

Empowering Educators: The Role of Professional Development in Advancing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Classrooms

Noureen Lakhani¹

¹ Senior Principal, Aga Khan Education Service Pakistan. Email: lakhanisnoureen@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i4.786>

Abstract

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in education are essential for fostering a learning environment where all students, regardless of their backgrounds and abilities, can thrive. This study explores the role of teacher professional development in implementing EDI principles in classrooms, with a particular focus on Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and inclusive pedagogical strategies. Through a mixed-methods approach, data is collected from educators through surveys, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with teachers, school leaders, and special education experts across diverse educational settings. Findings reveal that teachers who receive targeted EDI training demonstrate improved competency in adapting instructional methods to meet diverse student needs, leading to increased student engagement and participation.

The research highlights that sustained professional development programs focusing on culturally responsive teaching, universal design for learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction significantly enhance teachers' ability to create inclusive classrooms. Collaborative teaching models, peer mentoring, and ongoing reflective practices further reinforce equitable learning opportunities. The study underscores the necessity of embedding EDI-focused professional development into teacher training programs to ensure systemic, long-term impact. Policy recommendations emphasize institutional commitment to continuous teacher learning, integration of inclusive curricula, and the development of assessment frameworks to measure the effectiveness of EDI initiatives. By providing empirical evidence, this research informs future strategies for equipping educators with the necessary skills to foster equitable and inclusive learning environments, ultimately benefiting all learners.

Keywords: Equity in Education, Teacher Professional Development, Inclusive Classrooms, Diversity in Learning, Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching

Introduction

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) have become central themes in contemporary education, reflecting both a moral imperative and a practical necessity in increasingly diverse classrooms. Schools today serve learners with a wide range of cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, and ability backgrounds. Global commitments, such as UNESCO's call for education as a human right and a vehicle for social justice, emphasize that every learner deserves equitable access to meaningful, high-quality education (UNESCO, 2021). Yet, despite these commitments, inequities persist in many systems, particularly for students with disabilities, learners from marginalized cultural groups, and those who experience systemic barriers to participation and achievement. Bridging this gap requires not only inclusive policies but also teachers who are equipped with the skills, mindsets, and strategies to enact equity and inclusion in daily practice.

At the classroom level, teachers are often the primary agents of change in advancing EDI. However,

research consistently shows that many educators feel underprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students (Florian, 2017). Traditional teacher preparation programs may provide foundational knowledge about inclusion but often lack depth in practical strategies such as designing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, or implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT). Similarly, in-service teachers may struggle to translate policy ideals into pedagogical practice without structured professional development (PD). The gap between policy and practice underscores the importance of investing in teacher learning as a mechanism for driving systemic change.

Professional development has long been recognized as a lever for improving instructional quality and student outcomes. Ainscow (2020) argues that equity in education is inseparable from the ongoing growth of teachers, who must constantly adapt to new student populations and shifting societal expectations. High-quality PD that is sustained, collaborative, and contextually relevant has been shown to significantly impact teacher practice and, by extension, student learning (Desimone & Garet, 2015). When PD explicitly addresses EDI, it equips educators to design inclusive learning environments that accommodate variability among learners rather than treating difference as an exception.

Key approaches that have proven effective in EDI-focused PD include UDL, differentiated instruction, and CRT. UDL emphasizes designing curriculum and instruction that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, ensuring accessibility from the outset (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Differentiated instruction, as Tomlinson (2014) outlines, requires teachers to adapt content, process, and assessment to meet individual learner needs. CRT emphasizes valuing students' cultural knowledge and experiences as assets for learning, challenging deficit-based perspectives, and affirming diverse identities (Banks, 2019). Together, these approaches create a robust framework for inclusive teaching, but they require teachers to acquire specific skills and dispositions, skills that are best developed through structured PD opportunities.

