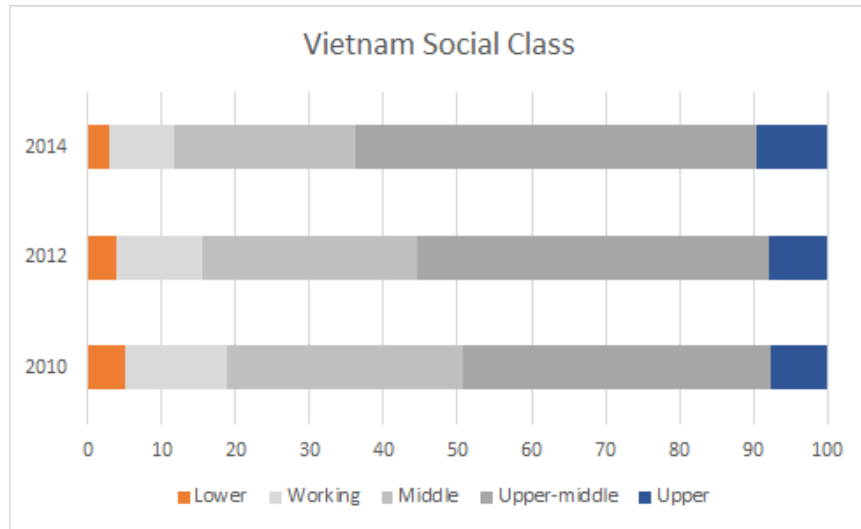


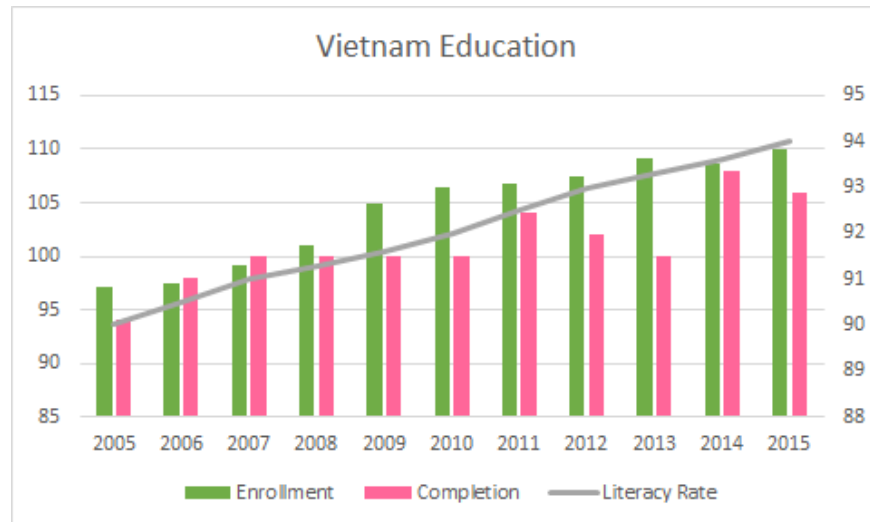
## **Inequality in Vietnam's Education: Income Distribution**

Vietnam has witnessed the fastest growth rate in recent decades, which gives rise to the economic gap in the society. Schooling, especially, serves to allocate individuals to specific economic positions, produces an adequate labour force in a hierarchically controlled and class-stratified production system. The underlying roots of inequality in education is often attributed to social inequality such as gender, region, and color, however, in Vietnam, the most important factor is the difference between the rich and the poor. Inequality in educational opportunities is closely linked to widening this income gap and the financial distribution in education. In this paper, we take a closer look at the school enrollment, school completion, and literacy rates among different social classes, the underlying cause within which, as well as policies implemented during recent years to address this issue.

Before the economic reform in 1986, Vietnamese society was divided into four social hierarchical classes including scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants, within which are the two distinguished classes: the rich and the poor. It was not until Vietnam progressed from a planned to a market oriented economy that the middle class emerged and has been expanding ever since. Along with global economic expansion, the social class in Vietnam also becomes more segregated with five main groups as many other countries in the world: upper class, upper-middle class, middle class, working class, and lower class. According to The World Bank, in the last decade, the number of middle class continues to increase, contributing to 87.4% of the total population in 2014. While the richest parts of the society slightly grew to 9.6% from 7.7% in 2010, a decrease of roughly 2% in the percentage of the lower class is also noticeable. Among the three groups categorized in the middle, the upper-middle class takes over the other two lower groups. Overall, income segregation in Vietnam shows a positive light during the last decade.

