



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Educational Exclusion and Youth Development in Rural Bihar: A Thematic Case Study with Implications for Policy and Practice

Niraj Kumar Singh

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Abstract: Education remains a fundamental human right and a crucial driver of social mobility and sustainable development. However, educational inequalities continue to affect millions of young people globally. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 251 million children and youth worldwide remain out of school. Although India's youth literacy rate (15–24 years) exceeds 97%, significant rural–urban, socioeconomic, caste-based, and gender disparities continue to influence educational access and outcomes. In Bihar, where the literacy rate remains below the national average, rural communities continue to face multiple educational challenges, including poverty, inadequate infrastructure, school dropout, learning poverty, and limited digital access. This study explores the lived experiences of educational marginalization among rural youth in the Panapur Block of Saran District, Bihar. Adopting a qualitative thematic case study design, data were collected from twelve youth participants aged 13–25 years through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was employed to examine educational access, dropout experiences, family support, caste and gender-based exclusion, school conditions, digital literacy, institutional support, and future aspirations. The findings indicate that educational participation among the interviewed youth was constrained by interconnected barriers, including poverty, long distances to educational institutions, inadequate sanitation and school infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, caste-related concerns, gender-related safety restrictions, and limited digital access. Participants also expressed educational aspirations and a desire to contribute to community development. Their accounts point to the need for improved school infrastructure, teacher accountability, accessible digital learning resources, gender-responsive educational environments, and stronger community engagement. The study highlights the relevance of inclusive educational policies and context-sensitive social work interventions for addressing educational exclusion and supporting youth development in rural Bihar.

Keywords: Educational Exclusion; Rural Youth; Caste Discrimination; Gender Inequality; Digital Divide; Youth Development.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of social, economic, and human development. Access to quality education contributes significantly to poverty reduction, social mobility, civic participation, and the achievement of sustainable development goals. Despite considerable global progress in school enrolment over the past two decades, educational inequalities continue to persist among socially and economically marginalized populations. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, approximately 251 million children and youth remain out of school worldwide, reflecting a stagnation in progress toward universal education (UNESCO, 2024). The burden of educational exclusion remains disproportionately concentrated among disadvantaged communities affected by poverty, social conflict, geographic isolation, and structural inequalities.

India has achieved substantial progress in educational expansion and literacy. The youth literacy rate (15–24 years) has reached approximately 97%, indicating remarkable improvements in educational access (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). However, aggregate literacy figures often conceal significant disparities related to caste, gender, socioeconomic status, and rural residence. Educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed, particularly among vulnerable populations residing in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. Research has consistently demonstrated that poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, discrimination, and social exclusion continue to hinder educational attainment among rural youth (Kingdon, 2020; Tilak, 2018).

Among Indian states, Bihar presents a particularly important context for understanding educational marginalization. Although educational indicators have improved over recent decades, the state continues to report literacy rates below the national average and faces persistent challenges associated with poverty, educational deprivation, and social inequality. Rural areas of Bihar often experience inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, poor transportation facilities, and limited access to digital learning opportunities. These challenges are further compounded by caste-based exclusion and gender-

¹) International Educational Development,
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA.

**) corresponding author*

Niraj Kumar Singh

Email: niraj.msw@gmail.com, nirajind@upenn.edu

related barriers that affect educational participation and continuation (ASER Centre, 2024; Drèze & Sen, 2013).

Educational marginalization extends beyond physical access to schools. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that exclusion is shaped by multiple interconnected structural factors, including economic deprivation, social discrimination, institutional neglect, and unequal access to educational resources (Sen, 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Students from marginalized communities frequently encounter barriers that limit their educational aspirations, reduce school participation, and increase the likelihood of school dropout. Such barriers often create cycles of disadvantage that persist across generations and contribute to broader patterns of social inequality.

The emergence of digital technologies has introduced new possibilities for educational inclusion while simultaneously exposing significant inequalities in access to learning resources. Studies have highlighted the existence of a substantial digital divide in India, particularly among rural and disadvantaged caste groups. Limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and technological skills continues to restrict educational opportunities for many rural youth (Reddy et al., 2021; Vaidehi et al., 2021). The persistence of digital exclusion raises concerns regarding educational equity, especially in contexts where technology increasingly influences learning processes.

Understanding educational inequality requires attention not only to institutional indicators but also to the lived experiences of young people themselves. Youth perspectives provide valuable insights into how structural barriers are experienced, negotiated, and challenged within everyday life. Qualitative investigations are particularly important for exploring the complex realities underlying educational participation, aspirations, and exclusion. By documenting youth narratives, researchers can better understand how educational systems interact with broader social, cultural, and economic conditions.

For this study, educational exclusion refers to barriers that prevent young people from accessing, continuing, or meaningfully participating in education, including barriers related to school resources, affordability, safety, discrimination, and digital access. Educational marginalization refers to the disadvantaged position experienced by young people when social, economic, geographic, or institutional conditions restrict their educational opportunities. Social exclusion is understood as the broader process through which unequal social relationships and institutional arrangements limit access to resources, recognition, and participation. The digital divide refers not only to differences in access to devices and internet connectivity but also to inequalities in affordability, digital skills, and the ability to use technology for educational purposes. Youth development, in this study, refers to the opportunities and constraints shaping young people's educational aspirations, agency, confidence, participation, and perceived possibilities for their future.

