

Inclusive professional learning

Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Strength of evidence
Promising	Mixed	Moderate

What is it?

For this strand, inclusive professional learning (PL) refers to how professional learning is designed and delivered so that it creates an inclusive culture across a school or trust. The primary focus is on how PL supports teachers and other staff to develop more inclusive practice with pupils. A connected aspect of this is how PL is itself designed inclusively for staff, in terms of how it is structured, accessed, and experienced.

Research suggests that inclusive PL can shape knowledge, skills, and staff beliefs about pupils' experiences of difference, equity, and participation. In relation to how PL is experienced by staff, the design of PL itself may also model inclusivity, for example by supporting engagement for all staff, valuing their experiences, and demonstrating practices that could inform classroom delivery.

Across the reviews synthesised in this strand, an inclusive approach to PL is described as recognising and responding to difference, such as special educational needs, cultural or linguistic background, disability, health conditions, and social disadvantage, while also acknowledging systemic factors that influence outcomes.

This strand is not primarily about PL focused on specific inclusion topics, such as ADHD awareness or SEND interventions. Rather, it concerns the degree to which all PL – whether on literacy, curriculum, or assessment – is designed and delivered in ways that are accessible, inclusive and in turn promote inclusive practice in the classroom.

While targeted approaches may have direct benefits, the wider value of inclusive PL may lie in supporting a professional learning culture where staff feel equipped and valued. This may also contribute indirectly to improvements in teaching and the broader learning environment for pupils.

Disclaimer: The evidence base informing this strand draws from studies of diversity training, culturally responsive education, and interventions aimed at shifting beliefs. These do not always map neatly onto "inclusive PL" as defined here. Many included studies also mix staff-facing and pupil-facing aspects of inclusion, so part of our approach is to identify what is most relevant to the design of PL itself. Our focus is to extract what is transferable: the aspects that help leaders of PL design programmes that are inclusive in both content and method.

Key findings:

Impact on teaching

Professional learning that is designed with inclusivity in mind can strengthen teachers' confidence in supporting diverse learners, their beliefs about difference and equity, and aspects of their classroom practice, but only when it moves beyond awareness-raising. While many teachers report gains in knowledge after training, shifts in beliefs about inclusion and equity appear less consistent, and observable changes in practice are often limited. Evidence also suggests that teachers' belief in their own capability to teach diverse groups effectively is linked with whether, following professional learning, they go on to adopt more inclusive classroom approaches.

Evidence from initial teacher education suggests that even structured programmes do not always lead to shifts in beliefs: for example, some studies found no meaningful improvement in trainee teachers' inclusive attitudes or perceptions of their teaching competence. This may be relevant for school leaders because similar patterns can occur in in-service contexts.

Although many teachers self-reported positive changes in their practice, external evaluations often revealed little or no observable difference in teaching. More broadly, across the reviews, many studies highlight barriers that may limit the effect of inclusion-related PL (such as limited time, constrained resources, or lack of administrative support)

The evidence suggests three key insights for leaders of professional learning:

1. **Teacher beliefs are pivotal:** Practice is less likely to change unless PL engages with how teachers think about difference, identity, and their own role.
2. **Culture matters:** Inclusive PL seems to work best when it helps staff see diversity as a resource and when it is connected to wider school priorities, including how the school monitors equity.
3. **Design choices make a difference:** Professional learning that balances theory with practical application (through modelling, structured reflection, or inquiry) is more likely to build confidence and sustain change.

Impact on pupils

Although the evidence on pupil outcomes from inclusive professional learning is overall promising, the strength of evidence for pupils is weak and effects often occur indirectly. Most studies focus on teachers rather than measuring the difference that an inclusive approach to PL makes for pupils. Where findings are reported, they tend to be cautious and uneven.

Key points for leaders of professional learning:

- **Evidence gap:** Few studies measure pupil outcomes directly. Reported gains are usually inferred from changes in teacher beliefs or self-reported practice.
- **Potential benefits:** Some reviews note small-to-moderate improvements in pupil behaviour, social participation, and academic progress when teacher practice shifts beyond awareness to confident application.

Overall, while the evidence base remains limited, the available findings suggest that the effectiveness of inclusive professional learning may ultimately be judged by the extent to which it leads to sustained shifts in practice that pupils experience as equitable and supportive.

How effective is the approach?