Another dimension of effective EDI-focused PD is its collaborative and reflective nature. Peer mentoring, co-teaching models, and professional learning communities provide spaces where teachers can share strategies, reflect on practice, and collectively problem-solve challenges related to inclusion (Florian, 2017). Reflective practices, such as equity audits or lesson study cycles, further help teachers identify biases, monitor equity gaps, and refine their approaches. Research suggests that when teachers engage in such collaborative and reflective PD, they are more likely to sustain inclusive practices over time (Ainscow, 2020).

Despite these promising developments, systemic barriers remain. Time constraints, limited resources, and inconsistent institutional support often prevent teachers from engaging in meaningful PD. Moreover, PD is sometimes treated as a one-off workshop rather than a sustained, iterative process. Such fragmented efforts are unlikely to produce lasting changes in teacher practice or student outcomes. As UNESCO (2021) stresses, achieving equity and inclusion in education requires systemic investment in continuous teacher learning, supported by institutional policies and leadership commitment.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the role of professional development in equipping teachers to advance EDI in classrooms. Specifically, it explores how PD focused on IEPs, UDL, differentiated instruction, and CRT influences teachers' ability to design inclusive learning environments. By using a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers, school leaders, and special education experts, the study provides both breadth and depth in understanding how PD translates into practice. The aim is not only to identify effective PD strategies but also to generate evidence that can inform policy and institutional efforts to embed EDI into teacher learning systems.

Ultimately, the pursuit of EDI in education is not an optional add-on but a fundamental responsibility of schools and teachers. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, the capacity of educators to

respond inclusively will determine whether education fulfills its promise as a pathway to equity and social mobility. Professional development stands out as a critical lever for change, enabling teachers to move beyond good intentions toward concrete practices that make learning accessible and meaningful for all. By situating PD at the heart of EDI efforts, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about how to prepare and support educators for the complexities of twenty-first-century classrooms.

Aims and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate how teacher professional development (PD) can advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in classrooms by equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to meet the needs of diverse learners. While policies increasingly mandate inclusive practices, their effectiveness depends largely on teachers' capacity to implement them in daily instruction. This study, therefore, focuses on how structured, sustained, and collaborative PD initiatives impact teachers' ability to design and deliver inclusive learning environments. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does EDI-focused professional development influence teachers' ability to adapt instructional strategies for diverse learners, including those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)?
2. What specific PD approaches, such as culturally responsive teaching (CRT), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction, are most effective in fostering inclusive practices?
3. In what ways do collaborative models (e.g., peer mentoring, co-teaching, professional learning communities) and reflective practices contribute to sustained implementation of EDI principles?
4. What institutional and policy-level supports are necessary to embed EDI-focused professional development into teacher education systems for long-term impact?

Literature Review

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are long-standing priorities in education, yet their integration into classroom practice remains uneven. Literature consistently points to the central role of teachers in translating inclusive policies into meaningful pedagogies. However, it also highlights that teachers cannot enact equity without structured opportunities for professional growth. Professional development (PD) thus emerges as a vital mechanism for bridging the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality (Ainscow, 2020).

Equity in Education

Equity in education refers to more than simply providing access; it emphasizes ensuring that all learners, regardless of background or ability, can succeed. Ainscow (2020) argues that equity requires schools to adapt to learner differences rather than expecting students to conform to rigid systems. This perspective is echoed by UNESCO (2021), which describes equity as the cornerstone of a new social contract for education. Literature underscores that equity cannot be achieved through policy statements alone; it requires changes in daily teaching practices that are responsive, inclusive, and culturally affirming.

Diversity and Multicultural Education

The concept of diversity in education draws attention to the varied cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts that students bring to classrooms. Banks (2019) has been a leading voice in multicultural education, highlighting that inclusive pedagogy must affirm students' identities while providing them access to shared academic knowledge. Multicultural frameworks emphasize that teachers must develop cultural competence: the ability to recognize, respect, and integrate students' cultural knowledge into teaching. Without targeted PD, however, many teachers feel unprepared to enact these principles effectively.

