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Concept paper

Beyond Enrolment: Learning Inequality, Educational Quality, and Institutional Challenges in Primary Education in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has expanded access to primary education and achieved high levels of school participation, yet enrolment does not necessarily translate into meaningful learning. Persistent differences in foundational literacy and numeracy, uneven school conditions, household poverty, disability-related barriers and variations in teaching support raise questions about the equity and quality of primary education. This concept paper examines the gap between access and learning in Bangladesh through a qualitative synthesis of academic literature and institutional publications. It integrates the capability approach, the social reproduction perspective and a learning-equity framework to explain how household resources, school-level conditions and institutional arrangements shape children's educational opportunities. The analysis develops five connected themes: the transition from enrolment to learning; socioeconomic and geographic inequalities; teacher capacity and classroom practice; school governance and policy implementation; and the role of families and communities. It argues that learning inequality is produced through interactions between conditions outside school and processes within schools, rather than through a single deficit in children, parents or teachers. The paper proposes an equity-centred framework that places foundational learning, inclusive teaching, teacher development, accountable school governance and targeted support for disadvantaged learners at the centre of primary education reform. It concludes that Bangladesh's next phase of educational progress should be assessed not only by whether children enter and complete primary school, but also by whether all children acquire the knowledge, skills and agency needed to participate in society and continue learning.

Keywords
[primary education; foundational learning; educational inequality; Bangladesh; teacher development; inclusive education.]

1. Introduction

Bangladesh has made considerable progress in expanding access to primary education. School participation has increased over time, gender gaps in enrolment have narrowed, and completion has improved. However, access and learning are not equivalent outcomes. A child may attend school regularly and progress through grades without acquiring the reading comprehension, writing and mathematical skills expected at that stage. The distinction between being enrolled and being able to learn is central to current debates about education quality in Bangladesh.

Recent evidence illustrates the scale of this challenge. UNICEF's 2025 analysis of the situation of children in Bangladesh reports that 51 per cent of children aged 7–14 are unable to read a basic paragraph, while the 2025 Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) preliminary findings show that only 24 per cent of children of the appropriate age for grades 2–3 demonstrate foundational reading skills and 18 per cent demonstrate foundational numeracy skills (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS] & UNICEF, 2025; UNICEF, 2025a). These indicators refer to different age groups and measures and should not be treated as interchangeable. Taken together, however, they point to a serious challenge in ensuring that children acquire essential competencies during the early years of schooling.

The learning challenge is not simply a matter of individual ability or effort. Children's opportunities to learn are shaped by the conditions in which they live and the institutions through which education is delivered. Household poverty can affect attendance, nutrition, access to books and the time available for study. Geographic location can shape the availability and quality of schools. Disability, language, gender, migration and exposure to social exclusion can influence whether children can participate meaningfully. Within schools, teacher preparation, classroom size, instructional materials, assessment practices, leadership and school-community relationships all affect the learning environment.

A narrow policy focus on enrolment can therefore conceal inequalities in the experience and outcomes of education. If children from disadvantaged households enter school but receive less instructional support, attend irregularly or are

taught in classrooms that do not respond to their learning levels, formal access may coexist with substantive exclusion. In this sense, learning inequality can emerge inside the education system even when children are physically present in school.

The distinction is particularly important in a country with diverse educational providers and local contexts. Government primary schools, registered non-government primary schools, kindergarten institutions, madrasas and non-formal learning programmes may differ in resources, management, teacher conditions and accountability arrangements. Rural, urban, remote, char and haor communities may also experience different barriers. A national average can therefore conceal substantial differences across locations and social groups.

This paper examines primary education in Bangladesh through the question of how access can be converted into equitable learning. It does not report original interviews, surveys or classroom observations. Instead, it develops a qualitative concept paper based on secondary literature and institutional evidence. The paper brings together three perspectives: the capability approach, the social reproduction perspective and an equity-centred understanding of foundational learning. The purpose is to explain how household circumstances, school practices and institutional arrangements interact to shape children's learning opportunities.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it reframes primary education progress as a transition from access and participation towards meaningful learning. Second, it treats educational inequality as relational and institutional: differences in learning are produced through interactions among household resources, school quality and public systems. Third, it develops a policy framework that connects foundational learning with inclusive pedagogy, teacher development, school leadership, family engagement and targeted support for disadvantaged children.

The central argument is that improving primary education requires more than increasing enrolment or distributing learning materials. It requires a system capable of identifying what children know, responding to different learning needs, supporting teachers, reducing barriers to participation and ensuring that public resources reach the schools and learners facing the greatest disadvantage.