The evidence on embedding inclusion within the design and delivery of professional learning presents a mixed but cautiously promising picture. Several studies suggest that inclusive approaches can build teacher confidence, foster more inclusive mindsets, and encourage the use of evidence-informed practices. At the same time, the depth and consistency of these effects vary, and direct evidence of impact on pupil outcomes remains relatively limited.

For teacher outcomes linked to PL engagement, the research base appears more reliable. Many studies indicate improvements in attitudes, confidence, and reflective engagement with diversity. Evidence of whether PL translates into observable changes in classroom practice is less consistently reported. While there are examples of teachers adopting more inclusive strategies, much of the evidence relies on self-reports, and fewer studies capture sustained changes in pedagogy.

The mode of professional learning may also play a role. Collaborative models, such as professional learning communities, appear more likely to support lasting changes in teacher thinking and practice than isolated or one-off interventions. It is also important to note that increasing the length of the programme, without considering strategies or format, is unlikely to result in improved outcomes.

The research indicates that inclusive approaches may be most effective when they are integrated across all forms of professional learning, rather than being treated as a stand-alone theme. In this way, teachers are more likely to connect beliefs with action and to develop inclusive habits that are sustainable and relevant to their everyday practice.

Overall, making professional learning inclusive appears to hold promise, particularly in strengthening teacher beliefs and confidence. However, the evidence of sustained changes in classroom practice and the impact on pupil outcomes remains more tentative and limited.

How to implement it well

Behaviours

Evidence suggests that the following behaviours can help leaders of PL create conditions where teachers engage meaningfully with PL that is inclusive for staff and which supports reflection on inclusive practice:

- **Engage in critical reflection:** Structured opportunities for staff to explore their own beliefs, assumptions, and potential biases appear helpful in the context of PL design. Facilitators can model this by acknowledging their own perspectives and working constructively with resistance.
- **Connect values to practice:** Teachers are more likely to apply inclusive principles when PL helps them link inclusion to their professional identity and daily decision-making, rather than treating it as an add-on.

- **Embrace constructive challenge:** PL that allows space for dialogue and differing viewpoints can support deeper mindset shifts. Creating safe but stretching conditions for this dialogue appears to matter in how the sessions are facilitated.
- **Apply and adapt strategies:** Opportunities to trial ideas in practice, with feedback and iteration, help to make inclusive approaches more concrete. Tools such as role-play, scenarios, or observation rubrics have been used to support this process.
- **Build collaboration into PL:** Inclusive professional learning often involves co-planning, peer reflection, or professional learning communities. These can create shared responsibility and encourage consistency across staff teams.

PL that encourages reflection, connects to identity, enables challenge, provides practice opportunities, and embeds collaboration may be more likely to support inclusive change.

Contextual factors

Making professional learning inclusive for staff appears to work best when it is shaped by the specific context of schools and trusts. Evidence highlights several conditions that influence whether inclusive approaches take root:

- **Shaping design to local needs:** PL is more effective when it reflects the demographics, lived experiences, and immediate concerns of staff and students. Studies suggest embedding PL within wider school systems so that the principles discussed in PL align with curriculum, recruitment, or behaviour policies.
- **Ensuring leadership commitment:** Visible support from senior leaders, through resource allocation, staffing choices, and willingness to sponsor challenging conversations, appears to influence whether inclusive change is sustained. Leadership messaging and priorities often set the tone for staff engagement.
- **Considering staff identity and diversity:** Teachers' own racial, cultural, and professional backgrounds can shape how they respond to PL. Programmes that acknowledge this diversity and offer differentiated support may be better placed to engage all staff, particularly where there is limited prior experience of working with marginalised groups.

Inclusive professional learning appears most effective when it is rooted in local realities, visibly backed by leadership, and responsive to the workforce itself.

Structured but flexible

Making professional learning inclusive seems to depend on balancing structure with flexibility. Structure can provide consistency, while flexibility helps PL feel relevant to teachers and their context.

- **Start from a shared framework:** PL appears more effective when anchored in a clear, agreed model for the PL approach, even where that model draws on frameworks such as culturally responsive teaching or Universal Design for Learning. A structured cycle (preparation, delivery, feedback, adjustment) can provide consistency while still allowing adaptation to local needs.

