

# Promoting Strong Equity and Inclusion in and through Teacher Education

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It is truly an honour to present a keynote at the Third Annual Conference of Islamic Education. The focus of this conference – Education Reimagined: Fostering Equity and Transformation in a Changing World – creates an important platform for us to engage in meaningful conversations and to reimagine more equitable education futures. The world is rapidly evolving, and educational landscapes are being reshaped profoundly. As we witness unprecedented and accelerating shifts linked to globalisation, climate change, migration, technological advancements, and increasing diversity in our classrooms, we are challenged to rethink how we can ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive and belong, regardless of their background, abilities, or socio-economic status[1].

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**Abstract.** Globalization, technological innovation, demographic shifts, and social justice imperatives have transformed educational landscapes, demanding a reorientation of teacher preparation toward equity. This conceptual paper introduces strong equity as a guiding principle that foregrounds the historical, economic, and sociocultural systems underpinning educational inequities, contrasting with "thin" access-focused approaches. We propose a five-question framework—Why? What? Who? Where? When?—to structure curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional partnerships: Why? Prompts critical analysis of structural disparities; What? Engages theory, policy critique, and reflective practice; Who? Emphasizes educator diversity and collaborative professionalism; Where? And when? Advocate contextualized, sustained learning across formal, non-formal, and community settings. Operationalized through supported school placements, practitioner inquiry, and cross-cultural exchanges, this framework offers a coherent roadmap for preparing teachers to recognize and dismantle inequitable structures and co-construct inclusive learning environments. It provides actionable guidance for policymakers, institutions, and researchers committed to transformative equity in global teacher education.

**Keywords:** equity, inclusion, teacher education.

## 1 Introduction

Education has the potential and power to shape minds, ignite curiosity, and inspire action. When approached thoughtfully, it can equip future generations with the tools to critically analyse information, think independently, and engage in meaningful, respectful dialogue. Education can also instill respect and appreciation for others and their diverse perspectives[1], [2]. However, despite decades of efforts to promote equity and inclusion through various national and international policies and programs, inequity remains a persistent issue within teacher preparation programs, schools, and the broader social structures that influence them[3].

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) commits to "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all"[4]. As the architects of classroom environments, teachers play a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity and ensuring equity for their learners[5], [6]. That makes teacher education a priority and a fundamental starting point for meaningful reform. We cannot expect to build inclusive and equitable learning spaces unless we first empower educators with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to achieve this vision.

This paper will discuss ways of promoting strong\* equity and inclusion in and through teacher education. The concept of strong\* equity is drawn from recent work by Cochran-Smith and Stringer Keefe (2022), who critique the conventional invocation of equity in teacher education as a catch-all connected to various issues surrounding diversity, justice, and gaps in outcomes and opportunities for marginalised groups[7]. The differentiation between "thin" and "strong" equity is borrowed from Benjamin Barber's (2004) classic distinction between "thin" and "strong" democracy[8]. "Thin equity" primarily concerns individuals' access to educational resources. In contrast, "strong equity" recognises the complex and intersecting historical, economic, and social systems that create inequalities, particularly concerning access to and experience of quality teaching.

Although my work primarily focuses on the European context, many equitable and inclusive education principles extend beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. The OECD's 2021 Education at a Glance report focused on equity, defining it as ensuring that access, participation, and progress toward quality education are available to all, regardless of personal or social circumstances such as gender, socio-economic status, or immigrant background[1]. However, I prefer a broader view of equity, aligned with Cerna et al.'s (2021) emphasis on supporting all students to reach their full potential—developing a sense of belonging, well-being, and self-worth, irrespective of their circumstances[1].

Like many other countries, Ireland has seen rapid changes in its educational landscape over the past few decades. Increasing classroom diversity and growing awareness of social justice issues have pushed educators to rethink how we approach equity and inclusion in education. Having been involved in teacher education for over twenty years, I have worked with teachers and policymakers on the frontlines of this transformation. I am deeply committed to advancing strong equity in and through teacher education. My goal is to cultivate teachers who feel respected, free to express themselves authentically, and empowered as intelligent agents capable of navigating the complexities of equity and inclusion across diverse educational contexts. These educators must embody the qualities of compassionate professionals who are deeply

committed to supporting all students while challenging inequitable systems, policies, and practices.

In this paper, I will investigate five fundamental questions – the why, what, who, where, and when – that should guide our efforts to prepare teachers to foster more equitable and inclusive learning environments. I propose these questions as a framework for discussing and developing targeted strategies in teacher education that promote inclusivity and equity across diverse educational contexts.