Although previous research has examined rural educational inequality, household poverty, caste-based disadvantage, gender barriers, and digital inequality in India, these issues are often discussed as separate dimensions of educational disadvantage. There remains a need for context-specific qualitative accounts that examine how these conditions interact in young people's everyday educational experiences in rural Bihar. In particular, the relationship between economic hardship, social treatment, gendered mobility, school conditions, family support, and digital access requires closer attention to understand how educational exclusion is experienced and negotiated by young people. The present study addresses this need by

examining the narratives of twelve youth participants from Panapur Block in Saran District, Bihar. Its contribution lies in bringing these interconnected dimensions together within a focused qualitative investigation and considering their implications for educational participation, youth aspirations, and social work practice. The study does not seek statistical generalization; rather, it offers context-specific insights that may inform further research and locally responsive educational interventions.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do rural youth in Panapur Block describe their experiences of educational access, participation, and discontinuation?
2. How do poverty, caste-related experiences, gender, family support, school conditions, and digital access shape their educational experiences?
3. How do young people describe their educational aspirations, agency, and participation in community or youth activities despite the barriers they encounter?
4. What implications do these experiences have for inclusive educational policy, youth development, and social work practice?

Against this background, the present study explores the experiences of educational marginalization among rural youth in the Panapur Block of Saran District, Bihar. Drawing upon twelve thematic case studies, the research examines the educational challenges, social barriers, family influences, institutional support systems, and future aspirations of young people residing in rural communities. The study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on educational inequality by centering youth voices and highlighting the structural conditions that shape educational opportunities in rural Bihar. The findings offer important implications for educational policy, youth development initiatives, and social work interventions aimed at promoting equitable and inclusive education.

Review of Literature

Educational inequality remains a persistent challenge despite improvements in school enrolment and literacy. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2026) emphasizes that educational equity requires attention not only to enrolment but also to participation, progression, and learning opportunities. In India, educational expansion has not eliminated disparities associated with socioeconomic status, caste, gender, and geographical location. The Ministry of Education (2025) reports improvements in educational infrastructure and access, although national indicators may conceal inequalities affecting disadvantaged communities. Kumar et al. (2023) further demonstrate that foundational learning competencies are associated with educational continuation, with variations across caste, gender, and geographical categories.

In rural India, educational exclusion extends beyond school enrolment to include irregular attendance, inadequate institutional resources, and unequal learning environments. Banerji and Mathur (2021), examining adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, identified household circumstances, school infrastructure, and teacher-related factors associated with school attendance. Similarly, Rangarajan et al. (2023) highlight the importance of supportive institutions and community relationships in promoting inclusive education. These findings suggest that meaningful educational participation depends on both accessibility and the quality of learning environments.

Economic hardship remains an important factor influencing educational participation and discontinuation. Household financial constraints may restrict access to

transportation, educational materials, and supplementary learning opportunities. Shukla et al. (2024) demonstrate that caste-based disparities in educational expenditure are substantially associated with differences in household economic resources. Meanwhile, Kumar et al. (2023) identify foundational learning competencies as important predictors of continued schooling, suggesting that educational discontinuation may result from interacting economic and academic disadvantages.

However, educational inequality also reflects broader institutional and social structures. Singh (2023) argues that caste-based exclusion operates both through barriers to educational access and discriminatory processes within educational institutions. Bailwal and Paul (2024) demonstrate associations between village social composition, teacher behaviour, and learning disparities among marginalized children. Edara (2025) further documents caste-based segregation across Indian schools, highlighting how educational institutions may reproduce existing social hierarchies.

Gender inequalities introduce additional barriers through mobility restrictions, household expectations, and unequal opportunities. Ruthven et al. (2024), examining young women in rural Bihar, demonstrate how educational and career aspirations are negotiated within gendered family and community relationships. Sarkar et al. (2026) similarly identify intersecting caste- and gender-related differences in labour-market aspirations among rural Indian youth. These findings support Thapan's (2023) argument that educational inequality should be examined through an intersectional understanding of social identity, institutional power, and lived experiences.

Digital exclusion has become an increasingly important dimension of educational inequality, particularly among rural and socially disadvantaged populations. Malla et al. (2024) document barriers to digital education among marginalized rural students, emphasizing how inadequate technological infrastructure may reinforce existing educational disadvantages. However, digital inclusion involves more than device ownership and internet connectivity.

Sarma and Sarma (2025) identify linguistic accessibility and sociocultural resources as factors influencing students' engagement with digital learning technologies. Kumawat and Garg (2025) further demonstrate how gendered household expectations and parental regulation shape rural girls' access to mobile technologies. Together, these studies indicate that digital inequality involves technological, economic, cultural, and gender-related constraints. Understanding these interconnected barriers is particularly relevant to rural youth whose educational opportunities may already be restricted by socioeconomic and institutional disadvantages.

Educational marginalization may constrain young people's aspirations, social participation, and future opportunities. Nevertheless, marginalized youth should not be understood solely as passive recipients of educational interventions. Ruthven et al. (2024) demonstrate that young women in rural Bihar negotiate educational and career pathways through personal agency and family relationships, despite structural constraints. Similarly, Thapan (2023) emphasizes the significance of student voice and participation in challenging educational exclusion.

Existing studies provide substantial evidence concerning poverty, caste discrimination, gender inequality, institutional disadvantage, and digital exclusion. However, localized qualitative evidence remains necessary to understand how these conditions interact within specific rural communities. The present study addresses this

contextual gap by exploring the experiences of twelve youth aged 13–25 years in Panapur Block, Saran District, Bihar. It examines how interconnected educational barriers shape participation, discontinuation, aspirations, and community engagement, offering context-specific insights for inclusive education and social work practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates the capability approach, social reproduction theory, and intersectionality to interpret educational exclusion as a multidimensional social process. These perspectives provide complementary explanations of how unequal opportunities, institutional structures, and overlapping social identities influence educational participation.