- **Sequence with space for choice:** A progression from awareness, to dialogue, to application seems to support deeper engagement. Within this, teachers may benefit from exploring examples linked to their role or subject area.
- **Evaluate with multiple perspectives:** Evidence suggests evaluation should not rely only on self-report, as this can present an overly positive picture. Combining teacher reflection with observation, pupil voice, or collaborative logs may give a fuller sense of change.
- **Recognise different starting points:** Teachers access PL with varied levels of experience, expertise and confidence. Using school or trust data to identify where support is most needed may help PL feel more relevant and equitable.
- **Equity focus:** Measuring disaggregated outcomes (e.g. discipline, attendance, achievement) may help leaders understand longer-term patterns in pupil experience, recognising that PL might be one contributing factor.
- **Sustain over time:** One-off events rarely lead to lasting change. Iterative, connected learning (for example: professional learning communities or termly review cycle) appears more likely to embed inclusive practice.

These elements suggest that inclusive professional learning is most effective when it is carefully planned and sequenced, but also flexible enough to respond to context, starting points, and feedback over time.

Barriers to effective implementation

Efforts to make professional learning inclusive for staff may stall if certain barriers are not considered. The evidence highlights four recurring challenges, that leaders should consider.

Mismatch between belief and practice

Teachers may support inclusion in principle but fail to change their behaviour. Barriers include:

- Gains reported only through self-reflection, with little external evidence of practice change.
- Resistance or discomfort during discussions involving privilege, bias, or race.
- Emotional strain for staff from racially or ethnically minoritised groups, if PL is not carefully supported.
- Limited follow-up to help teachers turn reflection into action.

Weaknesses in PL design

Some approaches may be less effective when they are:

- Short-term or one-off, without structured follow-up.
- Disconnected from everyday teaching realities or overly reliant on trainer reporting.
- Missing pupil perspectives, where used as part of evaluating whether PL aligns with pupil experience.

System-level constraints

Even where staff are committed, system pressures may limit impact. These can include:

- Lack of time, resources, or collaboration opportunities.
- Limited leadership or administrative support to reinforce inclusive professional learning.

- A wider culture that prioritises compliance or test performance over equity.

Deep-rooted equity challenges

Some barriers persist even after PL, which highlights the limits of PL in shifting deeply held assumptions, including:

- Deficit views of certain groups (e.g., non-native speakers) that persist even after PL.
- Narrow or unclear definitions of inclusion that reduce it to “access” rather than belonging.
- Discriminatory or inequitable systems, such as discipline policies, that sustain disparities unless explicitly addressed.

Other considerations

When planning professional learning with inclusion in mind, the research indicates that several additional considerations may be useful for leaders of PL. These points highlight areas where intentions for inclusive PL and the outcomes staff experience do not always align, and where careful design choices may help.

- **Confidence vs capability:** Teachers may report feeling confident without this translating into practical preparedness to apply learning from PL into their professional role. Leaders may want to move beyond attitude surveys to check whether PL builds real capability.
- **Beliefs vs practice:** Shifts in teacher belief or goodwill do not reliably lead to new habits. Without structured opportunities for application and feedback, inclusive PL risks remaining unimplemented.
- **Coverage gaps:** Reviews note that some groups, such as LGBTQIA+ pupils or religious minorities, are less frequently addressed within PL content. Leaders may need to consider whether PL takes a broad enough view of inclusion.
- **Organisational conditions:** The wider system influences how far inclusive PL takes root. Factors such as leadership messaging, workload pressures, and access to resources can all shape the likelihood of sustained change.
- **Learning from limitations:** Many reviews point to weak evaluation, with limited evidence of what has not worked. Leaders may find value in building review cycles for PL that capture both successes and challenges.

What are the limitations of this research base?

While the studies reviewed provide useful insights into how professional learning can be designed to be more inclusive, areas such as religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and the intersections of SEND with race or class are less represented within the studies exploring this area. Leaders of PL should be aware that the research focuses on specific groups whilst others are less represented by the reviews available for this strand.

Summary

The research suggests that making professional learning inclusive is less about running training on specific topics, and more about how all PL is designed and delivered within the wider context and culture of the school or trust.

For leaders of professional learning, three points stand out:

1. **It is a long-term commitment:** Inclusive PL appears most effective when sustained over time, with opportunities for reflection, practice, and feedback, rather than one-off sessions.
2. **Context and culture matter:** PL design may be most impactful when it reflects local workforce needs, connects to school priorities, and is reinforced through wider systems such as curriculum, behaviour, and leadership messaging.
3. **Beliefs and practice are linked:** Shifts in teacher attitudes are important but not sufficient on their own. Training may need to create space to surface assumptions, challenge deficit thinking, and link these reflections to practical application.

