

Equitable and Inclusive Education through Continuous Professional Development of Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) on the quality of in-service teacher education in India, with a particular focus on adopting equitable and inclusive educational practices. Through a critical analysis of 28 studies, the research synthesises five core themes that highlight the connection between CPD and the promotion of inclusive classrooms. These themes emphasise shaping inclusive educational policies, enhancing teacher preparedness through targeted training programmes, and leveraging technology to improve access and engagement for all students. The study stresses the need for dynamic CPD frameworks that adapt to the evolving educational landscape, fostering ongoing teacher development and ensuring alignment with national inclusivity goals. The findings suggest actionable strategies for policymakers and educators to create a fairer and inclusive educational system, ultimately augmenting learning outcomes for a diverse student population.

Keywords: *Inclusive classroom, continuous professional development, in-service teacher education, inclusive educational policies*

Introduction

The role of education as a transformative tool has become increasingly apparent in the rapidly evolving educational landscape, characterised by technological, pedagogical and societal changes. With its large young population, India stands at a crucial juncture where the quality of school education can significantly influence its future trajectory. At the core of this educational promise is the teacher, who plays a pivotal role in moulding the minds that will define the nation's future. Continuous Professional Development (CPD), an integral part of in-service teacher education, emerges as a critical element in this transformative journey. It serves as a dynamic medium that enables educators to refine their expertise, integrate equity and inclusivity into their teaching methodologies, and directly impact the educational system and the lives

of students across diverse backgrounds (MHRD, 2020).

In-service teacher education, particularly through CPD, extends beyond refining teaching skills to foster a just and inclusive educational environment. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) advocates for an educational framework that addresses each student's unique needs, irrespective of their circumstances, establishing equity and inclusion as foundational principles (MHRD, 2020). Implementing these principles necessitates empowering educators with the requisite skills and knowledge to create learning environments where each student can thrive. Programmes like India's National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA) on the Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) platform exemplify the nation's commitment to these values, providing educators with necessary CPD opportunities

to enhance instructional quality and foster an inclusive educational landscape (MHRD, 2020).

Therefore, in-service teacher education is not merely about upgrading pedagogical skills but also about instilling the ethos of inclusion and equity—crucial for addressing the diverse needs of students. It equips teachers to adapt to a variety of learning styles, cultural backgrounds and educational needs, facilitating a learning environment where diversity is embraced and all students are supported to achieve their full potential.

This paper tries to explore the evolving nature of in-service teacher education in India, highlighting its significance in promoting an equitable and inclusive educational system. By analysing various studies and educational programmes, it seeks to outline effective strategies and best practices that can be employed to enhance the scope and impact of CPD, contributing significantly to the broader educational reforms aimed at achieving equity and inclusivity in education (Singal, 2006; Bourke, 2009; Feng, 2012).

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review approach was employed to investigate the pivotal role of CPD in fostering equitable and inclusive education in India. A systematic analysis of secondary data from 2000 to 2023 was conducted, resulting in the selection of 28 research based on their relevance to CPD, educational equity and inclusivity in the Indian context. Additional studies included in the review focused on the effectiveness of in-service training, teacher readiness for inclusive education and the challenges in implementing India's latest National Education Policy.

The search process utilised renowned databases like ERIC, Scopus and Google Scholar, followed by a rigorous screening process to ensure the inclusion of only high-quality, peer-reviewed articles, government reports and key educational frameworks. This approach ensured that only the

most relevant and credible sources were incorporated.

The review involved reading and analysing each study to assess the impact of CPD on education. A qualitative approach was employed to synthesise insights into the alignment of CPD programmes with inclusive education goals, the effectiveness of training initiatives and the integration of technology in education. This required extracting data on the effectiveness of training modules, teacher satisfaction with CPD and observed changes in teaching practices post-training.

A thorough synthesis of the findings identified key patterns, themes and trends, offering a detailed perspective on the role of CPD in promoting equitable and inclusive education in India.