The capability approach emphasizes that formal access to educational resources does not necessarily ensure substantive opportunities to achieve valued educational outcomes. MacKenzie et al. (2022) argue that educational justice requires attention to both individual capabilities and the structural conditions shaping their development. Applied to rural education, this perspective highlights how poverty, inadequate infrastructure, unsafe transportation, and limited digital access may restrict meaningful educational participation.

Social reproduction theory explains how unequal economic, cultural, and social resources contribute to persistent educational disadvantage. MacKenzie et al. (2022) emphasize the value of integrating structural explanations with capability-based understandings of educational inequality. Evidence concerning caste-based differences in educational investment and school segregation further illustrates how existing social inequalities may be reproduced through educational institutions (Edara, 2025; Shukla et al., 2024).

Intersectionality provides a framework for examining how poverty, caste, gender, and geographical location interact rather than operate independently (Crenshaw, 1989). Thapan (2023) highlights the relevance of intersecting social identities to educational inequality in India, while Sarkar et al. (2026) and Jafar et al. (2023) demonstrate how caste and gender shape differentiated aspirations among rural youth. Rangarajan et al. (2023) further illustrate the value of combining intersectionality and capability perspectives when examining inclusive education.

Together, these theoretical perspectives guide the interpretation of participants' experiences by examining educational opportunities, structural inequalities, and intersecting forms of disadvantage. Importantly, the framework also recognizes young people's agency, aspirations, and community participation, providing a foundation for understanding educational exclusion and informing context-sensitive social work interventions.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore educational exclusion among rural youth in Panapur Block, Saran District, Bihar. A case study approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly

evident (Yin, 2018). Panapur Block served as the geographically bounded case, providing a contextual framework for examining how socioeconomic conditions, institutional barriers, and social inequalities shape rural youths' educational experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and aspirations in depth.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across participants' accounts. The case study design and thematic analysis served complementary methodological purposes: the former established the contextual boundaries of the investigation, while the latter provided a systematic approach to examining patterns and variations in participants' experiences. Consistent with the qualitative nature of the study, the research emphasized contextual understanding and analytical interpretation rather than statistical representativeness or population-level generalization.

Study Area

The study was conducted in the Panapur Block of Saran District, Bihar. The region was selected due to its predominantly rural population and the educational challenges reported in relation to poverty, infrastructural deficiencies, social exclusion, and limited access to educational resources. The area provides an important context for understanding the educational experiences of marginalized youth in rural Bihar.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved twelve participants aged 13–25 years who were purposively selected based on their experiences of educational access, participation, discontinuation, and related barriers in rural Bihar. The participants represented diverse educational backgrounds, including those currently enrolled in school, those who had discontinued their education, and those who had completed schooling. Variations in gender, family support, and involvement in youth activities were also considered to capture different perspectives on educational exclusion. Within the geographically bounded context of Panapur Block, this purposive sampling approach provided a focused basis for exploring both shared experiences and differences in the educational challenges encountered by rural youth. The sampling rationale was informed by the principle of information power, which emphasizes the relevance and specificity of participants' experiences in relation to the research objectives and analytical approach, rather than relying solely on numerical sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). Accordingly, the study prioritized contextual understanding and the interpretation of participants' experiences rather than statistical representativeness or generalization to the broader population of rural youth in Bihar.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed to explore participants' educational backgrounds, schooling experiences, barriers to education, family support, experiences of discrimination, digital literacy, awareness of government educational schemes, youth participation, aspirations, and recommendations for educational improvement.

Interviews were conducted in a language familiar to participants and were documented through detailed field notes and interview records. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences freely, enabling the collection of rich qualitative narratives.

Interview Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 participants aged 13–25 years from Panapur Block, Saran District, Bihar, who were selected through purposive sampling. The interviews explored participants' educational experiences, including their educational histories, barriers to school attendance and continuation, family support, experiences of social treatment, access to digital learning resources, future aspirations, and suggestions for improving educational opportunities. The semi-structured format allowed participants to describe their experiences and perspectives in their own words while ensuring that the main areas relevant to the study were addressed. Field notes and interview records were maintained to document relevant information and contextual observations. Illustrative questions focused on the challenges participants experienced in continuing their education and the ways access to digital devices and internet connectivity influenced their learning. The interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes relating to educational exclusion and youth development in the study setting.

Data Analysis

The interview material was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, the development of candidate themes, review of themes against the data, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the written analysis. During familiarization, the interview material was read repeatedly to identify accounts relevant to educational access, poverty, caste, gender, school conditions, digital exclusion, family support, and youth aspirations. Initial codes were developed from meaningful statements and recurring patterns. Related codes were then grouped into subthemes and broader themes. The themes were reviewed against the available interview material to assess whether they represented the participants' accounts and the research questions. Contrasting accounts were considered alongside recurring patterns so that differences in experience were not obscured. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and relevant literature.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance credibility, the researcher engaged in prolonged interaction with participants and maintained detailed field notes throughout the data collection process. Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of coding procedures and analytical decisions. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of the study setting and participant characteristics, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the

research, and voluntary participation was ensured. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing personally identifiable information from transcripts and research reports. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the twelve participants, highlighting variations in educational status, gender, family support, and youth participation. The sample consisted of six male and six female participants with diverse educational experiences. Four participants had completed schooling, five were identified as having left or discontinued school, one was still studying, and two reported completing the eighth and ninth grades, respectively. Family support also varied considerably, with four participants reporting supportive family environments, while others described limited, unsupportive, negative, or neutral family attitudes toward education. Regarding youth participation, eight participants reported some level of involvement in youth clubs, community campaigns, volunteer activities, or other initiatives, whereas four reported no participation. These characteristics illustrate the diversity of educational circumstances and social experiences represented in the study, providing a contextual basis for examining similarities and differences in the educational challenges encountered by rural youth.