The evidence base points towards inclusive PL as a promising but uneven approach. Its value lies not in specific content but in design choices that make all professional learning equitable, accessible, relevant, and responsive to the range of teacher and pupil needs.

When citing this strand, please use the following reference:

National Institute of Teaching (2026). NIoT Evidence Toolkit: Inclusive professional learning

References

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
1	Ash & Maguire (2023) A Scoping Review of Diversity Training for Teachers: The Potential for School Psychology	2000 - 2022	ITE & CPD	229	Not specifically mentioned, but include Canada, China, Finland, South Africa, South Korea, USA	Not reported	Mixed	High
2	Bancroft & Nyirenda (2020) Equity-Focused K-12 Science Teacher Professional Development: A Review of the Literature 2001-2017	2001–2017	CPD only	36	USA	Positive	Mixed	High
3	Bellacicco & Demo (2019) Becoming a teacher with a disability: a systematic review	1990–2018	ITE only	22	Australia, Canada, Ireland, Israel, UK, USA.	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
4	Bottiani et al. (2018) Promoting Educators' Use of Culturally Responsive Practices: A Systematic Review of Inservice Interventions	1998–2014	CPD only	10	USA	Positive	Mixed	High
5	Brock & carter (2017) A Meta-Analysis of Educator Training to Improve Implementation of Interventions for Students with Disabilities	1975–2015	ITE & CPD	12	USA	Mixed	Positive	High
6	Civitillo et al. (2018) Challenging beliefs about cultural diversity in education: A synthesis and critical review of trainings with	2005–2015	ITE only	36	Finland, UK, USA	Not reported	Mixed	High

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
	pre-service teachers							
7	Dignath et al. (2022) Teachers' Beliefs About Inclusive Education and Insights on What Contributes to Those Beliefs: a Meta-analytical Study	2000–2020	ITE & CPD	102	Multiple countries	Not reported	Mixed	High
8	Donath et al. (2023) Does Professional Development Effectively Support the Implementation of Inclusive Education? A Meta-Analysis	1994–2020	CPD only	342	Multiple countries	Positive	Positive	Excellent
9	Fallon et al. (2023) Learning to Decenter Whiteness in Schools Through Teacher Professional Development: A Systematic Review	2000–2020	CPD only	38	USA	Not reported	Mixed	High
10	Goddard et al. (2022) A Thematic Review of Current Literature Examining Evidence-Based Practices and Inclusion	2012–2022	ITE & CPD	27	Saudi Arabia, USA, other countries not mentioned	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
11	Gulya & Fehérvári (2023) Fostering culturally responsive pedagogy related competencies among pre-service teachers: a systematic review of the recent research literature	2000–2020	ITE only	44	Australia, Botswana, Canada, Chile, Finland, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, USA,	Not reported	Mixed	Excellent

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
12	Holmqvist & Lelinge (2021) Teachers' collaborative professional development for inclusive education	1993–2019	CPD only	21	Australia, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Ireland, South Africa, USA, Zanzibar	Mixed	Positive	Medium
13	Khamzina et al. (2024) Designing Effective Pre-service Teacher Training in Inclusive Education: a Narrative Review of the Effects of Duration and Content Delivery Mode on Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education	1994–2021	ITE only	31	Australia, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Scotland, Singapore, Turkey, USA, one study not reporting country	Not reported	Mixed	High
14	Ko et al. (2023) Organizing Possible Futures: A Systematic Review on Dis/ability Justice Frameworks to Design Equity-Oriented Inclusive Teacher Education Programs	1999–2022	ITE only	11	USA	Not reported	Positive	Medium
15	Koukoulidis et al. (2024) The status of culturally relevant teacher education in the European context: A systematic review of research	2000–2024	ITE & CPD	48	18 European countries	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
16	Lautenbach & Heyder (2019) Changing attitudes to inclusion in preservice teacher	2000–2023	ITE only	29	Australia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Northern Ireland, Singapore,	Not reported	Mixed	Medium