1.1 Research problem

Bangladesh's primary education system faces a dual challenge: ensuring that every child can access and complete primary schooling, and ensuring that attendance results in foundational learning. These challenges are connected but not identical. Policies that expand access may not automatically improve classroom instruction, while interventions that raise average test scores may fail to reach children who are absent, excluded or learning far below grade expectations.

The problem is intensified when educational disadvantage accumulates. Children who begin school without adequate early childhood preparation may struggle with early reading and number concepts. If teaching proceeds according to the expected grade level rather than children's actual understanding, early gaps can widen. Weak foundational skills then make it harder to understand later lessons, participate in classroom activities and transition successfully to secondary education. The result can be a cycle in which children remain enrolled but fall progressively further behind.

Existing discussions often examine access, teacher quality, poverty, governance and learning outcomes separately. A more integrated analysis is needed to show how these factors interact and why similar interventions may produce different results across communities. This paper addresses that conceptual gap by connecting household-level conditions, school-level processes and system-level governance within one analytical framework.

1.2 Research objectives

To examine the distinction between primary school access, participation, completion and foundational learning in Bangladesh.

To explore how household poverty, geography, gender, disability and social marginalisation shape children's learning opportunities.

To analyse the roles of teacher preparation, classroom practices, assessment and school leadership in educational quality.

To examine how policy implementation and institutional capacity influence equity and learning outcomes.

To develop an integrated conceptual framework and policy directions for improving equitable primary education.

1.3 Research questions

How can the gap between enrolment and foundational learning in primary education in Bangladesh be understood?

How do socioeconomic and geographic inequalities influence children's opportunities to participate and learn?

What school-level factors shape the quality and inclusiveness of teaching and learning?

How do governance, resource allocation and policy implementation affect primary education outcomes?

What policy approaches can support equitable foundational learning for disadvantaged children?

1.4 Significance and scope

The paper is relevant to development studies because primary education is both a public service and a foundation of human development. It is also relevant to education policymakers, school leaders, teachers, local government institutions and development organisations concerned with learning equity. The focus is on primary education in Bangladesh, with attention to foundational literacy and numeracy, inclusion, teacher capacity and institutional implementation. Early childhood education and secondary transition are discussed where they directly affect primary learning, but they are not treated as the principal subject of the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From universal access to meaningful learning

The expansion of school access has historically been a major objective of education policy in low- and middle-income countries. Enrolment, attendance and completion are important indicators because children cannot benefit from schooling if they are excluded from it. Yet these indicators provide only

partial information about educational quality. A system can make progress in bringing children into classrooms while still failing to ensure that they acquire essential skills.

The concept of learning poverty captures this distinction by combining the share of children who are out of school with the share of those in school who do not reach minimum reading proficiency by around age ten. The World Bank and UNESCO Institute for Statistics use the measure to draw attention to the relationship between access and learning quality (World Bank, 2024). Its value lies in showing that exclusion from school and low learning among enrolled children are connected dimensions of the same challenge.

Foundational learning refers to the basic literacy, numeracy and transferable skills that support later learning and participation. Reading with understanding, writing clearly, recognising numbers, performing basic operations and applying reasoning are not isolated school subjects. They enable children to learn across the curriculum and to use knowledge in everyday life. When these competencies are not established in the early grades, subsequent schooling becomes more difficult and the costs of remediation increase (World Bank, 2025).

The 2025 MICS preliminary findings provide a more specific picture of early-grade learning in Bangladesh. Only 24 per cent of children of the appropriate age for grades 2–3 met the survey's foundational reading criteria, and 18 per cent met its foundational numeracy criteria. The assessment criteria include several tasks rather than a single recognition item, making the indicators demanding measures of integrated early-grade skills (BBS & UNICEF, 2025). These results should be interpreted in relation to the survey's age and grade definitions, not as direct estimates of all primary-school pupils.

The implication is that education quality must be assessed through what children can do, not only through the inputs provided or the years they spend in school. Textbooks, buildings, teacher deployment and school attendance matter, but they are means rather than final outcomes. A learning-centred system needs reliable assessment, effective classroom interaction and timely support for children who are not progressing.

2.2 Socioeconomic inequality and educational opportunity

Household socioeconomic status is strongly connected to children's educational opportunities. Poverty can influence school participation through direct and indirect costs, including transportation, uniforms, learning materials, private tutoring and the opportunity cost of children's time. Even where public primary education is formally free, families may face costs that affect attendance and learning. Children may also contribute to household work, care responsibilities or income generation, reducing the time and energy available for schoolwork.

