

REVISITING THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: INSIGHTS FROM FIANARANTSOA, MADAGASCAR

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Abstract: *This study aims to examine the role of education in social transformation within the context of Fianarantsoa in Madagascar, with particular attention to how access, quality, and learning outcomes influence individual and collective trajectories. Grounded in a socio-educational perspective, the research addresses the gap between the widespread expectation that education leads to social mobility and the observed realities of persistent inequality and limited employment opportunities. A qualitative research design was adopted, involving purposive sampling of 20 participants, including teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and community leaders. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and supported by document analysis, then analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key patterns related to educational experiences and social impact. The findings indicate that education is highly valued as a pathway to improved living conditions and social recognition, reflecting its strong symbolic importance within society. However, disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of infrastructure, resources, and teaching quality contribute to uneven learning outcomes. Many students complete schooling without mastering essential literacy, numeracy, and practical skills, which limits their ability to access meaningful employment. The results suggest that education functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for social mobility, as broader socio-economic and institutional constraints shape its impact. The study highlights the need to improve the quality and relevance of education, strengthen teachers' capacity, and address structural inequalities to enhance education's contribution to sustainable development and social transformation.*

Keywords: *role of education, social transformation, fianarantsoa*

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of social transformation, particularly in developing societies where structural inequalities continue to shape individual and collective trajectories (Trani et al., 2025; Owan, 2019; Oktari et al., 2025). In Madagascar, education has long been positioned at the center of national development strategies, reflecting its perceived capacity to promote economic growth, social mobility, and civic engagement (Emynorane et al., 2026). Since independence in 1960, successive governments have invested in expanding access to schooling, with support from international partners such as UNESCO (2015) and the World Bank (2018). These efforts align with global commitments to inclusive and equitable education, particularly within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The expansion of the Malagasy education system has led to notable increases in school enrollment, especially at the primary level (Mashyaka & Ndayambaje, 2025). Statistical indicators suggest that access to basic education has improved over time, signaling progress toward universal schooling (Sadat et al., 2025; Phuangsuwan et al., 2025; Ratna et al., 2025)—these achievements, though significant, mask persistent disparities that continue to undermine the transformative potential of education. Inequalities remain pronounced between urban and rural areas and across socio-economic groups (Augustin & Emynorane, 2025). Students in rural communities often face limited access to schools, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Economic constraints further exacerbate these challenges, as many households struggle to bear the direct and indirect costs of schooling (Bashir et al., 2021; Berhanu & Naidoo, 2024). Such conditions raise important questions about the extent to which education can effectively contribute to social transformation in contexts marked by structural vulnerability.

The case of Fianarantsoa provides a particularly insightful lens through which to examine these issues. Located in the Haute Matsiatra region, Fianarantsoa is a socio-spatial environment characterized by both opportunities and constraints. As an urban center, it hosts relatively better educational institutions and administrative structures (UNICEF, 2019). Its surrounding rural areas, on the other hand, reflect the broader challenges faced by many parts of Madagascar, including limited access to quality education and high levels of poverty (Emynorane et al., 2025). This juxtaposition creates a dynamic context in which the role of education in shaping social outcomes can be critically explored.

The central problem this study addresses is the apparent tension between the expectations placed on education and its actual capacity to generate meaningful social change. Education is commonly viewed as a pathway to improved living standards, professional advancement, and social mobility (Edwards et al., 2020). Families invest considerable resources in schooling, often hoping that education will enable future generations to escape poverty and achieve greater stability (Corduban et al., 2014). Observable realities indicate that these expectations are not always fulfilled. High levels of youth unemployment and underemployment persist, even among individuals who have completed formal education (Essuman, 2019). The mismatch between educational attainment and labor market opportunities suggests that the relationship between education and social transformation is neither linear nor guaranteed.

This situation highlights a broader concern regarding the effectiveness of education systems in addressing socio-economic inequalities (Lee & Hung, 2024). The persistence of disparities in educational outcomes raises the possibility that education may also function as a mechanism of social reproduction (Gray et al., 2025). Differences in access to resources, quality of instruction, and institutional support can reinforce existing hierarchies, limiting the ability of disadvantaged groups to benefit fully from educational opportunities (Kumar et al., 2024). These dynamics are particularly relevant in Madagascar, where regional inequalities and socio-economic constraints continue to shape educational experiences and outcomes (Bien-aimé et al., 2026; Urbain et al., 2026).

Theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education offer valuable frameworks for understanding this dual role of education. Functionalist approaches, associated with scholars such as Émile Durkheim (1956), emphasize the integrative function of education in transmitting shared values and

maintaining social cohesion. From this viewpoint, education contributes to the stability and continuity of society by preparing individuals to fulfill their roles within the social system (Maruyama & Igei, 2024). Critical perspectives, developed by thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), challenge this interpretation by highlighting the role of education in reproducing social inequalities. These approaches highlight how cultural capital, institutional practices, and social structures shape educational success and limit social mobility for certain groups (Kobayashi & Ogawa, 2025). The capability approach introduced by Amartya Sen (1985) offers a complementary perspective, focusing on the potential of education to expand individual freedoms and enhance the capacity to make meaningful life choices.

An empirical study conducted across various African contexts underscores the complexity of these dynamics (Taniguchi & Hirakawa, 2016). Increased access to education has been associated with positive outcomes in areas such as health, gender equality, and civic participation. Persistent challenges in educational quality and relevance continue to constrain the broader impact of social transformation. In Madagascar, studies supported by organizations such as UNICEF (2019) point to a significant gap between school attendance and actual learning outcomes. Many students complete several years of schooling without acquiring essential literacy and numeracy skills, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the education system in fostering meaningful development (Emynorane et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on education and social change, an important gap remains in understanding how these processes unfold at the local level. Existing studies often rely on aggregate data and national-level analyses, which may overlook the specificities of regional contexts and lived experiences (Kobayashi & Ogawa, 2025). Limited attention has been given to how individuals and communities perceive the role of education, how they navigate structural constraints, and how local conditions shape educational outcomes (Kumar et al., 2024). This gap is particularly evident in Fianarantsoa and the Haute Matsiatra region, where localized studies remain scarce.

Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the relationship between education and social transformation. The present study seeks to contribute to this objective by focusing on the experiences and perceptions of actors in Fianarantsoa's educational landscape. Such an approach allows for a deeper exploration of the mechanisms through which education influences social trajectories, as well as the factors that enable or constrain its transformative potential.

The significance of this study extends beyond academic inquiry, offering insights that may inform policy and practice. A better understanding of the conditions under which education contributes to social transformation can support the development of more effective and equitable educational strategies. Greater attention to regional disparities, quality of learning, and socio-economic context is essential for enhancing the impact of education in Madagascar.

Certain limitations must be acknowledged in framing the scope of this study. The complexity of social transformation processes means that education is only one of several factors influencing it, alongside economic, cultural, and political dynamics. Interpretations of educational impact are shaped by subjective perceptions, which may vary across individuals and communities. The findings should therefore be understood as context-specific insights rather than universally generalizable conclusions. These considerations highlight the

importance of continuing study that integrates multiple perspectives and methodological approaches (Lee & Hung, 2024).

This study aims to revisit the role of education in social transformation by examining its manifestations within the specific context of Fianarantsoa. The analysis seeks to move beyond simplified assumptions and to engage with the multifaceted realities that characterize educational experiences in Madagascar. By situating education within its broader social environment, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of its potential and its limitations as an instrument of social change.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design grounded in a socio-educational perspective to explore the role of education in social transformation in Fianarantsoa, located in the Haute Matsiatra. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for capturing the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of actors directly engaged in the educational process, thereby enabling an in-depth understanding of how education influences local social dynamics. The study relies on a purposive sampling strategy, involving 20 informants selected for their relevance to the study objectives and direct involvement in the educational environment. The sample includes teachers, school administrators, students, parents, and local community leaders, ensuring a diversity of perspectives across both urban and peri-urban settings. Data collection is primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews, which provide flexibility to explore key themes while maintaining consistency across participants. Interviews are complemented by document analysis of relevant educational reports and policy frameworks to contextualize the findings. The data analysis follows a thematic approach, involving systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns related to educational access, quality, and social impact. This process enables the identification of key themes that reflect both the enabling and constraining factors in education in fostering social transformation. To ensure the credibility and rigor of the findings, several validation strategies are employed, including triangulation of data sources, cross-verification of interview responses, and iterative comparison of empirical observations with the existing literature. Attention is also given to maintaining consistency in interpretation by carefully documenting analytical decisions. Ethical considerations are respected throughout the study process, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and anonymizing data.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Empirical Findings

The empirical findings from Fianarantsoa, located in the Haute Matsiatra, reveal a nuanced and context-dependent relationship between education and social transformation. All categories of informants widely perceive education as a central pillar of individual advancement and community development. Participants consistently emphasized that schooling plays a critical role in shaping life trajectories, influencing aspirations, and fostering a sense of social belonging. These perceptions confirm the strong symbolic value attached to education within Malagasy society, where it is often viewed as the most legitimate pathway toward a better future.