Table 2 summarizes the six major themes and their corresponding subthemes identified through thematic analysis of the participants' accounts. The themes encompass educational barriers and unequal access, poverty and educational discontinuation, social exclusion and insecurity, institutional challenges, digital exclusion, and youth aspirations and participation. Educational barriers relate to geographical distance, transportation

difficulties, and inadequate infrastructure, while poverty-related challenges concern economic hardship, educational expenses, and pressures associated with employment. Social exclusion and insecurity encompass caste-related discrimination, gender bias, and safety concerns, whereas institutional challenges involve teacher absenteeism, insufficient school facilities, and weaknesses in educational governance. Digital exclusion reflects barriers involving technological devices, internet connectivity, and digital skills. In contrast, the theme of youth aspirations and participation captures participants' educational ambitions, community involvement, and interest in social change. Collectively, these themes provide an analytical framework for understanding the interconnected educational, socioeconomic, institutional, and sociocultural challenges experienced by participants, while also recognizing their aspirations and involvement in community development.

Theme 1: Educational Barriers and Unequal Access

Participants described long travel distances as barriers to regular school attendance. The absence of basic facilities such as libraries, toilets, electricity, and regular classrooms created additional barriers to learning. One participant stated:

"No regular school and no washroom in school." (Y1)

Another participant explained:

"The school is very far. Distance itself becomes a reason for not attending regularly." (Y2)

Similarly, a participant highlighted the absence of learning resources:

"There is no library in our school, and it becomes difficult to study beyond textbooks." (Y3)

The findings indicate that infrastructural deficiencies continue to undermine educational accessibility in rural Bihar.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 12)

Participant ID	Educational status	Gender	Family support	Youth participation
Y1	Completed schooling	Male	Supportive	NYKS member
Y2	Left school	Female	Low interest	Youth club
Y3	Completed schooling	Male	Not supportive	No
Y4	Completed schooling	Female	Supportive	Yes
Y5	Dropout	Male	Negative	No
Y6	8th pass	Female	Low support	Campaign participation
Y7	Dropout	Female	Not encouraging	No
Y8	Studying	Male	Supportive	Yes
Y9	Completed schooling	Male	Neutral	Limited
Y10	Discontinued	Female	Not helpful	No
Y11	9th pass	Male	Supportive	Volunteer
Y12	Dropout	Female	No support	Participated

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes Emerging from the Study

Major Theme	Subthemes
Educational Barriers	Distance, Transportation, Infrastructure Deficiencies
Poverty and Educational Discontinuation	Economic Hardship, Early Employment, Educational Costs
Social Exclusion and Insecurity	Caste Discrimination, Gender Bias, Safety Concerns
Institutional Challenges	Teacher Absenteeism, Lack of Facilities, Weak Governance
Digital Exclusion	Lack of Devices, Internet Access, Digital Skills
Youth Aspirations and Participation	Community Involvement, Educational Aspirations, Social Change

Theme 2: Poverty and Educational Discontinuation

Economic hardship emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting educational continuity. Participants described how poverty compelled many young people to discontinue education and seek employment to support their families. One respondent explained:

"Because of poverty, I could not continue my studies." (Y1)

Another participant reflected:

"The cost of education becomes difficult for families like ours." (Y4)

A participant who had dropped out reported:

"Poverty and caste together made it difficult to stay in school." (Y5)

These narratives reveal how financial constraints continue to shape educational opportunities and contribute to school dropout. The accounts concerning financial hardship indicate that the ability to continue education was shaped not only by the availability of schools but also by the resources required to participate in schooling. Educational expenses and the costs associated with travelling to educational institutions may create competing demands for households with limited financial resources. These constraints can narrow the choices available to young people and may make educational discontinuation more likely when families must prioritize immediate livelihood needs. These accounts suggest that educational discontinuation was experienced within the constraints of household economic circumstances rather than solely as an individual choice.

Theme 3: Social Exclusion, Caste Discrimination and Safety Concerns

Experiences of caste-based discrimination and social insecurity were reported by several participants. Such experiences negatively influenced educational participation and aspirations. One participant stated:

"There is caste conflict, and it affects how students are treated." (Y1)

Another respondent shared:

"Sometimes there is fear because of caste pressure and local conflicts." (Y8)

Female participants particularly emphasized safety concerns:

"Girls drop out because they do not feel safe travelling long distances." (Y7)

Another participant remarked:

"Girls are often not allowed to continue education." (Y12)

These findings suggest that educational exclusion is closely intertwined with broader social inequalities.

Theme 4: Institutional Challenges and Teacher Accountability

Participants frequently highlighted institutional shortcomings, particularly teacher absenteeism and poor school management. One respondent commented:

"There are no teachers most of the time." (Y11)

Another participant observed:

"Teachers are irregular, and classes do not happen properly." (Y10)

Similarly, a participant noted:

"The school building is poor, and there are very few facilities." (Y9)

The findings indicate that institutional weaknesses significantly reduce the quality of educational experiences among rural youth.