Inclusion and the Inclusive Classroom

Inclusion goes beyond integration; it emphasizes designing classrooms where all students, including those with disabilities and learning differences, participate fully. Florian (2017) argues that inclusion requires rethinking pedagogy to account for variability, rather than relying on separate systems for students with “special” needs. Literature stresses the importance of teacher attitudes, preparation, and support in advancing inclusion. Yet, without explicit training, many teachers default to deficit-based perspectives, perceiving diversity as a barrier rather than an asset (Sharma & Loreman, 2014). Professional development, when focused on inclusive pedagogical strategies, has been shown to shift these mindsets toward more asset-based orientations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction

Among the most influential frameworks for inclusion are Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction. UDL emphasizes providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to ensure all students can access and demonstrate learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Differentiated instruction, as outlined by Tomlinson (2014), calls for teachers to adapt content, process, and products to students’ readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Both approaches require teachers to move beyond “one-size-fits-all” teaching and to embrace flexibility and adaptability. However, research consistently notes that many teachers struggle to implement UDL or differentiation without targeted PD that models these strategies and supports their application in real classrooms (Courey et al., 2013).

Professional Development and EDI

The effectiveness of PD in promoting EDI depends on its design. Studies show that short, one-off workshops have limited impact, whereas sustained, collaborative, and practice-based PD leads to meaningful change in teacher practice (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Ainscow (2020) emphasizes that PD must not only build technical strategies but also foster reflective practice, enabling teachers to examine biases and assumptions that may undermine inclusion. Collaborative models, such as peer mentoring, professional learning communities, and co-teaching, are particularly effective, as they provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to share experiences and refine strategies.

Institutional and Policy Perspectives

The literature also highlights the importance of systemic support for EDI-focused PD. UNESCO (2021) calls for embedding teacher learning into broader institutional commitments to inclusion. Without policy frameworks and leadership that prioritize PD, even the most motivated teachers may find it difficult to sustain inclusive practices. Banks (2019) similarly notes that multicultural education requires systemic reform in curricula, assessments, and teacher training, not isolated efforts by individual teachers. Institutional backing ensures that PD is not a peripheral initiative but an integral part of teacher education systems.

Gaps in Literature

While there is substantial evidence on the importance of PD for advancing EDI, several gaps remain. First, more empirical research is needed on how specific PD approaches, such as UDL-based training, culturally responsive teaching workshops, or IEP-focused coaching, impact teacher practice and student outcomes across contexts. Second, there is limited exploration of how PD can be embedded systematically into career-long teacher development, rather than offered sporadically. Finally, while frameworks like UDL and CRT are widely endorsed, their practical translation into diverse educational contexts requires further study. These gaps justify the present study’s focus on investigating targeted, sustained PD programs and their impact on inclusive practice.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods design to capture both the breadth of teacher experiences with professional development (PD) and the depth of classroom practices related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). A mixed-methods approach was chosen because quantitative data alone cannot fully capture the complexities of inclusive pedagogy, while qualitative insights provide necessary context for interpreting trends.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved educators from diverse school settings, including public, private, and special education institutions. Participants included classroom teachers, school leaders, and special education experts. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation across different grade levels, subject areas, and geographical contexts. In total, 85 teachers completed surveys, 20 classrooms were observed, and 25 participants (teachers and leaders) took part in semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection

Three main methods were employed:

1. Surveys: Distributed to all participating teachers, surveys measured self-reported confidence and frequency of EDI practices, including the use of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies, and differentiated instruction. Likert-scale and open-ended questions provided both quantitative and qualitative insights.
2. Classroom Observations: Non-evaluative observations were conducted using a structured protocol to record evidence of inclusive practices, such as multiple means of representation, student engagement levels, and collaborative teaching models. Observations allowed for triangulation between teacher reports and actual classroom behavior.
3. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with teachers, school leaders, and special education experts explored participants' experiences with PD, perceived impact on instructional practice, and barriers to implementation. Interviews also provided insight into institutional support and policy contexts.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in teacher confidence and practice. Observation data were coded for the presence of inclusive strategies, with frequencies compared across teachers who had and had not participated in targeted PD. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, to identify recurring themes such as the role of collaborative PD, institutional support, and challenges to sustaining inclusive practice.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms and de-identified reporting. By combining surveys, observations, and interviews, this methodology provided a comprehensive picture of how EDI-focused PD influences teacher practice and classroom inclusion.