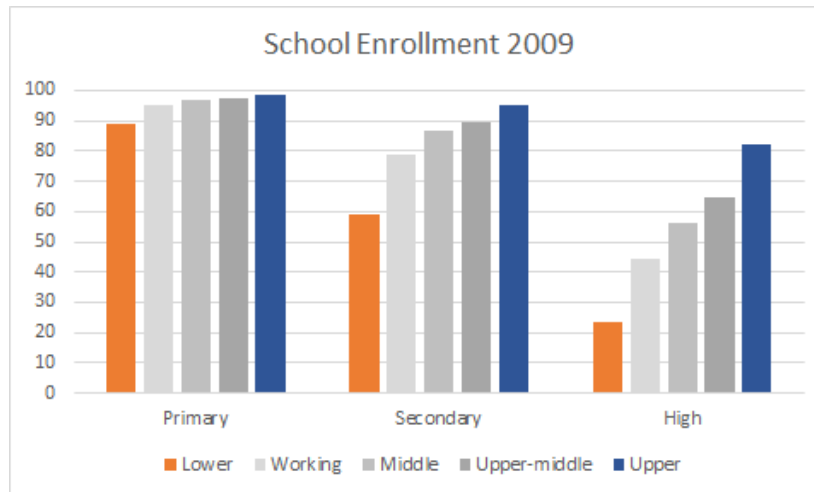


Beginning from the economic and social reform, the schooling system in Vietnam consists of twelve years, among which are five years of compulsory primary education, four years of secondary education, and three years of high education. A rigorous curriculum is implemented by the Ministry of Education and Training with a compulsory 12-subject learning system every term. The main goal is to improve children's general knowledge, train quality human resources, nurture and foster talent. With a population of 97 million, while only one primary school is located in each ward, one secondary school shared among several wards, and enrollments are geographically based, class sizes remain one of the biggest issues in Vietnam's education system. Approximately 40 to 50 students are gathered in a class with an assigned homeroom teacher throughout each school level as a result. According to CEIC and The Global Economy, over the last few decades, the total number of primary school enrollment has been increasing gradually along with mildly fluctuated yet rising school completion. Greatest changes can be observed in the literacy rate, which almost reached 95% in 2015, indicated by UNESCO. Overall, the compulsory primary education policy has made a notable impact, while secondary and high school access requires further improvement.



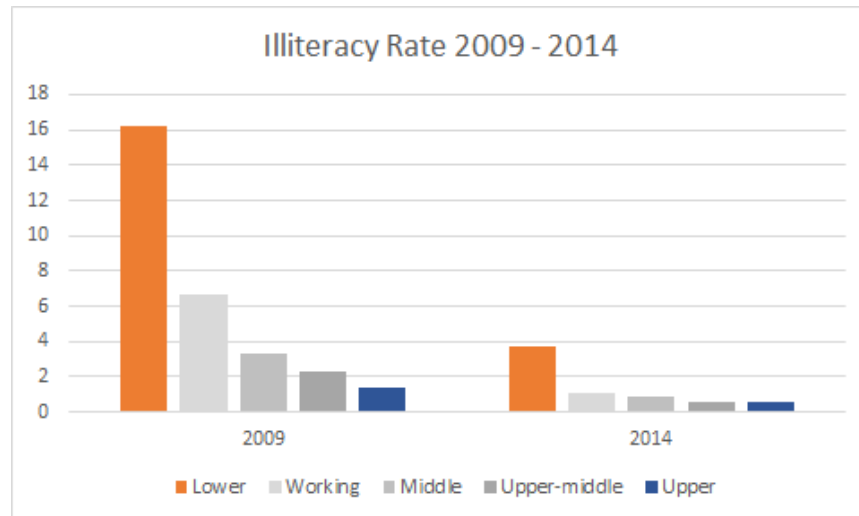
Regarding the types of schools, Vietnam maintains a system of public and private education. The government provides free education for children up until the completion of the ninth grade. High school costs only a small amount of roughly \$100 annually, expanded by the national and regional specialized schools system. Private schools, on the other hand, range from personal funding to international and transnational schools with a tuition fee of at least \$800 annually.

School enrollment clearly illustrates the segregation among the five social classes. By Vietnam Population and Housing Census 2009, the range in primary enrollment between the different groups stayed within the top 10%, which indicates the high and equal access of primary education to children in the country. However, the higher the level of education, the wider the gap between the social classes is. From almost 88.9% in primary enrollment to 59% in secondary education and only 23.2% enrolled in highschools, the number of lower-class students' enrollment percentage decreased by a third in each level, implying the most severe change among the five social classes. With the smallest decline in the top group, these numbers emphasize the growing gap from 9.4% to 59.1% difference between the richest and the poorest.