Review of Related Literature

This literature review examines a range of studies on inclusive education and teacher professional development, exploring the dynamic interplay between these fields and their impact on inclusivity and equity. By analysing the research findings, it highlights key themes and patterns, examines the interconnectedness of teacher education with inclusivity goals, and extracts valuable insights for policy and practice. Ultimately, the review seeks to enhance the understanding of these complex relationships, enabling policymakers and educators to better support diverse learners in inclusive environments.

Inclusive Education Policies and Implementation: Advancing inclusive education involves the continuous development and refinement of policies to address the diverse needs of learners. The discourse highlights the importance of contextual awareness in policy implementation, influenced by national, cultural and socioeconomic factors.

Singal (2006) and Bourke (2009) stress that policymakers must consider the specific regional, cultural and historical contexts to effectively translate policies into practice.

Feng (2012) and Singal (2019) note that high-quality teaching is essential for successful inclusion, requiring teachers to possess the skills and knowledge to accommodate all students. Further insights emerge from Rangarajan, Sharma and Grové (2023), who critically evaluate NEP 2020, assessing its commitment to inclusivity and equity, while identifying potential benefits and challenges.

Professional Development for Inclusive Education: Professional development is essential for equipping educators with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to foster inclusivity in classrooms.

Key research studies conducted by Bourke (2009), Forlin and Chambers (2011) and Chitiyo, et al. (2017) highlight the importance of such training. Innovative methodologies, collaborative processes and critical reflection are central to creating an inclusive culture, as noted by Walsh, et al. (2018) and Haerani, et al. (2020).

Studies by Holmqvist and Lelinge (2021) and Wright and Delgado (2022) examine the effectiveness of various development models, while Ponnusamy and Sankar (2022) provide insights from a study in Kerala, exploring local teachers' perceptions and the impact of these programmes. Collectively, these studies emphasise the need for continuous, context-specific and collaborative professional development that promotes inclusivity, equity and social justice.

Technology Integration and Online Education: The rise of digital technologies and online platforms has transformed professional development, bringing both challenges and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, with researchers like Dhurumraj, et al. (2020) and Walsh, et al. (2018) highlighting the crucial role of technology in providing flexible and accessible learning for educators. This transition has enabled remote access to professional development resources, fostering a culture of continuous learning and collaboration.

Davis and McGill (2023) discuss how online education can democratise access

to educational resources across urban and rural areas, promoting equity. Similarly, Waitoller and Artiles (2013) highlight the role of technology in training for inclusive education, noting its potential to improve teacher readiness and support diverse learners. Overall, technology's integration into professional development significantly improves accessibility, personalisation, collaboration and teacher preparedness for inclusive education.

Diversity and Inclusive Practices: Effective teacher education requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and values the diversity of learner identities, experiences and backgrounds. Researchers like Sacramento (2019) and Wright and Delgado (2022) emphasise addressing gender and sexual diversity in professional development programmes. Bacus and Alda (2022) and Massar (2022) highlight the need for inclusive curricula and thorough teacher training to support a diverse student body. Lang, et al. (2023) advocate for educational practices that cater to the varied cultural, linguistic and educational needs of students. Additionally, Dheesha (2020) underscores the importance of raising awareness about disability and inclusivity in teacher education, fostering a deeper understanding of the intersections between identity, culture and learning.

Policy Alignment and Educational Goals: Aligning educational policies with inclusive education objectives is a key theme in the literature. NEP 2020, along with studies by Flood and Banks (2021) and Davis and McGill (2023), emphasise the role of CPD in promoting educational equity and empowering educators to create inclusive learning environments. Solomon, et al. (2023) explore the impact of policy on teacher learning and practice, highlighting the interplay between policy frameworks and the goals of inclusive education. This relationship is crucial for supporting inclusive practices through policy at all levels of the education system, as seen in countries like India.