UNICEF's 2025 work on disadvantaged children in Bangladesh highlights how low-income status, marginalisation and barriers to participation can affect children's ability to remain in education and acquire foundational skills. Its Educate the Most Disadvantaged Children programme uses community-based accelerated learning, locally recruited female teachers and targeted instruction to support out-of-school and at-risk children (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). The programme's reported transition and learning results demonstrate the potential value of targeted support, although programme-level results should not automatically be generalised to the whole national system.

Social inequality also affects the quality of schooling available to children. Families with greater resources may supplement public education through private tutoring, digital devices, books and access to better-resourced institutions. Children from poorer households may depend almost entirely on the instruction and materials available in their school. When public school quality varies, household wealth can influence not only whether children attend school but also the quality of learning they receive.

2.3 Geographic inequality and differentiated school contexts

Geography shapes educational opportunity through distance, transport, infrastructure, teacher availability and the stability of school operations. Children in remote rural settlements, chars, haor areas, coastal communities and urban informal settlements may face different combinations of barriers. A school may exist within a district but remain difficult to reach during particular seasons. In other places, overcrowded classrooms and limited facilities may affect the quality of instruction even when access is physically available.

A uniform policy response may therefore have unequal effects. The same textbook distribution or teacher training programme may be easier to implement in a well-connected school than in a remote institution with limited staffing and infrastructure. Equity requires needs-based planning that recognises local conditions and allocates additional support where the barriers are greatest.

2.4 Teachers, pedagogy and classroom learning

Teachers are central to the relationship between policy and children's actual learning experiences. Curriculum documents and textbooks influence what is intended to be taught, but teachers shape how content is interpreted, explained, practised and assessed. Teacher subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, expectations, classroom management and capacity to respond to diverse learners therefore matter for educational quality.

Differentiated instruction is particularly relevant where children in the same grade have different levels of reading and numeracy. If teachers teach only to the assumed grade level, children who have fallen behind may be unable to follow the lesson. Teaching at the right level involves identifying what learners can currently do, grouping or supporting them flexibly, using suitable materials and checking progress. UNICEF Innocenti's 2026 work on differentiated classrooms in Bangladesh secondary schools is not direct evidence about primary schools, but it provides relevant system-level lessons about assessment, levelled materials and sustained teacher support. These lessons should be adapted and tested in primary contexts rather than transferred uncritically (Nugroho et al., 2026).

Class size and workload can influence the feasibility of individual feedback, but class size alone does not determine learning quality. Classroom routines, lesson planning, formative assessment, teacher attendance, instructional time and the availability of materials also matter. A teacher working with a large class may still use peer learning and structured

tasks, while a smaller class may produce weak learning if instruction is poorly aligned with children's needs.

2.5 Inclusive education and children at risk of exclusion

Inclusive primary education requires more than allowing children from different backgrounds to enrol. It requires schools to identify and reduce barriers that prevent children from participating, learning and progressing. Children with disabilities may face inaccessible buildings, a lack of assistive devices, limited specialist support, inflexible teaching methods and negative attitudes. Children from linguistic or ethnic minorities may encounter difficulties when the language of instruction differs from the language used at home. Children affected by poverty, migration, child labour, early marriage or family disruption may also face interrupted schooling.

UNICEF's Bangladesh education overview identifies children with disabilities, children from the poorest households and children living in disaster-affected areas among groups at elevated risk of exclusion. It also highlights the continuing importance of child marriage and child labour in shaping school continuation, particularly as children grow older (UNICEF, n.d.). These barriers show that educational exclusion is connected to wider systems of social protection, child protection, health and local development.

Inclusive teaching requires teachers to recognise learner diversity and adapt communication, classroom organisation, assessment and materials. Accessibility also involves school infrastructure, sanitation, safe routes to school and mechanisms for responding to bullying or discrimination. Where children require specialised support, mainstream schools need referral pathways and access to appropriate services. Inclusion should be understood as a responsibility of the education system, not as a problem located in the child.

2.6 School governance, financing and policy implementation

Primary education quality depends on the capacity of institutions to translate policy commitments into reliable services. This includes planning, teacher recruitment and deployment, training, procurement, school maintenance, assessment, monitoring and local accountability. The Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) framework in Bangladesh has addressed quality, access and participation, and programme planning, financing and management. The Annual Sector Performance Report describes components related to curriculum, teaching-learning materials, teacher education, continuous professional development, assessment, infrastructure, out-of-school children and education in emergencies (Directorate of Primary Education [DPE], 2019).