Theme 5: Digital Exclusion and Educational Inequality

The majority of participants reported limited access to digital technologies and online learning resources. One participant explained:

"I have never attended any digital class." (Y4)

Another respondent stated:

"There is no access to computers or internet facilities." (Y6)

A participant further reported:

"I do not even have a device to access online education." (Y12)

Digital exclusion emerged as an important dimension of educational inequality among the rural youth interviewed in this study. Participants described barriers to technology-mediated learning, particularly the absence of digital classes, limited access to computers and internet connectivity, and the lack of personal devices for accessing online educational resources. These experiences illustrate how inadequate digital infrastructure and restricted access to technological resources can constrain educational participation and learning opportunities. Although digital inequality may also involve the affordability of internet services, shared-device arrangements, household restrictions, and differences in digital literacy, the participants' accounts primarily highlight barriers related to the availability of digital learning facilities and devices. These findings suggest that limited access to digital resources constitutes an additional layer of educational disadvantage, potentially reinforcing existing socioeconomic and geographical inequalities experienced by rural youth.

Theme 6: Youth Aspirations and Community Participation

Despite facing multiple barriers, participants expressed strong aspirations for educational improvement and social change. Several youth were actively involved in community initiatives and awareness programmes. One participant stated:

"I joined NYKS because I wanted social change." (Y1)

Another respondent reflected:

"Youth participation can increase awareness and reduce school dropout." (Y2)

Participants also proposed solutions:

"Regular teachers and better monitoring are necessary." (Y2)

"Girls should have safe transport facilities." (Y8)

"The government should come and see village realities directly." (Y10)

These findings demonstrate that rural youth are not merely passive recipients of educational policies but active stakeholders capable of contributing to educational transformation.

The study revealed that educational exclusion among rural youth in Bihar is shaped by multiple interconnected factors, including poverty, infrastructural deficiencies, caste discrimination, gender-based barriers, institutional weaknesses, and digital exclusion. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, educational aspirations, and a commitment to community development, highlighting the need for inclusive and context-sensitive educational policies.

Cross-Case Analysis of Participants' Experiences

An exploratory cross-case comparison revealed both shared educational barriers and variations in the experiences reported by the twelve participants. Among participants who had discontinued their education, Y5 associated difficulties in remaining in school with poverty and caste-related barriers, while Y7 highlighted safety concerns affecting girls travelling long distances to school. Y10 reported irregular teaching practices, whereas Y12 described restrictions on girls' educational continuation and limited access to digital devices. These accounts illustrate how educational discontinuation may be associated with different combinations of economic, institutional, social, and technological constraints. However, educational barriers were not confined to participants who had left school. Y8, who was still studying, expressed concerns about caste-related pressure and local conflicts, while Y3 and Y4, who had completed schooling, reported inadequate learning resources, financial constraints, and limited digital learning opportunities. These differences suggest that educational exclusion may affect young people's experiences even when they remain enrolled in or have completed formal schooling.

Variations were also observed in participants' reported family support and involvement in community activities. Participants describing supportive family environments continued to report educational challenges. For instance, Y8 expressed concerns about caste-related insecurity, while Y4 reported financial difficulties and limited access to digital classes. Conversely, Y5 and Y12, whose family support was categorized as negative or absent, described barriers related to poverty, caste, gender restrictions, or digital access. Youth participation also varied across educational statuses. Y1 associated his involvement in the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) with aspirations for social change, while Y2, who had left school, was involved in a youth club. Y12,

identified as a school dropout, was also reported to have participated in youth activities. These comparisons indicate that educational disadvantage and community participation may coexist, although the available data do not establish causal relationships between family support, youth engagement, and educational outcomes. Given the small, purposively selected sample, these findings should be interpreted as exploratory, context-specific patterns rather than generalized differences between participant groups.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that educational exclusion among rural youth is shaped by interconnected socioeconomic, institutional, and sociocultural barriers rather than by a single source of disadvantage. Economic hardship may restrict the resources available for educational expenses and transportation, while inadequate school facilities, irregular teaching, and limited digital access can further constrain meaningful participation in learning. This interpretation is consistent with Blanden et al. (2023), who demonstrate that educational inequality emerges through multiple pathways involving household resources, educational investments, and institutional opportunities. Recent evidence from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh similarly indicates that learning deficits, engagement in paid work, and gender-related circumstances are associated with early school leaving, illustrating how educational disadvantage may develop through interacting conditions (Santhya et al., 2025). Within Panapur Block, participants' accounts suggest that economic constraints, caste-related experiences, gendered mobility restrictions, and limited institutional resources may reinforce one another. However, these qualitative findings illustrate context-specific experiences rather than establishing the prevalence or causal effects of these barriers across rural Bihar.

The findings can also be interpreted through the complementary perspectives of the capability approach, social reproduction, and intersectionality. The capability approach emphasizes that the availability of educational resources does not automatically translate into substantive opportunities to achieve valued educational outcomes (Robeyns, 2017). From this perspective, school enrolment alone cannot establish educational inclusion when young people face financial constraints, unsafe transportation, inadequate learning environments, or restricted access to educational technology. Research on educational inequality further demonstrates how unequal household resources and opportunities for educational investment can contribute to the persistence of disadvantage across generations (Blanden et al., 2023). An intersectional perspective extends this interpretation by emphasizing that social inequalities must be understood through the relationships among multiple dimensions of disadvantage rather than through isolated categories (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Together, these perspectives suggest that educational exclusion in rural Bihar should be examined as a multidimensional process in which structural constraints shape educational participation while interacting with young people's aspirations and agency.

