and research. *Comparative Education*, 54(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2017.1394420>

Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalisation*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107>

Flores, N. (2020). From linguistic purity to multilingual justice. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 19(5), 299–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1777867> Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137385765>

Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137385765>
- Heller, M. (2011). *Paths to post-nationalism: A critical ethnography of language and identity*. Oxford University Press.
- Heugh, K. (2015). Epistemologies in multilingual education: Translanguaging and genre-companions in conversation with policy and practice. *Language and Education*, 29(3), 197–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994528>
- Hornberger, N. H., & McCarty, T. (2012). Globalization and language policy. In B. Spolsky (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of language policy* (pp. 300–318). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511979026.020>
- Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language* (pp. 35–84). School of American Research Press.
- Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Selwyn, N. (2016). *Education and technology: Key issues and debates* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education-or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum.
- UNESCO. (2022). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707>