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
	education: a systematic review				Türkiye, UK, USA			
17	Liao et al. (2022) Effects of equity-oriented teacher education on preservice teachers: A systematic review	2011–2020	ITE only	58	Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Honduras, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Africa, South Korea, Tanzania UK, USA, Vietnam,	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
18	Matschiner et al. (2023) A Systematic Review of the Literature on Inservice Professional Development Explicitly Addressing Race and Racism	1981–2022	CPD only	64	USA	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
19	Meyer et al. (2024) Reducing Excellence Gaps: A Systematic Review of Research on Equity in Advanced Education	2010–2021	CPD only	80	USA, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, China, Cyprus, Egypt, England, Germany, India, Israel, Kuwait, NZ, Oman, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Türkiye, UK, UAE	Positive	Positive	Medium
20	Rad et al. (2022) Pathways to inclusive and equitable quality early childhood education for achieving SDG4 goal-a scoping review	2003–2021	CPD only	40	Global, including Bosnia & Herzegovina, Finland, Hong Kong, Indonesia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam	Not reported	Positive	Medium
21	Tarantino et al. (2022) Inclusion of children with special	1975 – 2018	CPD only	44	17 countries across North America, Europe, Asia,	Not reported	Positive	High

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
	educational needs and disabilities in physical education: A systematic review and meta-analysis of teachers' attitudes				and South America.			
22	Tristani & Bassett-Gunter (2019) Making the grade: teacher training for inclusive education: A systematic review.	1990 – 2019	ITE & CPD	27	Australia, Canada, Mexico, USA	Not reported	Positive	Medium
23	Tualaulelei & Halse (2021) A scoping study of in-service teacher professional development for inter/multicultural education and teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students	2000–2019	CPD only	159	Australia, Canada, Chile, Greece, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, Palestine, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, Türkiye, USA,	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
24	Vass et al. (2019) The possibilities and practicalities of professional learning in support of Indigenous student experiences in schooling: A systematic review	2006–2018	CPD only	19	Australia	Not reported	Positive	Medium
25	Wray et al. (2022) Factors influencing teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education: A systematic literature review	2010–2022	ITE & CPD	71	Multiple countries including Australia, Canada, Chile, China, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, USA	Not reported	Positive	Medium
26	Ahmed et al. (2022) Teacher professional	2000–2021	CPD only	50	Asia-Pacific countries (LMICs)	Positive	Positive	High

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
	development for disability inclusion in low- and middle-income Asia-Pacific countries: An evidence and gap map							
27	Chang & Viesca (2022) Preparing teachers for culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy (CRP): A critical review of research.	1995-2021	ITE only	134	USA	Not reported	Mixed	Medium
28	Gale et al. (2022) Overcoming barriers to inclusion in education in India: A scoping review. International Journal of Inclusive Education	2010-2020	ITE and CPD	61	India	Positive	Positive	Medium
29	Hinton & Kirk (2014) Teachers' perspectives of supporting pupils with long-term health conditions in mainstream schools. Health & Social Care in the Community,	2003-2013	ITE and CPD	61	Multiple countries	Not Reported	Mixed	Medium
30	Petersson-Bloom, Leifler, & Holmqvist (2023) The Use of Professional Development to Enhance Education of Students with Autism: A Systematic Review. Education Sciences.	2012-2022	CPD	16	Multiple countries	Positive	Mixed	Excellent
31	Keles & Munthe (2025) A	1981-2023	ITE only	103	Multiple countries	Not Reported	Mixed	High

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
	systematic review of research on how initial teacher education prepares teachers for work on discrimination, racism and prejudices in schools. Review of Education.							
32	Costello et al. (2022) A systematic review of the provision of sexuality education to student teachers in initial teacher education. Frontiers in Education	1990 - 2019	ITE only	15	Multiple countries	Not Reported	Mixed	High
33	Hutzler & Choresh (2023) Preparing physical education teachers for the inclusions of children with disabilities through online courses: A scoping review. European Physical Education Review.	2008-- 2022	ITE and CPD	8	Multiple countries	Not Reported	Mixed	Medium
34	Ward et al (2025) The Effects of ADHD Teacher Training Programs on Teachers and Pupils: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. Journal of attention disorders	1998- 2019	CPD only	29	Multiple countries	Mixed	Mixed	Excellent
35	Langelaan et al. (2023) Differentiating instruction: Understanding	2010- 2020	ITE and CPD	29	Multiple countries	Not reported	Mixed	Excellent

	Reference	Years of research	Focus	# Studies	Countries	Impact on pupils	Impact on teachers	Reporting quality
	the key elements for successful teacher preparation and development. Teaching and Teacher Education							
36	Solano-Campos, Hopkins, & Quaynor (2020) Linguistically responsive teaching in preservice teacher education: A review of the literature through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory. <i>Journal of Teacher Education</i>	2001-2017	ITE only	64	USA	Not Reported	Mixed	Medium

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