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CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS IN RECONFIGURING EDUCATION: ENSURING QUALITY, ACCESS, AND EQUITY

***Annotation.** Education systems today are facing serious challenges in maintaining quality while ensuring equal access for all learners. Outdated curricula, limited teacher training, funding constraints, and weak governance structures affect institutional effectiveness. At the same time, marginalized and vulnerable groups continue to struggle with barriers related to affordability, digital access, safety, and inclusion. Reconfiguring education requires a balanced approach that strengthens academic standards while expanding opportunities for disadvantaged communities. This article examines these key challenges and suggests practical, future-focused reforms such as technology-enabled learning, inclusive policies, improved governance, and sustainable financing to build an equitable and resilient education system.*

Key words: *education, challenges, pathways, quality, access, equity.*

Анотація. *Сьогодні системи освіти стикаються із серйозними викликами у підтримці якості, забезпечуючи при цьому рівний доступ для всіх учнів. Застарілі навчальні програми, обмежена підготовка вчителів, обмеження фінансування та слабкі структури управління впливають на ефективність інституцій. Водночас маргіналізовані та вразливі групи продовжують боротися з бар'єрами, пов'язаними з доступністю, цифровим доступом, безпекою та інклюзією. Реконфігурація освіти вимагає збалансованого підходу, який зміцнює академічні стандарти, одночасно розширюючи можливості для неблагополучних громад. У цій статті розглядаються ці ключові виклики та пропонуються практичні, орієнтовані на майбутнє реформи, такі як навчання на основі технологій, інклюзивна політика, покращене управління та стале фінансування для побудови справедливої та стійкої системи освіти.*

Ключові слова: *освіта, виклики, шляхи, якість, доступ, рівність.*

Introduction. Education systems today are facing serious challenges in maintaining quality while ensuring equal access for all learners. Outdated curricula, limited teacher training, funding constraints, and weak governance structures affect institutional effectiveness [1]. At the same time, marginalized and vulnerable groups continue to struggle with barriers related to affordability, digital access, safety, and inclusion. Reconfiguring education requires a balanced approach that strengthens academic standards while expanding opportunities for disadvantaged communities.

The aim of the article is to examine current key challenges and propose practical, future-oriented reforms, such as technology-based learning, inclusive policies, improved governance, and sustainable financing to build an equitable and resilient education system.

The Objectives of the article:

- To examine the major quality-related challenges within contemporary education.
- To analyse structural, financial, and governance constraints affecting educational institutions.
- To evaluate issues of access, equity, and safety in education, especially for marginalised and vulnerable populations and to propose future-oriented reforms.

Review of Literature. The question of equity continues to dominate contemporary education discourse. UNESCO (2023) [5] estimates that 251 million children and youth remain out of school globally, with disparities concentrated among girls, rural populations, children with disabilities, and low-income households. In India, inequities persist across states and socio-economic groups (UNICEF, 2022) [8]. Concerning quality gaps in learning, the World Bank (2023) [10] highlights learning poverty and weak foundational literacy, while OECD (2023) [4] links poor outcomes to rote pedagogy and weak vocational pathways. Persistent teacher shortages and funding constraints further undermine system performance. Global Partnership for Education (2023) [2] reports inadequate teacher recruitment and infrastructure deficits in low- and middle-income countries. In India, public expenditure remains around 3% of GDP, below the 4–6% benchmark recommended by UNESCO (2023) [5], reflecting clear financing and policy gaps in education. World Bank (2022) [9] further stresses that inefficient allocation and weak governance reduce the impact of spending. Studies also identify structural failures—access and barriers to participation, including low upper-secondary completion rates and digital exclusion (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023) [6]. Safety concerns persist, particularly in fragile contexts, with conflict and crisis disrupting schooling (Education Cannot Wait, 2023; UNHCR, 2023) [7]. The International Labour Organisation (2022) links dropout rates to poverty and child labour. Collectively, the literature calls for sustained financing, governance reform, inclusive policies, and technology-enabled transformation to ensure equitable, safe, and high-quality education systems in India and globally.

Question of Equity. Across the world, access to education remains deeply unequal. Recent estimates show that around 251 million children and young people are still out of school globally (UNESCO, 2023) [5]. The situation is especially concerning in Sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly one in five adolescents of lower secondary school age are not enrolled. Poverty continues to be a powerful barrier—children from the poorest families are up to four times more likely to be excluded from school compared to those from wealthier households. Gender disparities also persist, particularly in low-income countries, where girls are about 2.5 times more likely than boys to miss out on secondary education. In addition, children with disabilities face even greater challenges, being two to three times more likely to be excluded from schooling. These figures highlight that educational access is not just a matter of availability, but of equity and inclusion.

Quality Gaps in Learning. Many education systems continue to struggle with significant quality gaps in learning. Pre-university training often does not adequately prepare students for the academic and practical demands of higher education, leading to weak transitions and high dropout rates. At the same time, curricula in many institutions remain outdated and disconnected from contemporary industry needs, technological advancements, and real-world challenges. Vocational education and adult learning pathways are also underdeveloped, limiting opportunities for skill development and lifelong learning. Furthermore, an over-reliance on rote memorization and exam-oriented teaching restricts students' ability to think critically, solve problems creatively, and apply knowledge in practical contexts, thereby weakening overall educational outcomes.