The existence of a policy or programme does not guarantee effective implementation. Implementation depends on adequate financing, administrative coordination, timely procurement, data quality, local capacity and feedback from schools. Raihan, Hossen and Khondker (2024) identify institutional challenges in public spending on primary education, including resource allocation, teacher recruitment and retention, training, infrastructure, curriculum and monitoring. Their analysis underscores that education outcomes are shaped by institutional arrangements, not only by the design of individual interventions.

2.7 Research gap

The literature and policy evidence identify persistent challenges in access, learning, inclusion, teacher development and institutional implementation. However, these dimensions are often examined separately. This paper addresses the need for an integrated conceptual account of how household disadvantage, school-level instructional processes and system-level governance combine to shape learning inequality. Its contribution is not to claim that these issues have been ignored, but to connect them within a single analytical framework focused on the conversion of school access into foundational learning.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 The capability approach

The capability approach, associated particularly with Amartya Sen, evaluates development in terms of people's substantive freedoms and opportunities to achieve valued ways of living. Applied to education, it shifts attention from the formal availability of schooling towards what children are actually able to learn and become. Enrolment is an important resource or opportunity, but it is not equivalent to the capability to read, reason, communicate, participate and continue learning.

Children may attend the same school but have different capabilities to benefit from it. Disability, language, health, nutrition, household responsibilities and access to learning materials can affect how educational resources are converted into learning. The capability approach therefore highlights conversion factors: personal, social and environmental conditions that influence whether resources become real opportunities. It also directs attention to agency, including children's ability to participate in learning and express their needs.

This perspective supports an equity-centred understanding of primary education. The objective is not merely to distribute identical inputs to every school, but to ensure that children with different circumstances have a fair opportunity to achieve essential learning. Some learners may require additional time, assistive devices, language support, remedial instruction or social protection to reach comparable levels of capability.

3.2 Social reproduction and educational inequality

The social reproduction perspective draws attention to the ways institutions can reproduce wider social inequalities. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that educational systems may privilege forms of cultural knowledge and communication that are more familiar to socially advantaged groups. In primary education, differences in parental education, language, familiarity with school expectations and access to learning resources can influence how easily children navigate classroom demands.

This perspective does not imply that schools inevitably reproduce inequality. Rather, it asks how school practices may unintentionally reward some forms of prior knowledge while treating others as deficits. For example, children whose caregivers can support homework, purchase supplementary materials or communicate confidently with teachers may receive advantages beyond classroom instruction. If teaching assumes that all children begin with the same level of

preparation, differences outside school can become differences in school performance.

3.3 Foundational learning and educational effectiveness

A learning-centred framework focuses on the conditions that enable children to acquire and apply foundational skills. It connects curriculum expectations, teacher knowledge, instructional time, classroom practice, assessment and learner support. Foundational literacy and numeracy are cumulative: children need repeated opportunities to practise, receive feedback and connect new knowledge with what they already understand.

Assessment is most useful when it informs teaching rather than merely ranking learners. Formative assessment can help teachers identify whether children can decode words, understand a passage, write a sentence, recognise numbers or solve a basic problem. Such information can guide lesson planning and targeted support. Assessment should also be inclusive and appropriate to children's language and disability-related needs.

3.4 Integrated conceptual framework

The paper integrates the three perspectives through a multi-level framework. At the household level, poverty, caregiver education, health, language, gender relations, disability and time constraints shape children's readiness and capacity to participate. At the school level, teacher preparation, instructional practice, materials, class organisation, assessment, leadership and safety shape the learning environment. At the system level, financing, teacher deployment, curriculum, monitoring, local governance and social protection shape the resources and incentives available to schools and families. These factors interact to influence attendance, participation, foundational learning, progression and completion.

The framework proposes that equitable learning requires both adequate educational resources and the institutional capacity to convert those resources into meaningful opportunities. It also recognises feedback effects: children who fall behind may lose confidence or attendance, while schools with weak learning data may fail to identify the scale and distribution of learning gaps. Effective interventions must therefore address multiple levels rather than rely on a single input.

4. Methodological Approach

4.1 Research design

This paper adopts a qualitative conceptual design informed by secondary literature and institutional documents. It does not claim to conduct original fieldwork, interviews, focus groups, classroom observations or a nationally representative survey. Its purpose is to interpret existing evidence and develop an integrated framework for understanding primary education inequality in Bangladesh.