Participants' accounts indicate that inadequate educational infrastructure, long travel distances, limited learning resources, poor sanitation facilities, and irregular classroom instruction constitute important barriers to educational participation. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that school infrastructure influences learning through several interconnected

dimensions, including accessibility, safety, physical learning conditions, and the suitability of educational environments (Barrett et al., 2019). Educational exclusion therefore extends beyond school enrolment to include inequalities in the quality and accessibility of educational opportunities. Muralidharan and Singh (2021) similarly emphasize that expanding school participation in India has not consistently produced corresponding improvements in learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of institutional quality and effective educational provision.

Geographical accessibility is particularly relevant to the experiences reported by participants in Panapur Block. Evidence from Bihar demonstrates that reducing transportation-related constraints can improve educational participation. Muralidharan and Prakash (2017), in their evaluation of Bihar's bicycle programme for girls, found that improved mobility increased secondary school enrolment, with particularly important effects in villages located farther from secondary schools. Their findings demonstrate that geographical distance and transportation-related costs can influence educational participation. The experiences reported in the present study are consistent with this broader evidence, suggesting that improving school accessibility must involve both geographical proximity and the practical conditions that enable young people to attend regularly. Nevertheless, the current study does not independently measure the effects of school distance or infrastructure on attendance and retention.

Economic hardship emerged as an important constraint on educational continuity among several participants. Their accounts indicate that financial difficulties influenced the ability to afford educational expenses and maintain participation in schooling. These findings correspond with broader research identifying household socioeconomic resources as important determinants of educational investment, attainment, and intergenerational mobility (Blanden et al., 2023). Recent evidence from India also demonstrates that children's engagement in work and their educational participation are closely interconnected, with household economic circumstances influencing the competing demands placed on young people (Santhya et al., 2024). Within the context of rural Bihar, educational discontinuation may therefore reflect constrained household choices rather than a lack of interest in education.

The relationship between poverty and educational discontinuation also extends beyond direct schooling expenses. Economic hardship may restrict access to transportation, supplementary learning materials, digital technologies, and other resources that support educational progression. Santhya et al. (2025), using longitudinal evidence from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, demonstrate that learning deficits are associated with increased risks of early school leaving, while paid work, family circumstances, and gender-related factors also contribute to educational discontinuation. These findings highlight the importance of considering both household conditions and the quality of learning experiences. In the present study, participants' accounts suggest that financial disadvantage can narrow perceived educational opportunities and complicate decisions about continuing education.

Poverty should consequently be understood as part of a broader structure of educational disadvantage. Recent analysis of Bihar's caste-based survey indicates substantial socioeconomic inequalities across social groups, although the authors also acknowledge limitations in the underlying survey data (Roy & Anand, 2026). Such evidence provides relevant contextual support for interpreting the participants' experiences without assuming that economic

circumstances affect all rural youth in the same way. An intersectional interpretation further suggests that economic hardship may operate alongside caste-related disadvantage, gender restrictions, and uneven institutional provision, producing distinct educational experiences across different social circumstances (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Participants' accounts suggest that caste-related tensions and perceptions of discriminatory treatment are relevant to understanding educational exclusion in Panapur Block. Although the available interview quotations do not fully establish the specific mechanisms through which discrimination occurred, they indicate that caste-related experiences may influence young people's perceptions of educational environments and social belonging. This interpretation is consistent with Nayak (2023), whose research on Dalit children in government schools in Odisha documents how caste-based inequalities can be reproduced through access to school resources, classroom participation, and everyday interactions with teachers and peers. These findings demonstrate that formal educational access does not necessarily eliminate discriminatory experiences within educational institutions.

Caste-related exclusion may also operate through institutional practices and unequal recognition of students' social identities. Chand (2025), examining the experiences of Dalit students in higher education in Uttar Pradesh, demonstrates how pedagogical practices and classroom interactions can contribute to the reproduction of caste-based inequalities. Although Chand's study concerns higher education rather than rural secondary schooling, it offers a complementary perspective on how educational institutions may reproduce social hierarchies. In the present study, the relationship between caste and educational participation therefore warrants interpretation beyond formal access to schools, particularly concerning dignity, inclusion, social relationships, and equitable treatment.

The relevance of these experiences is further reinforced by evidence of persistent socioeconomic disparities across caste groups in Bihar. Roy and Anand (2026) identify substantial differences in economic conditions and access to resources among social groups using the 2023 Bihar caste-based survey, while emphasizing limitations in the reliability and availability of disaggregated data. These findings provide contextual support for understanding caste-related educational disadvantage as part of broader patterns of socioeconomic inequality. Nevertheless, the present study cannot determine the prevalence or specific institutional forms of caste discrimination without more detailed participant narratives and contextual evidence.

The experiences reported by female participants suggest that gender-related restrictions on mobility, concerns about personal safety, and limitations on educational continuation constitute important dimensions of educational exclusion. Such constraints may influence whether girls can attend educational institutions regularly, particularly when schools are located far from their homes. Evidence from Bihar provides empirical support for the importance of mobility in girls' educational participation. Muralidharan and Prakash (2017) found that a bicycle distribution programme increased girls' secondary school enrolment and reduced gender disparities, demonstrating the relevance of interventions addressing transportation-related barriers.

Gendered educational exclusion must also be considered in relation to broader household expectations and social norms. Santhya et al. (2025) found that early school leaving among adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh was associated with several factors, including learning deficits, engagement in paid work, marriage, and

gender-related beliefs and practices. UNICEF (2023) similarly documents the continuing relationship between child marriage, household disadvantage, and educational participation in India, including the particular vulnerability of girls from poorer and rural households. Although early marriage was not directly established by the quotations presented in the current study, this broader evidence highlights a relevant contextual dimension of gendered educational disadvantage that warrants further investigation.