Table 1: Thematic Categorisation of Related Literature

Theme	No. of Studies	Authors	Description
Inclusive Education Policies and Implementation	7	Singal (2006); Bourke (2009); Bourke (2009), Feng (2012); Singal (2019); Flood and Banks (2021); Rangarajan, et al. (2023)	This theme examines the advancement and challenges of inclusive education policies and programmes in different national contexts, including local educational landscapes. It emphasises on contextual understanding and quality teaching, with a specific look at NEP 2020.
Professional Development for Inclusive Education	10	Bourke (2009); Forlin and Chambers (2011); Chitiyo, et al. (2017); Walsh, et al. (2018); Haerani, et al. (2020); Holmqvist and Lelinge (2021); Wright and Delgado (2022); Ponnusamy and Sankar (2022); Joshi, et al. (2020); Mistry (2023)	This theme encompasses research on training programmes that improve teacher capabilities to support diverse learning needs, drawing attention to sustainable and context-specific professional development with collaborative and reflective training models.
Technology Integration and Online Education	4	Dhurumraj, et al. (2020); Walsh et al. (2018); Davis and McGill (2023); Fleming (2023)	It focuses on the shift towards digital platforms (especially during COVID-19) that facilitate accessible and flexible CPD opportunities. This theme also examines how technology can bridge gaps in teacher training and support inclusive practices.
Diversity and Inclusive Practices	7	Sacramento (2019); Wright and Delgado (2022); Bacus and Alda (2022); Massar (2022); Lang, et al. (2023); Dheesha, (2020); Mistry (2023)	It addresses the specific needs of diverse learners, including gender and cultural diversity, through professional development. This theme focuses on inclusive curricula and teacher preparation, enhancing disability awareness among prospective teachers.
Policy Alignment and Educational Goals	6	NEP 2020; Flood and Banks (2021); Bacus and Alda (2022); Davis and McGill (2023); Solomon, et al. (2023); Waitoller and Artiles (2013)	This calls attention to aligning educational policies, especially NEP 2020, with the goals of inclusive education. The findings show the critical role of policy in supporting effective CPD and ensuring educational equity, with the need for policies that are continuously evaluated and aligned with current educational demands.

Table 1 categorises research into five critical themes, outlining how studies examine the evolution of inclusive policies, the enhancement of teacher capabilities through targeted professional development, the role

of technology in bridging training gaps, the addressing of diverse learner needs through specific educational practices and the alignment of educational goals with policy frameworks. Each section draws

from a range of studies to underscore the collective pursuit of inclusivity and equity in educational settings

Discussion

A comprehensive review of related literature underscores the pivotal role of in-service teacher education in promoting equitable and diverse education in India, highlighting a growing scholarly focus on the intricate dynamics of teacher professional development in relation to inclusivity and equity.

The literature emphasises the necessity of embedding cultural and contextual relevance within CPD programmes, advocating for a localised approach to teacher education that acknowledges the diversity of Indian classrooms (Singal, 2006; Bacus and Alda, 2022). This approach calls for customised educational strategies that address the unique needs of Indian learners, recognising the importance of context-specific solutions (Singal, 2006; Bacus and Alda, 2022; MHRD, 2020).

Studies also highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms like NISHTHA and DIKSHA in expanding access to CPD, reflecting a global shift towards online learning that has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhurumraj, et al., 2020; Haerani et al., 2020). This transition promotes more flexible, inclusive and accessible professional development models, capable of reaching a wider audience of educators and ultimately enhancing the quality of education in India.

Additionally, research underscores the importance of policy alignment and the integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) within CPD frameworks, advocating for a systemic approach to nurture inclusivity and equitable learning environments (Flood and Banks, 2021; Lang, et al., 2023). Implementing UDL can facilitate the refinement of flexible and responsive teaching practices, ultimately improving the learning experiences of diverse students.

An example of UDL integration in CPD

is presented in a case study from the *Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology*, which describes its application in an undergraduate course supported by educational technology to foster greater student engagement and inclusivity. The study details course modifications that provided students with various options for engaging with the content, their peers and instructors, aiming to enhance their sense of belonging and academic achievement. This approach effectively demonstrates how UDL principles can be applied in teacher development programmes to accommodate a wide range of learning preferences and needs, fostering an inclusive educational environment.