A concept paper is appropriate because the central task is theoretical integration rather than the estimation of a new empirical relationship. The paper draws on established theoretical perspectives and compares relevant findings from academic and institutional sources. It uses qualitative interpretation to identify recurring mechanisms, tensions and policy implications.

4.2 Source identification and selection

The literature informing the paper was identified through targeted searches using combinations of terms such as primary education Bangladesh, foundational literacy, foundational numeracy, learning poverty, teacher development, inclusive education, school governance, education inequality and disadvantaged children. Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic publications, government education-sector documents and reports from recognised international organisations.

Sources were considered relevant when they addressed one or more of the following: access and completion in primary education; early-grade learning outcomes; socioeconomic and geographic inequality; teacher preparation and classroom instruction; disability and social inclusion; school governance and public financing; or targeted interventions for disadvantaged learners. Foundational theoretical works were included where they provided concepts useful for interpreting educational inequality.

The paper uses purposive selection rather than a fully systematic review protocol. It does not claim exhaustive coverage of all publications, does not report a PRISMA flow diagram and does not conduct formal risk-of-bias scoring. The selection process is intended to support a concept paper, not to provide a reproducible systematic evidence review.

4.3 Analytical procedure

The selected sources were read for concepts, findings and policy arguments relevant to the research questions. Information was organised into five broad analytical categories: access and learning; household and geographic inequality; teachers and classroom practice; inclusion and exclusion; and governance and implementation. These categories were compared across sources and interpreted through the capability approach, social reproduction perspective and foundational learning framework.

The synthesis distinguishes between national indicators, programme-specific results and findings from individual studies. National survey indicators are not treated as equivalent to school-level assessment results, and programme outcomes are not generalised to the whole education system. Where a source concerns secondary education rather than primary education, it is used only for cautious system-level insights and is identified as such.

4.4 Trustworthiness and limitations

Credibility is supported through the use of multiple source types and the comparison of academic, government and institutional evidence. Transparency is maintained by identifying the paper as a conceptual synthesis and by distinguishing published evidence from the interpretation developed here. The analysis also recognises differences in indicator definitions, age groups, survey periods and programme settings.

The paper has several limitations. It does not generate new primary data and cannot provide first-hand accounts from children, parents, teachers or school leaders. The available literature may provide uneven coverage of particular regions, school types and marginalised groups. Institutional reports may use different assessment tools and reporting periods, limiting

direct comparison. The paper's framework should therefore be treated as an analytical proposition that can guide future empirical research, not as a tested causal model.

5. Thematic Analysis and Conceptual Discussion

5.1 Enrolment is not the same as learning

The first theme is the distinction between formal access and substantive learning. Enrolment and attendance are essential because they provide the opportunity to participate in education. Yet the learning evidence suggests that many children do not acquire expected foundational competencies during the early grades. The gap indicates that the education system must evaluate not only whether children are present but also whether teaching enables them to understand and use what they are taught.

A child may attend school for several years while remaining unable to read a short passage with comprehension or perform basic numerical tasks. This can happen when instructional methods do not respond to children's actual learning levels, when attendance is irregular, when teachers lack support or when assessment fails to identify learning gaps early. The child may be promoted to the next grade without having mastered essential competencies, making later learning increasingly difficult.

The 2025 MICS early-grade indicators are particularly important because they assess integrated reading and numeracy skills among children around grades 2–3. The reported proportions—24 per cent for foundational reading and 18 per cent for foundational numeracy among children of the appropriate age—suggest that early-grade learning requires focused attention (BBS & UNICEF, 2025). The indicators should be interpreted carefully, but they reinforce the need to prioritise foundational skills from the beginning of primary school.

5.2 Household disadvantage shapes the capacity to benefit from school

The second theme concerns the influence of household conditions on learning. Poverty can affect the ability to afford transport, learning materials, nutritious food and a quiet place to study. Children may undertake domestic work, care for siblings or contribute to household income. These responsibilities can reduce attendance, homework time and concentration. For families experiencing unstable employment or housing, maintaining regular school participation may be difficult even when parents value education.

The capability approach helps explain why identical school provision may produce unequal outcomes. Children enter school with different health, language, early learning experiences and support networks. These differences are not fixed measures of ability; they reflect the circumstances in which children grow and the resources available to them. An equitable school system needs to recognise such differences and provide appropriate support rather than interpreting them as individual failure.