The findings therefore suggest that improving girls' educational participation requires interventions addressing both institutional and sociocultural constraints. Safe transportation, accessible educational facilities, supportive family environments, and community engagement may help reduce barriers associated with mobility and security. However, the effectiveness of these measures within Panapur Block remains a question for future empirical assessment rather than an outcome demonstrated by the present study.

Participants' accounts indicate that limited access to digital classes, computers, internet connectivity, and personal devices constitutes an additional barrier to educational participation. These experiences suggest that digital exclusion may constrain access to technology-mediated learning opportunities, particularly among young people already experiencing socioeconomic and geographical disadvantage. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) emphasizes that educational technology can support access and inclusion, but its benefits depend on equitable access, appropriate implementation, and the availability of supporting educational resources. Digital technologies may therefore reproduce existing inequalities when disadvantaged learners lack the conditions necessary to use them effectively.

Evidence from India also demonstrates that technology can contribute to improved learning when incorporated into appropriate instructional environments. Muralidharan et al. (2019), in an experimental evaluation of technology-aided instruction, found improvements in learning outcomes through a programme that adapted instruction to students' learning levels. However, their findings concern a specific instructional intervention and should not be interpreted as evidence that device provision alone improves educational outcomes. This distinction is important because digital inclusion involves more than physical access to technology; it also requires suitable learning content, instructional support, and opportunities for meaningful use (UNESCO, 2023).

Recent evidence from Bihar further highlights the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and digital access. Roy and Anand (2026) identify substantial inequalities in access to computers and related resources, suggesting that digital exclusion remains closely connected to broader patterns of material disadvantage. In the present study, participants primarily reported barriers involving the availability of devices, digital learning facilities, and internet connectivity. Although affordability, device sharing, household restrictions, and digital literacy represent important dimensions of digital inequality, these mechanisms cannot be attributed to individual participants without additional interview evidence. The findings consequently suggest that digital inclusion initiatives should address technological accessibility alongside broader educational and socioeconomic barriers.

Despite reporting multiple educational barriers, participants expressed aspirations for educational improvement, greater institutional accountability, and community development. Their involvement in youth clubs

and community activities suggests that educational disadvantage does not necessarily eliminate opportunities for civic participation or expressions of agency. Such findings are consistent with strengths-based approaches to youth development, which recognize young people as potential contributors to social change rather than merely as recipients of institutional support. Ozer (2017) emphasizes that youth-led participatory approaches can create opportunities for adolescents to develop critical awareness, leadership, and engagement in efforts to improve their communities.

The participants' accounts also highlight an important distinction between educational aspirations and the opportunities available to realize them. Research on educational inequality demonstrates that household resources and unequal opportunities for educational investment can influence educational progression and subsequent social mobility (Blanden et al., 2023). From a capability perspective, aspirations become meaningful opportunities only when young people have the resources and social conditions necessary to pursue them (Robeyns, 2017). Thus, the expressed aspirations of participants in Panapur Block should not be interpreted as evidence that structural barriers have been overcome. Rather, they highlight the coexistence of educational disadvantage and a continuing desire for personal and community advancement.

Educational exclusion may also have implications for broader youth development by limiting opportunities to acquire knowledge, develop skills, establish supportive relationships, and pursue further education or employment. Evidence from longitudinal research in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh indicates that early school leaving is associated with educational and social circumstances that may constrain young people's subsequent opportunities (Santhya et al., 2025). Addressing educational exclusion therefore requires attention to both institutional resources and the conditions that support young people's participation in decisions affecting their lives.

From a social work perspective, these findings support the relevance of participatory and empowerment-oriented interventions that connect individual aspirations with family, school, and community resources. Youth participation initiatives may provide opportunities for young people to articulate educational concerns, participate in community problem-solving, and contribute to locally responsive interventions. Ozer (2017) identifies youth-led participatory action research as a promising approach for promoting adolescent development and addressing inequitable conditions. Building on this perspective, social work interventions in rural Bihar could combine educational guidance, family support, community mobilization, and youth participation in educational planning. Such interventions should be developed collaboratively with local stakeholders and evaluated empirically rather than assumed to produce improvements in educational outcomes.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study underscores the need for multi-dimensional interventions to address educational exclusion among rural youth in Bihar. Policy efforts should prioritize infrastructure development, teacher accountability, digital inclusion, transportation support, and gender-sensitive educational programmes. Targeted measures are also required to address caste-based exclusion and ensure equitable access to educational resources. From a social work perspective, community-based interventions, youth empowerment

programmes, and participatory educational initiatives can play an important role in promoting educational inclusion and supporting youth development. The findings highlight that educational exclusion is not solely an educational issue but a broader social justice concern requiring coordinated responses from educational institutions, policymakers, social workers, and local communities.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and existing literature on educational exclusion, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance educational participation and youth development in rural Bihar. The findings indicate that inadequate school infrastructure, including the absence of libraries, sanitation facilities, electricity, and learning resources, remains a major barrier to educational participation. Research has consistently shown that access to adequate educational infrastructure positively influences student attendance, learning outcomes, and school retention (Dreze & Sen, 2013; ASER Centre, 2024). Therefore, policymakers should prioritize investments in rural educational infrastructure, particularly in marginalized communities where educational deprivation remains pronounced.

Distance to schools and transportation difficulties were frequently identified by participants as reasons for absenteeism and school dropout. Studies suggest that geographical accessibility significantly affects educational participation among rural youth, particularly girls (Kingdon, 2020). The Government of Bihar should strengthen transportation schemes, expand bicycle distribution programmes, and establish additional secondary schools in underserved areas to reduce travel-related barriers.