## **2 The Why: Importance of Building a Rationale for Equity and Inclusion**

Addressing why equity and inclusion should be prioritised in teacher education and why they are important principles for teachers is paramount. It is essential to construct a compelling rationale for principles of equity as the foundation for any practical work. A profound comprehension of the complex historical, systemic, and social contexts that produce inequities is essential[9]. To build such comprehension, teacher educators must investigate the root causes of disparities and question how various groups have become advantaged or disadvantaged. Furthermore, teacher educators must recognise and engage with the diverse experiences of marginalised groups[10], [11]. Acknowledging their unique challenges underscores education's role in promoting social justice.

This work is inherently challenging, often requiring student teachers to confront uncomfortable truths. However, the deep engagement, interrogation, and confrontation with equity, disadvantage, privilege, power, and education's role in perpetuating inequalities must be prioritised in teacher education to achieve meaningful change. Genuine transformation demands a significant reframing of entrenched assumptions and dominant ideologies, encouraging educators to question long-held beliefs and open themselves to new perspectives that prioritise equity and justice. As noted by Ladson-Billings nearly two decades ago, the challenges teachers face in working with diverse students often stem from the belief that effective teaching is merely about "what to do"[12]. The underlying issue is "how we think" (p. 30). This intrinsic connection between actions and thoughts emphasises that attitudes toward students inevitably manifest in instructional practices.

## **3 The What: Engaging with Content and Pedagogy**

Transitioning to teacher education for equity involves identifying the texts, content, and pedagogical approaches student teachers should use. The aim extends beyond merely implementing inclusive pedagogies; no one-size-fits-all methods exist. Instead, the focus needs to be on developing student teachers who are observant, proactive, and reflective about equity and inclusion issues within their specific contexts.

Regarding content, it is crucial to introduce student teachers to foundational theoretical perspectives in the philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history of education as they relate to equity and inclusion. Encouraging a critical evaluation of educational policies and curricula through an equity lens is also essential, prompting students to consider the national and local

contextual factors that affect student performance and socio-emotional experiences within schools.

The expanding body of research on inclusive education, particularly the concept of universal learning design, offers valuable insights to guide practice. Given the complex nature of equity and inclusion challenges, providing opportunities for supported reflective practice is vital. While hands-on experience in school contexts through supported placements is necessary, it is equally essential to maintain a close connection between practical experience and a comprehensive understanding of structural and systemic barriers. Teachers cannot enact change in isolation; they must cultivate a critical awareness of broader systems[13] and develop the competence and agency necessary to influence change within and beyond their classrooms. Over the past decade, there has been a concerted effort to engage teachers in meaningful professional conversations, collaborative inquiry, and, in contexts such as Ireland, practitioner research[14].

#### **4 The Who: The Importance of Teacher Diversity and Collaboration**

The question of who is involved in teacher education for equity and inclusion warrants significant attention. It is essential to consider the composition of the teaching workforce and who else contributes to the educational ecosystem. The composition of the teaching workforce is an often overlooked dimension of equity. Research shows that who the teachers are – both in terms of their social identities and experiences – matters greatly in fostering equitable learning environments[15]. Teachers from underrepresented groups bring unique perspectives, often informed by their personal experiences of marginalisation, which allow them to recognise and address structural inequalities in schools more effectively than their majority-group peers[16].

In a forthcoming paper, my colleagues and I assert that who the teachers are matters. We argue for greater recognition of teachers' social and cultural backgrounds and agency, often treated peripherally in discussions on learning environments and equity policy. Teaching bodies remain homogenous in many contexts, reflecting the cultural majority group[17]. While preparing all teachers to educate diverse students effectively is vital, addressing the representation of various societal groups within the teaching profession is equally important[18]. Interactions with teachers from minority backgrounds can challenge perceptions of power and inferiority[19], enhance cognitive flexibility, and, over time, reshape how students perceive and engage with others. Teachers with diverse "pedagogical cultural identities" [20] weave diverse cultural practices into pedagogical approaches, bringing the potential to significantly impact learning environments by centring marginalised voices, knowledge, and experiences while challenging the dominance of Western or majority-normative pedagogical processes.

From the teacher education perspective, individuals from underrepresented backgrounds can play a vital role in transforming teacher education's cultural, pedagogical, and critical dimensions. Their unique insights and experiences hold significant transformative potential. However, "just" diversifying the teaching body is not a cure-all for equity issues; mere representation does not suffice[15]. Some studies have highlighted concerning experiences faced by educators from underrepresented groups, including racial tokenism, the essentialisation of minority and working-class teachers, and elevated stress levels due to challenges in integrating into normative majority teacher education and school cultures [21], [22]. Therefore,

ethical approaches to teacher diversity must ensure that teachers from diverse backgrounds are present in schools and empowered to be their authentic selves, fully engaging with students, colleagues, and communities without compromising their backgrounds and identities[15], [21], [23]. Thus, we advocate for ethical approaches to teacher diversity that tackle inclusion, equity, and social justice issues for teachers from diverse backgrounds throughout their career pathways[21]. We view equity and inclusion for teachers from underrepresented groups and creating more equitable and inclusive teaching environments as fundamentally linked to establishing equitable learning spaces.