Holmqvist and Lelinge (2021) emphasise the significance of collaborative practices and professional networking, suggesting a collective movement towards shared learning, communal growth and a culture of inclusivity in education. Such approaches encourage the exchange of ideas, strategies and resources, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem. This collaborative ethos can further help address the complex challenges of inclusive education, ensuring that all students receive the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

Further, studies by Ponnusamy and Sankar (2022) and Waitoller and Artiles (2013) offer insights into the effectiveness of in-service training programmes in Kerala, highlighting the need for policy-driven support to foster inclusive practices. These studies reinforce the idea that effective CPD programmes must reflect the diverse needs of educators while aligning with broader educational goals and priorities.

In essence, the emerging literature highlights a paradigm shift in in-service teacher education, marked by a move towards more inclusive, adaptable and culturally congruent practices. This shift aligns with global trends in educational equity while resonating with India's unique sociocultural landscape, necessitating a renewed focus on teacher

CPD as a cornerstone of transformative educational change.

Results

In India's evolving educational landscape, the need for fair and diverse education calls for actionable strategies to empower educators in meeting diverse student needs. This study provides a systematic review of pertinent literature, presenting evidence-based practices to enhance inclusivity and equity. These practices form a roadmap for educators, policymakers and stakeholders to collaboratively develop a supportive educational system that serves all students, regardless of their background or abilities.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Training: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is essential in India's diverse classrooms as it addresses the varied cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds of students. CRT training equips teachers with the skills to recognise and value this diversity, enriching the learning experience by incorporating local knowledge and cultural nuances. This method not only makes education more relevant and engaging but also ensures inclusivity, with teaching methods specifically adapted to reflect the real-world experiences of the community (Davis and McGill, 2023; Sacramento, 2019).

Moreover, in India's diverse linguistic landscape, CRT plays a crucial role, particularly in supporting students who are not fluent in the instructional medium, such as Hindi or English. Effective CRT training includes language inclusion strategies that provide all students with equitable access to the curriculum, helping overcome language barriers that can impede academic progress. Research studies by Mistry (2023) and Ponnusamy and Sankar (2023) highlight the benefits of CRT in meeting the needs of marginalised communities. Expanding these programmes nationwide can help reduce biases and stereotypes while equipping educators to effectively and manage embrace

classroom diversity. This initiative aligns with India's educational reforms aimed at fostering equitable learning environments



Figure 1. Effective Practices under Culturally Responsive Teaching [Source: *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice* (Gay, 2018)]

where all students can thrive, irrespective of their sociocultural backgrounds.

Regular Professional Development: Emphasising the continuous nature of professional development is crucial, aligning with NEP 2020 recommendations for educators to engage in at least 50 hours of CPD annually. This tailored approach addresses educators' interests and needs, covering advanced pedagogies, such as Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), competency-based learning and innovative teaching methodologies (NEP 2020).

Online and Blended Learning: Acknowledging the significant role of online and blended learning platforms, this approach offers flexible, accessible and cost-effective professional development opportunities. It ensures equitable access for all educators, promoting inclusive learning environments, irrespective of geographical or demographic diversities.

Gender Diversity Inclusive Curriculum: Thoughtful pedagogical adjustments, curriculum design and other modifications also ensure gender inclusivity and equity within educational practices, promoting a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all.

Policy Alignment: Ensuring congruence between educational policies and the objectives of inclusive education is paramount. Regular assessments of policy efficacy in fostering equitable education, alongside clear definitions of professional development delivery protocols, are essential for sustained progress.

Professional Collaboration: Encouraging collaborative professional development among teachers, including teacher aids, encourages knowledge sharing and builds a supportive and inclusive educational culture. This collective approach persuades educators to work together, share best practices and support one another in creating inclusive learning environments.

Universal Design for Learning: It provides a structured teaching approach, emphasising multiple means of representation, expression and engagement to ensure equal learning opportunities for every student,

regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Studies by Waitoller and Artiles (2023) and Fleming (2023) highlight the importance of integrating UDL into educational practices to improve accessibility and engagement, particularly for learners with disabilities and diverse cultural backgrounds. UDL-trained teachers can effectively implement strategies, accommodating learners with disabilities and diverse cultural backgrounds.