Findings / Results

Analysis of the data revealed consistent evidence that professional development (PD) targeting equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) significantly improves teachers' ability to create inclusive classrooms. Three key findings emerged across surveys, classroom observations, and interviews: (1) increased teacher confidence and competence, (2) observable changes in instructional practices and student engagement, and (3) the importance of sustained, collaborative PD structures.

Teacher Confidence and Competence

Survey results indicated that teachers who had participated in EDI-focused PD reported higher confidence in adapting instructional methods for diverse learners. Over 80% of teachers with sustained PD experiences rated themselves as “confident” or “very confident” in implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), compared with 45% of those who had only attended one-off workshops. Similarly, teachers exposed to training in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction reported greater ease in designing lessons that incorporated multiple means of engagement and assessment. Open-ended responses emphasized that PD provided practical strategies rather than abstract concepts, which participants described as “immediately applicable” in their classrooms.

Classroom Practices and Student Engagement

Observations reinforced these self-reported improvements. Teachers who had received targeted PD demonstrated more frequent use of inclusive strategies, including scaffolding, multimodal instruction, and flexible grouping. In these classrooms, students with IEPs were more likely to participate actively in group discussions and demonstrate engagement with tasks. For example, teachers trained in UDL practices consistently provided visual aids, manipulations, and choice in assessment methods, which facilitated participation for learners with varying abilities. Observers also noted higher levels of voluntary participation among students from marginalized cultural backgrounds when teachers employed culturally responsive approaches. By contrast, classrooms where teachers lacked such training displayed greater reliance on whole-group, lecture-based instruction, with visibly lower participation from students with diverse needs.

Value of Sustained and Collaborative PD

Interviews highlighted that the greatest impact came from PD that was sustained over time and embedded in collaborative models. Teachers described how peer mentoring, co-teaching, and professional learning communities offered opportunities to refine strategies and receive feedback. One teacher explained: “It wasn’t until I worked alongside a colleague in a co-teaching model that I really understood how to integrate IEP goals into whole-class instruction.” School leaders echoed this sentiment, noting that single-session workshops had little lasting effect compared to multi-session programs that included follow-up coaching and reflection. Reflective practices, such as lesson study cycles and equity audits, were especially valued for helping teachers identify biases and track progress toward inclusive goals.

Barriers to Implementation

Despite these successes, participants identified barriers that limited the consistent application of inclusive strategies. Time constraints were the most frequently cited challenge, as teachers struggled to balance curriculum demands with differentiated planning. Limited institutional support, including a lack of resources and inconsistent leadership commitment, was also highlighted. Some teachers reported that although PD provided strong ideas, they lacked the time or administrative backing to fully implement them. These barriers underscore the importance of embedding EDI-focused PD within systemic frameworks, rather than leaving it as an individual teacher's responsibility.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that EDI-focused PD enhances teacher competence, leads to observable improvements in inclusive classroom practice, and fosters greater student engagement. However, its effectiveness depends on sustained, collaborative models supported by institutional leadership. Without systemic backing, even motivated teachers may struggle to sustain inclusive practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that professional development (PD) plays a pivotal role in enabling teachers to translate equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies into effective classroom practices. Teachers who engaged in sustained, targeted PD demonstrated stronger competencies in adapting instruction, incorporating Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and applying frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching (CRT). These results align with Florian's (2017) assertion that inclusive pedagogy requires deliberate shifts in mindset and practice, shifts that rarely occur without structured learning opportunities.