In considering the role of teacher education for equity, it is essential to highlight significant developments and research that reconceptualise teaching and education as more collaborative endeavours. There is a growing consensus around creating a team-based approach to teaching and learning that includes student teachers, practicing teachers, support staff, school leaders, teacher educators, and researchers[24], [25]. This collaborative model emphasises multidisciplinary teams working with various professionals, such as psychologists, social workers, and community organisations, to better support all students and their parents or guardians[26].

The importance of collaboration in education has been underscored by studies highlighting its benefits for student learning and teacher development. For instance, the work of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, 2016) emphasises the benefits of collaborative professionalism, which builds on professionals' pride in their expertise on the one hand and their genuine humility and understanding that "none of us knows everything" on the other hand[27], [28]. These two attributes allow professionals to pool their ideas and insights, their bits of imperfect and incomplete knowledge, to try to solve the mysteries of how to help the child learn and develop"[29]. McLaughlin and Talbert's work (2006) showed that collaborative approaches promote the exchange of diverse perspectives, contributing to a deeper understanding of educational equity[30]. However, "re-culturating schools into learning communities" remains challenging[30], [31].

Equally important is the growing emphasis on amplifying students' voices in decision-making and learning processes. Cook-Sather (2014) argues that student voice initiatives empower learners, fostering ownership of their education and promoting a more inclusive school culture[32]. Similarly, McMahon et al. (2012) highlight student engagement initiatives in Australia and Canada that embrace a critical democratic approach to collaboration[33]. These initiatives foster partnerships among students, educators, and communities to effectively address the challenges faced by visible minority and low-income students.

Such efforts underscore the significance of collaboration among teachers, students, and community members in creating equitable educational environments. They offer a valuable framework for enacting student engagement in socially just and transformative ways, leading to improved educational outcomes for marginalised groups. To implement these approaches effectively, teachers must cultivate strong interpersonal and collaboration skills; therefore, training programs should equip educators with the necessary tools to foster collaborative environments and encourage student participation.

## **5 The Where and the When: Contextualising Teacher Education for Equity**

Addressing equity and inclusion in education requires a long-term commitment throughout a teacher's career, as these concepts are inherently complex and influenced by ever-evolving societal contexts. Building meaningful relationships with students and their families is essential for fostering equity, but this process takes time and consistent effort. Additionally, systemic inequities in education often cannot be resolved quickly, requiring sustained advocacy for policy changes that dismantle barriers. As the education landscape evolves with new technologies and pedagogical approaches, ongoing professional development is crucial for teachers to remain effective.

The context in which teacher education occurs is vital for promoting equity; it should extend beyond traditional settings to include both formal and informal educational environments. Connecting academic coursework with real-world experiences deepens teachers' understanding of local needs and challenges[3]. Collaborative partnerships among teacher education institutions, schools, and communities are critical for adequate preparation, enabling future educators to grasp the nuances of their students' lived experiences and fostering a more responsive approach to teaching. Incorporating non-formal educational experiences, international exchanges, and virtual learning environments can further expand teachers' perspectives and competencies. Ultimately, maintaining a focus on equity and inclusion throughout their careers enables educators to cultivate the skills, knowledge, and reflective practices necessary to create genuinely inclusive environments, resulting in improved educational outcomes and advancing the broader goal of social justice in education.

## **6 Final Thoughts**

The road ahead is not without obstacles, but filled with opportunities for meaningful change. If we are to build more equitable and inclusive educational systems for the next generation, we must start with those who educate – our teachers. While I may have approached this topic from a different regional and cultural perspective, I hope that the insights I have shared will contribute to our collective understanding of how we can navigate present challenges and shape future pathways toward a more inclusive and equitable world of education.

Equity and inclusion are global challenges that benefit from cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration. Teacher exchanges may offer unique opportunities for mutual learning, bringing fresh perspectives, innovative strategies, and renewed commitment that can help us reimagine our approaches to fostering inclusive education.

In my experience supervising doctoral and post-doctoral education researchers from multiple international contexts, including Indonesia, I continually strive to learn more about how equity issues are understood and addressed in different cultural contexts. These knowledge exchanges have enriched my practice, highlighting the powerful potential of cross-cultural learning.

By sharing experiences and working together across borders, we deepen our understanding of equity and develop more creative, context-sensitive approaches to achieving it. This kind of global collaboration is essential as we strive to create inclusive, equitable learning environments for all.

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Thank you for this opportunity to engage with such diverse perspectives, and I look forward to continuing these important conversations.

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