Targeted interventions can help address these constraints. UNICEF Innocenti's 2025 report on the Educate the Most Disadvantaged Children programme describes community-based accelerated learning for out-of-school and at-risk children aged 7–14. The programme reports reaching more than 243,000 children across five districts, with 84 per cent transitioning into formal schools and strong reported progress in basic reading and numeracy (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). These are programme findings, not national estimates, but they illustrate how flexible provision and targeted teaching can support learners who have been poorly served by conventional pathways.

5.3 Geographic and institutional differences produce unequal learning environments

The third theme is the unequal distribution of educational conditions across places and school contexts. A school may be formally available but lack adequate classrooms, sanitation, safe water, accessible infrastructure or sufficient teaching staff. Distance and seasonal travel barriers can affect attendance in remote areas. Urban schools may face overcrowding and high demand, while schools serving poor or mobile populations may struggle to maintain continuity when children move between locations.

The social reproduction perspective suggests that unequal school conditions can convert wider social inequality into educational inequality. Families with resources may compensate for weak school provision through tutoring, books or digital learning. Families without these resources depend more heavily on the quality of public provision. When school quality is uneven, the children who most need strong public education may receive the least additional support.

A needs-based approach to resource allocation is therefore important. Equal per-school allocation may appear fair but can be insufficient where schools face very different levels of need. Remote schools may require additional support for teacher deployment and transport. Schools serving children with disabilities may need accessible facilities and assistive materials. Schools with high numbers of learners below grade level may need remedial resources and coaching. Equity requires that allocation responds to barriers and not only to enrolment totals.

5.4 Teacher capacity is a system responsibility

The fourth theme concerns teachers and the conditions that enable effective teaching. Teachers are often expected to implement curriculum changes, assess learning, manage diverse classrooms, communicate with parents and complete administrative tasks. These responsibilities require professional knowledge, time, materials and institutional support. When teachers lack practical coaching or work under difficult conditions, policy expectations may not translate into classroom practice.

Teacher development should be continuous and practice-oriented. Teachers need opportunities to observe effective instruction, practise new methods, receive feedback and discuss challenges with colleagues. Training should be linked to the actual curriculum and to the learning levels of children in their classrooms. A programme that teaches general principles without follow-up may have limited influence on daily teaching routines.

Formative assessment is one practical mechanism for connecting teaching with learning. Teachers can use short reading activities, oral questions, number tasks and written work to identify what learners understand. The information can

guide flexible grouping, revision and targeted practice. It is important that assessment results are used to support learners rather than label them as weak or create pressure to exclude low-performing children.

Differentiated instruction is relevant in classrooms where children progress at different rates. The 2026 UNICEF Innocenti study on differentiated teaching in Bangladesh secondary schools reports that checking students' understanding at their actual level was consistently associated with better learning in the intervention context, while teachers needed continued support and appropriate materials (Nugroho et al., 2026). Because the study concerns secondary schools, its findings should not be presented as direct evidence of primary-school impact. Nevertheless, it raises questions that primary education research and teacher development programmes should examine.

5.5 Inclusion requires changes in institutions and classroom practice

The fifth theme is the need to understand inclusion as a system-wide responsibility. Children with disabilities may be enrolled but unable to participate fully if classrooms, toilets, learning materials and teaching methods are inaccessible. Children from linguistic minorities may struggle when instruction does not connect with their language experiences. Children affected by poverty, child labour, migration or family instability may need flexible support to maintain attendance and catch up after absence.

Inclusion requires early identification of barriers, accessible infrastructure, teacher preparation, appropriate materials and referral systems. It also requires attention to school culture. Bullying, stigma and low expectations can discourage children from participating even when formal access is available. Teachers and school leaders need practical guidance on adapting instruction and responding to discrimination.

The UNICEF Bangladesh education overview identifies children with disabilities and children from the poorest households among those most at risk of exclusion, while also pointing to child labour and child marriage as factors affecting continuation (UNICEF, n.d.). These challenges demonstrate that education policy cannot operate in isolation. Coordination with social protection, health, nutrition, disability services and child protection is essential.

5.6 Governance and policy implementation determine whether reform reaches classrooms

The sixth theme concerns the gap between policy design and implementation. Education programmes may set appropriate goals, but achieving them depends on recruitment, deployment, procurement, budget execution, school maintenance, data systems and local management. Delays or weaknesses in any of these processes can reduce the support available to teachers and learners.

Bangladesh's primary education development programme framework recognises quality, equitable access and participation, and programme planning, financing and management as connected areas. The Annual Sector Performance Report describes activities involving curriculum, textbooks, teacher recruitment, teacher education, continuous professional development, assessment, infrastructure, disability inclusion and out-of-school children (DPE, 2019). This breadth is important because learning outcomes depend on multiple components operating together.