Teacher absenteeism and irregular classroom instruction emerged as recurring concerns among participants. Previous research has demonstrated that teacher presence and instructional quality are critical determinants of student achievement and educational engagement (Tilak, 2018). Educational authorities should strengthen monitoring systems, regular inspections, teacher training programmes, and professional development initiatives to improve teaching effectiveness and accountability.

Economic hardship continues to influence educational discontinuation among rural youth. Existing scholarship programmes, financial assistance schemes, free educational materials, and conditional support initiatives should be expanded to ensure that economically disadvantaged students remain in school. Dreze and Sen (2013) emphasized that educational inequalities are often rooted in broader socioeconomic inequalities and therefore require comprehensive social protection measures alongside educational interventions.

The study found that safety concerns, mobility restrictions, and early marriage continue to affect girls' educational participation. Research indicates that gender-sensitive educational environments, improved sanitation facilities, and community awareness programmes contribute significantly to girls' school retention and educational attainment (UNESCO, 2024). Special attention should therefore be given to ensuring safe transportation, functional girls' toilets, and community campaigns promoting girls' education.

Experiences of caste discrimination reported by participants highlight the need for inclusive educational practices. Educational institutions should implement anti-discrimination policies, promote diversity and inclusion programmes, and establish grievance redressal

mechanisms. Studies have shown that caste-based inequalities continue to influence educational opportunities and social mobility among marginalized populations (Nambissan, 2010; Vaidehi et al., 2021). Addressing these structural inequalities is essential for achieving educational equity.

Digital exclusion emerged as a significant challenge among participants. Access to computers, internet connectivity, and digital learning resources remains uneven across rural communities. Research by Reddy et al. (2021) and Vaidehi et al. (2021) demonstrated that digital inequality increasingly contributes to educational exclusion, particularly among economically and socially disadvantaged groups. Government agencies and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to establish community digital learning centres, provide affordable internet access, and enhance digital literacy among rural youth.

The findings demonstrate that young people possess valuable insights regarding educational improvement and community development. Youth participation in educational planning and community initiatives should be encouraged through youth clubs, leadership programmes, and participatory governance mechanisms. Christens and Dolan (2011) argue that youth engagement strengthens both community development and social change processes. Creating meaningful opportunities for youth participation can enhance educational outcomes and strengthen civic responsibility.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study included twelve purposively selected participants, and the findings are intended to provide contextual insight rather than statistical generalization to all rural youth in Bihar. Second, the research was conducted in Panapur Block of Saran District, meaning that the experiences documented may not reflect the full diversity of educational conditions across other rural areas. Third, the study relied on youth participants' accounts and did not include triangulation through interviews with teachers, parents, school administrators, or other community stakeholders. Consequently, the analysis reflects the perspectives represented in the interview material rather than a comprehensive assessment of all stakeholders' experiences. Finally, the findings depend on the depth and scope of the interviews and the researcher's interpretation of the data. Future research could address these limitations through studies across multiple locations, engagement with additional stakeholder groups, and participatory approaches in which young people contribute to research design, interpretation, and recommendations as co-researchers.

Future studies should consider larger and more diverse samples across different districts of Bihar to explore variations in educational experiences. Mixed-method and longitudinal research designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how educational exclusion influences youth development over time. Additional research focusing on digital inequality, gendered educational experiences, and caste-based educational disparities would further strengthen the evidence base for policy and practice interventions.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Educational exclusion among rural youth in Bihar remains a complex and multidimensional challenge shaped by poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, caste-based discrimination, gender inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and limited digital access. The thematic case study revealed that these factors do not operate independently; rather, they interact to create cumulative disadvantages that restrict educational participation and hinder youth development. The experiences shared by participants demonstrate that educational exclusion extends beyond school enrolment and encompasses unequal access to quality learning environments, supportive institutional structures, and opportunities for personal and social advancement.

The findings further highlight that rural youth continue to navigate significant barriers while maintaining strong educational aspirations and a desire for social mobility. Despite experiences of school discontinuation, financial hardship, social exclusion, and limited institutional support, many participants expressed hope for educational improvement and emphasized the importance of community participation, teacher accountability, safe learning environments, and equitable access to educational resources. These narratives challenge deficit-oriented perspectives of marginalized youth and instead illustrate their resilience, agency, and capacity to contribute to educational transformation within their communities.

The study concludes that addressing educational exclusion requires a holistic and rights-based approach involving policymakers, educational institutions, local communities, and social work professionals. Sustainable improvements can be achieved through strengthened educational infrastructure, poverty reduction initiatives, gender-sensitive interventions, digital inclusion strategies, and inclusive educational policies that actively address caste and socioeconomic inequalities. By centering the voices and lived experiences of rural youth, the study contributes to the growing discourse on educational equity and youth development, while offering practical insights for policy and practice aimed at ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to access, participate in, and benefit from quality education.

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All data generated and analyzed during this study are included inside the manuscript.

Ethical Approval

The study complies with the current laws of the country in which it was performed.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

AUTHOR(S) INFORMATION

Niraj Kumar Singh is a Ph.D. student in Education, specializing in Leadership in Education, at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, United States. He holds an M.S.Ed. in International Educational Development from the University of Pennsylvania and is an alumnus of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, Government of India. With more than ten years of experience in education, international development, and social impact, his research interests include educational leadership, youth development, educational equity, and international and comparative education. Contact Information: Email: nirajkumarsingh.upenn@gmail.com, nirajkumar_singh@uml.edu, nirajsingh@alumni.upenn.edu. Website: www.nirajkumarsingh.org

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Correspondence All inquiries and requests for additional materials should be directed to the Corresponding Author.

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