The integration of technology, as discussed by Dhurumraj, et al. (2020), enhances UDL's effectiveness, offering personalised learning pathways that accommodate various sensory and cognitive needs. Systematic professional development, including UDL-focused workshops, is crucial for equipping educators with necessary skills and tools to design flexible curricula and assessments, thereby aligning teaching practices with the principles of equity and inclusivity.

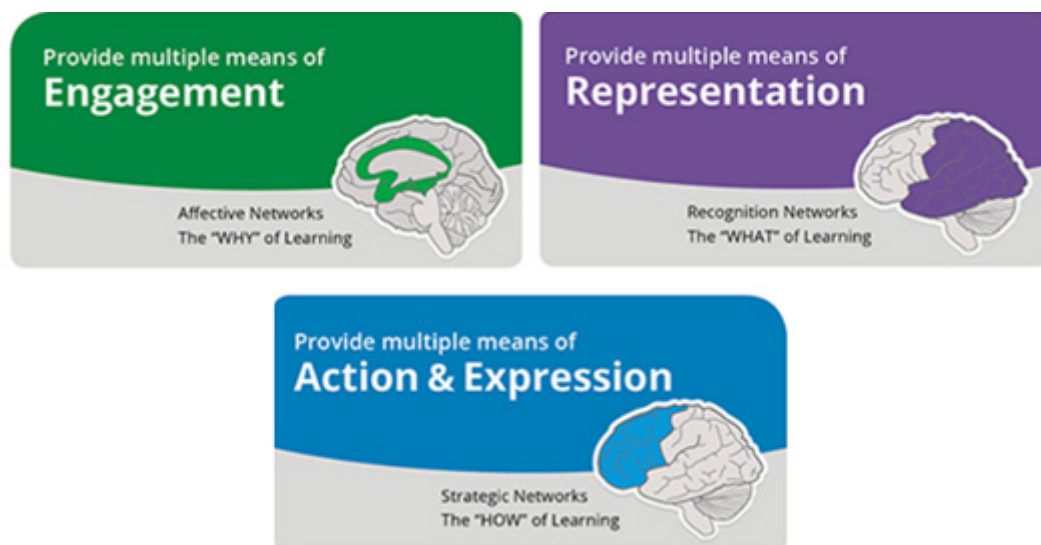


Figure 2. A graphic organiser of the principles of Universal Design for Learning [CAST (2018). Source: <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>]

Teacher Motivation and Retention: Addressing teacher motivation, diversity within the teaching community and job satisfaction during professional development are equally important. These can contribute to increased teacher retention, directing

a positive outlook towards inclusion and a more stable educational workforce.

Momentum for Change: Sustaining continuous momentum in educational practice transformation is essential. This requires aligning with policy reforms,

developing inclusive curriculum frameworks and designing professional development training programmes based on evidence-based practices to assess their impact on outcomes. This approach ensures that educational practices remain dynamic, responsive and effective in promoting inclusivity.

The Use of Terminology and Language:

Clarifying the use of terminology and language related to special and inclusive education is vital to prevent confusion and ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate education (Walsh, et al., 2018; and Chitiyo, et al., 2017). Consistent and accurate language use supports communication, collaboration and resource allocation, ultimately leading to better outcomes for students with diverse needs.

These findings provide a roadmap for addressing the diverse needs of students and educators, ensuring access to quality educational experiences for all while reflecting global trends and adapting to India's unique sociocultural context. By embracing these practices, a more inclusive, supportive and effective educational system can be created, benefiting all stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper examines the role of CPD in promoting equitable and inclusive educational practices in India. By analysing a variety of studies, it identifies key strategies for improving in-service teacher education, emphasising the necessity for adaptable CPD frameworks that align with the dynamic educational requirements and India's diverse learner demographics. The findings advocate for structured professional training that improves teacher efficiency in inclusive settings, supported by policy adjustments and technological advancements that augment educational access and engagement.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of strategic collaboration among educators, policymakers and educational stakeholders to implement these initiatives effectively. This collaborative approach is essential for refining educational practices to ensure they meet the needs of all students. To conclude, this paper advocates for a systematic and reflective approach to CPD, suggesting that well-informed and well-implemented teacher development programmes are key to achieving educational equity and excellence, ultimately preparing all learners for a successful future in a diverse society.

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