Teacher Shortages and Funding Constraints. Education systems across many countries continue to face serious structural and financial challenges. There is a persistent shortage of qualified teachers due to inadequate recruitment, poor retention strategies, and limited professional support. At the same time, chronic underfunding of educational infrastructure and widening financing gaps remain major concerns, with many nations failing to allocate the recommended 15% of domestic revenue or

at least 4% of GDP to education. These funding limitations directly affect access and participation. Globally, only about 60% of youth complete upper secondary education, and in low-income countries, completion rates fall below 30%. Infrastructure deficits further deepen inequality—nearly half of schools in Sub-Saharan Africa lack electricity, restricting digital learning opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these vulnerabilities even more starkly, as 1,6 billion learners experienced school closures, and at least 463 million had no access to remote learning alternatives.

Structural Failures. Many education systems continue to struggle with inefficient governance and fragmented policy frameworks, which weaken coordination and long-term planning. There is often little integration between secondary, pre-university, and higher education, resulting in disconnected pathways and poor academic transitions. Weak benchmarking and limited accountability mechanisms further reduce the effectiveness of reforms and quality assurance efforts. Learning outcomes reflect these structural shortcomings—for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 70% of children are unable to read a simple text by the age of ten. Persistent attendance gaps and high dropout rates, frequently linked to poverty and child labour, continue to disrupt educational continuity. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these inequalities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable learners. As a result, many schools remain under-equipped—both academically and technologically—to prepare students for modern economic, social, and global challenges.

Safety and Access. Children living in disaster-prone areas, conflict-affected regions, and migrant or refugee communities often experience severe disruptions to their education, with schooling frequently interrupted or entirely inaccessible. These unstable conditions not only affect academic progress but also impact emotional and psychological well-being. Marginalized groups, including displaced populations and minority communities, often struggle to access safe and supportive learning environments. In addition, inadequate infrastructure—such as the lack of proper

classrooms, sanitation facilities, electricity, and learning resources—further limits the ability of education systems to provide inclusive and equitable opportunities for all learners.

Safety – Learning in Crisis. More than 224 million school-age children currently live in conflict-affected areas, where access to safe and continuous education remains highly uncertain. Between 2020 and 2022, attacks on educational institutions increased by 17% globally in fragile and crisis-affected regions, further threatening students and teachers.

Beyond conflict, basic school conditions remain inadequate in many low-income countries, with fewer than half of schools having access to essential sanitation facilities.

Safety concerns are not limited to infrastructure alone, as nearly one in three students worldwide report experiencing bullying, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen protective, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.

Financing and Policy Gaps in Education. UNESCO recommends 4–6% of GDP or 15–20% of public expenditure for education. Nearly one-third of low-income countries spend below 4% of GDP on education. Many low-income countries allocate less than 20% of their education budget to secondary education, limiting expansion capacity [5].

Financing and Policy Gaps in Education. India (3,0% of GDP) falls below the UNESCO-recommended minimum of 4%, reflecting a clear financing gap despite its large learner population [6].

This underinvestment contributes to quality deficits, teacher shortages, and infrastructure constraints, particularly in public education (Table 1).

Financing and Policy Gaps in Education. Higher education spending alone does not guarantee strong educational outcomes.

It highlights the importance of how effectively funds are allocated, governed, and translated into quality learning.

Table 1

Financing and Policy Gaps in Education

Country	% GDP to Education	% Gov't Budget to Education
India	3,0	13,0
USA	5,0	13,0
UK	4,2	11,0
China	4,0	14,0
Niger	4,1	12,8
Burkina Faso	5,3	20,0 – 22,0
Ethiopia	4,1	Varies

UNESCO recommended targets: $\geq 4\%$ of GDP or $\geq 15\%$ of public expenditure [5]

Financing and Policy Gaps. Reduced investment in education significantly weakens a nation's long-term social and economic development, limiting opportunities for future generations. When benchmarking and performance monitoring remain optional or inconsistently applied, accountability suffers, and systemic improvements become difficult to measure. To build resilient, inclusive, and future-ready learning societies, governments must commit to sustained and strategic investment in education, supported by clear standards, transparent evaluation mechanisms, and strong governance frameworks.

The learning outcomes (quality indicator) are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Learning Outcomes (Quality Indicator)

Country	Literacy Proficiency by Age 10, %
India	50
USA	85
UK	90
China	95
France	92

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2023). Education finance indicators [6].

The learning outcome (access & equity) are shown in Table 3.

Table 3**Learning Outcomes (Access & Equity)**

Country	Out-of-School Children, %	Secondary Completion Rate , %
India	8–10	75
USA	2	90
UK	2	88
China	3	85
France	1	92

Source:OECD. (2023). Education at a Glance [4].

Reconfiguration for the Future. The following areas are to be empowered.

Problem-Solving Skills: Shift from rote memorization to analytical and creative learning. **Green Education** integrates sustainability and environmental awareness into curricula. **Digital & Technology Integration,** Harness digital tools to expand access and personalize learning. **Equity & Inclusion,** ensure every student, regardless of background, has equal opportunity to thrive. Despite global progress, secondary education remains the weakest link in many systems, especially in low-income and conflict-affected regions.

Conclusions. This paper highlights that addressing the interconnected challenges of equity, access, and safety in education demands a comprehensive and sustained approach. Ensuring meaningful progress requires consistent, adequate financing that prioritises long-term educational development over short-term adjustments. Investment in infrastructure, such as safe buildings, digital connectivity, sanitation, and learning resources, is essential to create supportive and inclusive environments. Gender-responsive and inclusive policies must be strengthened to ensure that girls, children with disabilities, marginalized communities, and vulnerable groups are not left behind. Additionally, building crisis-resilient education systems is critical to withstand disruptions caused by conflicts, pandemics, or natural disasters. Together, these measures form the foundation for creating equitable, safe, and future-ready education systems.

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