Institutional analysis by Raihan et al. (2024) highlights challenges in public spending and the institutional arrangements needed to deliver primary education, including teacher recruitment and retention, training, infrastructure, curriculum and monitoring. This suggests that reform should be evaluated not only through policy commitments but also through the capacity to implement them consistently at school level.

6. Discussion

6.1 Reframing educational progress around learning equity

The analysis suggests that the next phase of primary education reform in Bangladesh should be judged by the distribution of learning, not only by aggregate access indicators. Enrolment and completion remain essential, but they do not reveal whether children can read with understanding, write meaningfully or apply basic mathematics. A learning-equity perspective asks which children are acquiring foundational skills, which are falling behind and what institutional conditions explain the differences.

This reframing does not reduce the importance of access. Rather, it recognises that access is a necessary but insufficient condition for educational opportunity. A system that improves learning among already advantaged pupils while leaving disadvantaged children behind may raise average performance but fail to achieve equitable development. Learning indicators should therefore be disaggregated by gender, disability, household economic status, location, language and school type where reliable data are available.

6.2 The interaction between home, school and system

This has an important implication for intervention design. Providing learning materials may have limited effects if teachers are not supported to use them. Teacher training may have limited effects if class time is disrupted or teachers lack basic resources. Parent engagement programmes may be ineffective if families face severe work and care constraints. Interventions should therefore be designed as complementary packages rather than isolated activities.

6.3 Equity is not identical treatment

An equity-centred system recognises that children may need different forms and levels of support to achieve essential learning. Some learners may need additional reading practice, language support, assistive technology, flexible attendance arrangements or accelerated learning. Providing these supports is not preferential treatment; it is a way to address unequal starting conditions and barriers to participation.

The capability approach is useful here because it focuses on real opportunities rather than identical inputs. A school may distribute the same textbook to every child, but a child with a visual impairment may need an accessible format. A child who has missed months of school may need targeted catch-up instruction. A child learning in a second language may need language-sensitive support. Equity requires the system to identify and respond to these differences.

6.4 Teacher professionalism and institutional support

Teachers are often discussed as the main determinant of learning, but this can lead to an unfair concentration of responsibility on individual educators. Teaching quality depends on preparation, manageable workloads, appropriate materials, leadership, coaching and supportive accountability. Teachers should be expected to deliver effective instruction, but institutions must create the conditions that make this possible.

Professional development should be sustained and connected to evidence from classrooms. School leaders can support collaborative planning, peer observation and discussion of learner progress. Education authorities can use monitoring data to identify where additional coaching or resources are needed. This approach treats teachers as professionals who require support and accountability, rather than as the sole cause of system weaknesses.

6.5 Inclusion and the risk of hidden exclusion

Formal enrolment statistics may conceal exclusion within the classroom. Children can be present but unable to hear, see, understand the language of instruction, access learning materials or participate in classroom activities. Others may attend irregularly because of poverty, care responsibilities or family mobility. These forms of hidden exclusion require measures that go beyond registration and attendance.

Schools need accessible ways to identify participation barriers and respond without stigmatising learners. This includes communication with families, disability-sensitive assessment, safe reporting mechanisms and links to social services. The aim is to ensure that children are not merely counted as enrolled but are recognised as active participants in learning.

6.6 Implications for human development and intergenerational inequality

Foundational learning is closely connected to later educational progression, employability, health literacy and civic participation. Children who leave primary school without basic skills may struggle to benefit from secondary education and vocational training. The consequences can extend into adulthood and influence the opportunities available to the next generation. In this sense, primary learning is both an educational outcome and a mechanism through which wider development inequalities may be reduced or reproduced.

A stronger primary education system can contribute to poverty reduction, but schooling alone cannot eliminate poverty. Its contribution depends on the quality of learning and on complementary policies that address nutrition, health, child protection, employment and social security. Education reform should therefore be embedded within a wider human development strategy.

7. Policy Recommendations

7.1 Establish foundational learning as a measurable system priority

Primary education authorities should set clear, age- and grade-appropriate expectations for reading, writing and numeracy in the early grades. Schools should use simple, reliable formative assessments to identify learning gaps and provide timely support. Assessment information should be used for instructional improvement and system planning, not for punitive ranking of children or schools. National reporting should distinguish enrolment, attendance, completion and learning outcomes, and disaggregate results where data quality permits.