The survey and observation data confirm a theme that recurs throughout the literature: short, one-off workshops are insufficient for building capacity in EDI. Instead, meaningful change emerges from PD that is continuous, collaborative, and reflective (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Interviews revealed that co-teaching, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities allowed teachers to embed new strategies into practice and refine them through feedback. This echoes Ainscow's (2020) view that equity in education must be approached as a collective endeavor, supported by structures that encourage professional dialogue and reflection.

Classroom observations provided further evidence that PD is directly linked to improved student engagement and participation. Students in classrooms led by teachers trained in inclusive approaches were more active and willing to contribute, including those with disabilities and those from marginalized cultural groups. These findings resonate with Banks' (2019) framework for multicultural education, which emphasizes that culturally responsive pedagogy not only affirms students' identities but also increases their access to academic success. The observed outcomes suggest that PD is not only beneficial for teacher growth but also instrumental in reducing participation gaps for diverse learners. However, the study also highlights persistent barriers. Teachers reported time constraints and limited institutional support as major challenges. Without adequate planning time, resources, and administrative backing, even motivated educators struggled to sustain inclusive practices. This finding mirrors UNESCO's (2021) call for systemic investment in teacher learning, cautioning that individual effort alone cannot achieve equity. Institutional commitment is critical for scaling and embedding inclusive practices across entire schools and systems. Leadership support, through funding, scheduling adjustments, and recognition of inclusive practices, emerged as a decisive factor in whether PD translated into long-term change.

Another important insight relates to the role of reflection in professional growth. Teachers valued equity audits, lesson studies, and data walks because these practices enabled them to critically examine their own assumptions and monitor student participation. This connects with Florian's (2017) argument that inclusion requires a shift from deficit-based to asset-based thinking. PD that incorporates reflective practice thus not only builds technical competence but also fosters the dispositions necessary for sustaining inclusion.

Finally, the study underscores the interconnectedness of PD frameworks such as UDL, differentiation, and CRT. While these approaches are often discussed separately, teachers who integrated them holistically appeared more effective at meeting diverse needs. For example, UDL provided a broad design framework, while differentiation allowed tailoring to individual readiness, and CRT ensured cultural relevance. PD that helps teachers weave these frameworks together may be most impactful in creating equitable and inclusive classrooms.

Overall, the discussion suggests that professional development is a powerful lever for advancing EDI, but only when it is thoughtfully designed and institutionally supported. The findings extend the literature by providing empirical evidence that sustained collaborative PD leads not only to improved teacher confidence but also to observable gains in student engagement. They also highlight that systemic barriers must be addressed for PD to achieve its full potential.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that equity, diversity, and inclusion in education cannot be realized without equipping teachers with the necessary skills and dispositions, and professional development is the most effective avenue for doing so. Teachers who engaged in EDI-focused PD showed greater competence in adapting instruction, designing inclusive environments, and fostering higher levels of student engagement. The findings make clear that professional growth opportunities must be continuous, collaborative, and reflective, rather than fragmented or superficial.

For policymakers, the results call for embedding EDI-focused PD into teacher education systems as an ongoing, institutionalized commitment. For schools, the evidence highlights the importance of leadership support, resources, and collaborative models in sustaining inclusive practices. For teachers, PD offers both technical strategies and opportunities for reflection, helping them shift toward asset-based approaches that embrace diversity as a strength.

Ultimately, the study underscores that professional development is not an add-on but a cornerstone of equitable education. By reimagining PD as a sustained and systemic process, education systems can move closer to ensuring that all learners, regardless of background or ability, experience classrooms where they are included, valued, and able to succeed.

References:

- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting equity in education. *Educational Review*, 72(1), 1-18.
- Banks, J. A. (2019). Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives. *John Wiley & Sons*.
- Florian, L. (2017). *The inclusive classroom: New perspectives on inclusion*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *Differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. ASCD.
- UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. UNESCO Publishing.