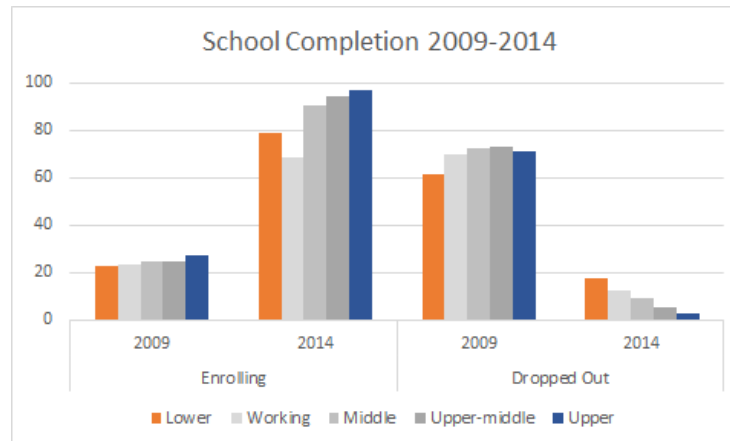


Poverty and child labor most likely leads to this inequality. Especially in the rural areas where agriculture still remains as the main income source, children are much less expected to receive proper education as they grow older. To many families, the opportunity cost between sending their children to school and keeping them at home to assist farming is too high. Regarding these areas where most of the lower class population is located, school choice is also much more scarce than those living in the cities. The number of schools within an area declines along with the increase in the education level, so children often need to go to other areas to attend secondary school and more likely to be further for highschoolers. Geographical distance from home to highschool, particularly, prevents students from enrolling.

To observe the changes over the years, we inspect the illiteracy rate in 2009 and 2014 from a UNICEF's report. Unsurprisingly, 16.2% of the lower class is unable to use written words and make simple arithmetic calculations, whereas only 1.4% of the upper class remains illiterate. As can be seen after five years, the percentage of illiterate children in the poorest group decreases to only 3.68%, highlighting a significantly small difference compared to the richest. This remarkable change indicates the promising outcome of the free tuition that makes primary education accessible to everyone and the improvement in Vietnam education's quality. According to the Human Development Department of East Asia and Pacific Region and The World Bank, at the end of 2010, the number of teachers without a "standard" degree has dropped to less than 3% and more pilot certification schemes for teacher training programs are implemented. Without more detailed data, it can also be concluded that primary enrollment in 2014 rises close to 100% among every social class.



School completion serves to capture the impact of different social backgrounds on the efficiency of education. We examine the number of enrolling and dropped out students in 2009 and 2014. Enrolling students are those who are currently attending primary, secondary, or highschools. The data shows a somewhat similar trend to that of school enrollment, but with the widening gap between the lower and upper class. Although a significant increase of 70% in average shows a positive outlook for Vietnam education, the social inequality is still highlighted with twice the initial difference. The number of dropped out students reflects this issue to a great extent, yet also reveals interesting past trends. In 2009, unexpectedly, children in the higher income group were more likely to drop out of school with 61.2% in the lower class and a relatively 71.4% in the upper class, which are alarming regarding the entire education system. These frightening statistics, however, can be explained by the aftermath of the global economic crisis in 2008, which dealt a deathblow to Vietnam's industrialization. Higher income families, the majority income source of whom comes from the cities, therefore, suffer from this economic recession. Children might have ceased their education during this period as a consequence. Nevertheless, the economic situation improved and arrived at a positive state in 2014. Only 17.27% children from lower income families and 2.56% upper class children do not finish their education. The gap between these groups still remains wide.



To be more specific, a family's economic resources play an important role in the children's continuing education. It is very likely that children no longer receive proper education because of the rising cost, which not only contains tuition fee, but also additional costs such as parents' engagement and college's preparation. Poor academic results also make children not want to go to school. Lack of parental attention continues to be a barrier and is an increasing trend over the years. Early marriages, even though only contributes a small percentage, might also lead to this nonstop growing difference in school completion.

Upon these educational issues embedded in the social inequality, Vietnam has taken many measurements on both international and national scale. Since 2003, Vietnam became the Global Partnership for Education when the Education for All Act was implemented, whose main goal is to renovate the education system, move closer to regional and international quality standards, and ensure social equity and lifelong learning opportunities. Conditional aid for poor and disadvantaged students as well as teachers relocation program to the rural areas has been increasing since then. Most recently, Vietnam implemented the Education Revised Law in 2018, which went into effect in 2020. With the ultimate aim of shifting from a knowledge-based education to an education that develops comprehensively in both qualities and abilities, the adaptation of innovative curriculums will increase children's engagement in school to a great extent. The law also emphasizes the increase in all-day secondary education, especially in lower income areas without additional tuition fees. Afternoon class fees will soon no longer be applied in already established all-day schools. Overall, education in Vietnam has been developing in a fast pace along with the country's economic growth. With appropriate measures, the gaps among the social classes regarding education accessibility can be gradually closed, which pushes forth the promising outlook in the near future.

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