7.2 Strengthen teacher preparation and continuous professional development

Teacher development should combine initial preparation, ongoing training, school-based coaching and peer learning. Training should focus on practical classroom skills, including early literacy instruction, numeracy pedagogy, formative assessment, inclusive teaching and classroom management. Teachers need access to appropriate materials and time to apply new approaches. Supportive supervision should identify implementation barriers and provide follow-up rather than rely only on inspection.

7.3 Support children who are behind through targeted and flexible learning

Schools should have structured opportunities for remedial and catch-up learning, particularly in the early grades. Instruction should be responsive to children's actual learning levels rather than assuming that all learners in a grade have mastered the same competencies. Accelerated and non-formal programmes can support out-of-school children, but pathways into formal schooling should be clear and adequately resourced. Programme quality should be assessed through sustained learning and reintegration, not enrolment in a short-term intervention alone.

7.4 Allocate resources according to need

Education financing should recognise differences in school context and learner needs. Remote schools, overcrowded institutions and schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged children may require additional resources. Needs-based allocation should consider infrastructure, teacher availability, accessibility, learning materials and the cost of reaching marginalised communities. Transparent criteria and public reporting can strengthen accountability and help ensure that additional resources reach the intended schools.

7.5 Make schools accessible and inclusive

Schools should improve physical accessibility, safe sanitation, water facilities, learning materials and classroom practices for children with disabilities and other marginalised learners. Teacher preparation should include disability awareness and inclusive pedagogy. Where specialised support is needed, schools should have referral links with relevant services. Anti-bullying and child-protection mechanisms should be accessible to children and caregivers.

7.6 Strengthen family and community engagement without shifting public responsibility

Schools should communicate regularly with caregivers through accessible and flexible channels. Parent engagement can include short reading activities, attendance discussions and information about children's progress. Programmes should recognise that caregivers differ in literacy, time and resources. School management committees and local stakeholders can contribute to oversight, but the state remains responsible for financing, staffing and ensuring the quality of public education.

7.7 Improve governance, data and coordination

Education authorities should strengthen data systems that connect school-level learning evidence with planning, teacher support and budget decisions. Monitoring should track whether policy inputs reach classrooms and whether disadvantaged learners benefit. Coordination is needed across primary education, early childhood development, disability services, nutrition, social protection and child protection. Independent evaluation and transparent reporting can help identify which interventions are effective in different contexts.

7.8 Build continuity between primary and secondary education

Primary education should prepare children with strong foundational skills and a smooth transition to secondary school. Communication between primary and secondary institutions can help identify learning gaps that emerge during transition. Secondary schools should not be expected to compensate entirely for weaknesses in primary learning, but they should have diagnostic and bridging support for students who arrive below expected levels. A coherent approach across education stages can reduce the accumulation of learning disadvantage.

8. Future Research Agenda

Finally, future studies should evaluate the cost, implementation quality and long-term outcomes of foundational learning interventions. Programme-level success should be assessed through sustained learning, attendance, transition and inclusion, not only the number of children reached. Comparative research across rural, urban and remote settings can help identify which components require adaptation to local conditions.

9. Conclusion

Bangladesh has made important progress in expanding primary education, but the challenge of ensuring that every child learns remains substantial. Enrolment and completion are necessary measures of progress, yet they do not show whether children acquire foundational literacy and numeracy or whether disadvantaged learners participate meaningfully in classroom life. Recent national and institutional evidence highlights the need to focus more strongly on early-grade learning and the distribution of educational opportunity.

This concept paper has argued that learning inequality is produced through interactions among household conditions, school-level practices and system-level institutions. Poverty, geography, disability, language and family responsibilities shape children's capacity to benefit from schooling. Teacher preparation, instructional methods, assessment, school leadership and learning materials influence what happens in classrooms. Financing, governance and implementation determine whether schools have the capacity to respond to diverse needs.

The capability approach shows why educational opportunity should be judged by what children are actually able to learn and do. The social reproduction perspective explains how unequal resources and school practices can reproduce wider disadvantage. A foundational learning framework identifies the instructional and institutional conditions needed to ensure that children acquire essential skills. Together, these perspectives support an equity-centred approach to primary education reform.

The paper concludes that Bangladesh's next phase of primary education development should move beyond an enrolment-centred understanding of success. It should prioritise foundational learning, sustained teacher development, inclusive classrooms, needs-based financing, meaningful family engagement and accountable governance. Such reforms must be coordinated with policies addressing poverty, health, nutrition, disability and child protection. The ultimate measure of progress is not simply whether children enter school, but whether every child has a fair opportunity to learn, progress and participate with dignity.

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