At the same time, the findings point to a clear gap between expectations and lived realities. Informants reported that educational attainment does not

automatically translate into improved socio-economic outcomes. Many young graduates struggle to secure stable employment, and the transition from school to the labor market remains uncertain. This discrepancy suggests that broader structural conditions, including economic opportunities and institutional capacity, mediate the transformative potential of education. Education appears to function as a necessary but insufficient condition for social mobility, requiring complementary factors to produce sustained change.

Another important dimension emerging from the data concerns the diversity of educational experiences within the region. Significant differences exist between urban and peri-urban or rural contexts, particularly in terms of access to resources, infrastructure, and teaching quality. These disparities contribute to uneven learning outcomes and reinforce existing inequalities. Participants highlighted that students in more advantaged settings benefit from better conditions that enhance their chances of success. In contrast, those in disadvantaged areas face multiple barriers that hinder their educational progress.

A further cross-cutting insight emerging from the empirical analysis concerns the relevance of skills and the alignment between education and local socio-economic realities. Informants frequently noted that the content of formal education does not adequately reflect the competencies required in the labor market or in everyday economic activities within the region. This mismatch contributes to the growing phenomenon of educated underemployment, in which graduates possess academic credentials but lack the practical, technical, or entrepreneurial skills necessary for sustainable livelihoods. As a result, education risks losing part of its transformative capacity, not because it fails to inspire or socialize individuals, but because it does not fully equip them to navigate existing economic structures. Addressing this gap requires a reorientation of educational priorities toward more context-sensitive curricula, greater integration of vocational and life skills, and stronger linkages between schools, local economies, and community needs. Such adjustments would enhance the functional value of education and reinforce its role as an effective driver of inclusive and sustainable social transformation.

The synthesis of these findings is presented in Table 1 below, which captures the main dimensions of analysis and their implications for social transformation:

Table 1. Key Dimensions of Education and Their Implications for Social Transformation in Fianarantsoa, Madagascar

Dimension	Observed Reality	Implications for Social Transformation
Educational Aspirations	Strong belief in education as a pathway to success	Sustains motivation and social demand for schooling
Access to Education	Unequal across urban and rural areas	Produces uneven opportunities
Learning Conditions	Often constrained by limited resources and infrastructure	Reduces the effectiveness of schooling
Employment Outcomes	Weak alignment between education and job opportunities	Limits upward mobility
Social Perception	Education is associated with respect and social	Reinforces its sym

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These findings indicate that education in Fianarantsoa operates within a complex system where aspirations, constraints, and outcomes interact dynamically. Its role in social transformation cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-economic environment.

Education as a Driver of Aspiration and Social Mobility

Education plays a fundamental role in shaping individual aspirations in Fianarantsoa. Students and families widely perceive schooling as a pathway toward improved living conditions and greater social recognition. This perception is deeply rooted in the belief that education provides access to knowledge, skills, and opportunities that are otherwise unattainable (Emynorane et al., 2026). As a result, families often prioritize schooling despite economic difficulties, demonstrating a strong commitment to investing in their children's future. Such findings are consistent with the human capital perspective, which conceptualizes education as an investment that enhances individual productivity and long-term socio-economic outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From a broader developmental standpoint, education is also recognized as a key mechanism for expanding individual capabilities and enabling people to lead lives they value, as emphasized by Amartya Sen (1985). International frameworks, including those promoted by UNESCO, further reinforce the idea that education is central to fostering inclusive growth and social progress (UNESCO, 2015).

The influence of education on social mobility is also evident in the way it reshapes individual ambitions and life goals (Mashyaka & Ndayambaje, 2025). Many students expressed a desire to pursue professional careers that differ significantly from their parents', particularly in sectors such as administration, education, and business. This shift reflects the role of education in expanding horizons and enabling individuals to envision alternative life trajectories (Owan, 2019). Education, in this sense, acts as a catalyst for change by encouraging individuals to aspire beyond traditional socio-economic boundaries (Ratna et al., 2025). Empirical studies in developing contexts support this observation, showing that increased educational attainment is associated with higher aspirations and greater intergenerational mobility (World Bank, 2018). At the same time, sociological analyses suggest that aspirations are not formed in isolation but are shaped by social structures and access to opportunities, which influence how individuals translate educational achievements into tangible outcomes (Trani et al., 2025).

Community perceptions further reinforce the link between education and social mobility. Educated individuals are often regarded as role models and are associated with higher social status, better communication skills, and increased participation in community affairs. Their visibility within society contributes to the diffusion of new values and expectations, thereby influencing collective attitudes toward education. These dynamics align with Émile Durkheim's functionalist perspective, which highlights the role of education in promoting social cohesion and transmitting shared norms (Durkheim, 1956). Education also contributes to the accumulation of cultural capital, shaping social recognition and positioning within society, as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu and Passeron (1990).

Structural Inequalities and Educational Constraints

The findings highlight significant structural inequalities that affect access to and participation in education across the region surrounding Fianarantsoa.

Geographic disparities represent a major challenge, particularly for students living in rural or remote areas of Haute Matsiatra. Long distances to schools, limited transportation options, and inadequate infrastructure create barriers that discourage regular attendance and increase the risk of dropout. These spatial inequalities reflect broader patterns observed in many low-income contexts, where rural populations experience reduced access to essential public services. Empirical evidence from the World Bank (2018) indicates that geographic isolation significantly lowers educational attainment and contributes to persistent intergenerational inequality.

Economic factors also play a critical role in shaping educational experiences. Many households face financial constraints that limit their ability to support their children's schooling. Costs associated with uniforms, learning materials, and transportation often become prohibitive, especially for families with multiple dependents (Sadat et al., 2025). In such contexts, education competes directly with immediate livelihood needs, leading some students to engage in informal labor or household economic activities. This trade-off between schooling and survival reflects structural poverty. It aligns with UNICEF findings, which emphasize that economic vulnerability remains a key driver of school dropout in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2019). From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics illustrate how unequal distribution of economic capital constrains access to educational opportunities and shapes individual trajectories (Oktari et al., 2025).

Institutional constraints further compound these inequalities and limit the effectiveness of the education system. Schools frequently operate with insufficient resources, including a lack of textbooks, inadequate infrastructure, and limited pedagogical support (Augustin & Emynorane, 2025). Overcrowded classrooms and shortages of qualified teachers reduce instructional quality and hinder student engagement (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025). These conditions create an uneven learning environment in which educational success depends not only on individual effort but also on the structural context in which learning occurs. Such disparities resonate with the critical framework developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, who argue that educational systems can reproduce social inequalities by privileging students with greater access to resources and support (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In this sense, structural constraints do not merely limit access to education but actively shape its outcomes, thereby influencing the broader processes of social transformation.

Quality of Education and Learning Outcomes

The quality of education emerges as a decisive factor influencing the extent to which schooling contributes to social transformation. Participants frequently expressed concerns about the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Limited pedagogical resources, outdated materials, and insufficient training opportunities for teachers were identified as key challenges affecting the quality of instruction (Eric et al., 2025). These factors hinder the development of essential competencies and reduce the overall impact of education.

Learning outcomes remain uneven, with many students struggling to acquire foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. This situation raises concerns about the education system's ability to prepare individuals for active participation in the economy and society. Completing formal education does not necessarily guarantee the acquisition of practical skills, which limits the potential for meaningful employment and social advancement (Edwards et al., 2020). The

gap between years of schooling and actual learning highlights the importance of focusing on quality rather than access alone.

The implications of low-quality education extend beyond individual outcomes to affect broader social dynamics (Bashir et al., 2021). When education fails to deliver tangible benefits, it can lead to disillusionment among students and families, potentially weakening trust in the system (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the same time, the persistence of educational aspirations despite these challenges reflects the enduring belief in the value of education. Strengthening the quality of learning is therefore essential for ensuring that education fulfills its role as a driver of social transformation and contributes to sustainable development in the region (Gray et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that education in Fianarantsoa has significant potential to drive social transformation. However, its impact remains constrained by persistent structural inequalities, limited resources, and uneven learning outcomes. While access to education has improved, the findings reveal that schooling alone does not guarantee meaningful social mobility or economic advancement. The gap between educational aspirations and actual outcomes reflects deeper systemic challenges, including disparities in infrastructure, teacher capacity, and alignment between education and labor market needs. The study also highlights that education continues to carry strong symbolic value among communities, sustaining motivation and long-term investment in schooling despite its limitations. To enhance the transformative role of education, it is recommended that policymakers prioritize improving the quality of teaching through continuous professional development, increased provision of learning materials, and targeted support for disadvantaged and rural areas. Strengthening the relevance of curricula to local economic realities and promoting stronger linkages between education and employment opportunities are also essential. In addition, addressing socio-economic barriers that hinder participation in education should remain a key focus. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes for graduates better to understand the long-term impact of education on livelihoods, and conduct comparative studies across regions to capture contextual variations. Further investigation into the role of informal learning and community-based initiatives may also yield valuable insights into alternative pathways to enhance educational effectiveness and social transformation.

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