

Teachers' Continuous Professional Development for Implementing Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Ethiopia: Evidence from the Sheger City Administration

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≈ This study explores the current state of teachers' continuous professional development for implementing inclusive education in the Sheger City Administration in Ethiopia. Using an instrumental multiple case study design, the study investigates teachers' understanding of existing continuous professional development programmes, the perceived relevance of these programmes to inclusive education, and the challenges teachers encounter in implementing these programmes. Data collection involved a document review, interviews with eight teachers, four principals and two education officials, and focus group discussions with all categories of study participants in order to deepen the understanding of their collective experiences and perspectives. Cross-case data analysis techniques were used to analyse the data. The findings reveal that although the national continuous professional development framework emphasises general teacher skill and knowledge development, it provides limited guidance on inclusive education. Key elements such as disability identification, differentiated instruction, collaborative practice and learner-centred adaptation are insufficiently addressed. As a result, the surveyed teachers reported that existing continuous professional development programmes are not fully relevant to the demands of inclusive classrooms. The study also identified several challenges with regard to effective continuous professional development implementation, including limited understanding and involvement of teachers, inadequate continuous training, lack of prioritisation of inclusive education in continuous professional development planning, time constraints, and insufficient motivation and institutional support. The study emphasises the need for a revised continuous professional development framework

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that explicitly incorporates inclusive education principles, prioritises collaboration with teachers and provides ongoing support for successful implementation. This necessitates a systemic shift towards inclusive continuous professional development practices that empower teachers to create classrooms that embrace and support the diverse needs of all learners.

Keywords: continuous professional development, critical disability theory, inclusive education, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers

Stalno strokovno izpopolnjevanje učiteljev za izvajanje inkluzivnega izobraževanja za učence s posebnimi potrebami v Etiopiji: ugotovitve iz mestne uprave Sheger

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~ Ta študija raziskuje trenutno stanje na področju stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja učiteljev za izvajanje inkluzivnega izobraževanja v mestni upravi Sheger v Etiopiji. S pomočjo instrumentalne študije več primerov ta raziskava preučuje razumevanje učiteljev glede obstoječih programov stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja, zaznana pomembnost teh programov za inkluzivno izobraževanje in izzive, s katerimi se učitelji srečujejo pri izvajanju teh programov. Zbiranje podatkov je vključevalo: pregled dokumentov, intervjuje z osmimi učitelji, s štirimi ravnatelji in z dvema uradnikoma s področja izobraževanja ter diskusije v fokusnih skupinah z vsemi kategorijami udeležencev študije, da bi poglobili razumevanje njihovih skupnih izkušenj in perspektiv. Za analizo podatkov so bile uporabljene tehnike medprimerjalne analize podatkov. Ugotovitve kažejo, da nacionalni okvir za stalni strokovni razvoj sicer poudarja splošni razvoj znanja in veščin učiteljev, vendar ponuja le omejene smernice glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja. Ključni elementi, kot so: prepoznavanje invalidnosti, diferencirano poučevanje, sodelovalna praksa in prilagajanje učencu, niso zadostno obravnavani. Posledično so anketirani učitelji poročali, da obstoječi programi stalnega strokovnega razvoja niso v celoti ustrezni zahtevam inkluzivnega izobraževanja. Študija je ugotovila tudi več izzivov, povezanih z učinkovitim izvajanjem stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja, med katerimi so: omejeno razumevanje in vključenost učiteljev, neustrezno stalno izobraževanje, pomanjkaje prednostne obravnave inkluzivnega izobraževanja pri načrtovanju stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja, časovne omejitve ter nezadostna motivacija in institucionalna podpora. Študija poudarja potrebo po prevetrenem okviru stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja, ki izrecno vključuje načela inkluzivnega izobraževanja, daje prednost sodelovanju z učitelji in zagotavlja stalno podporo za uspešno izvajanje. To zahteva sistemski premik k inkluzivnim praksam stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja, ki učiteljem omogočajo ustvarjanje razredov, ki sprejemajo in podpirajo raznolike potrebe vseh učencev.

Ključne besede: stalno strokovno izpopolnjevanje, teorija kritične invalidnosti, inkluzivno izobraževanje, osnovnošolski učitelji, srednješolski učitelji

Introduction

Inclusive education is a growing concern in the field of education (Bukamal, 2022; Ginja & Chen, 2021; Haug, 2017; Lindner et al., 2023; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). It is widely recognised as a rights-based approach aimed at ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners, including those with diverse learning needs (Ginja & Chen, 2021; Heroux & Peters, 2020; Opperetti et al., 2014). Beyond accommodating students with disabilities, inclusive education emphasises valuing diversity and addressing exclusionary pressures within education systems (Elder et al., 2021; Haug, 2017).

Teachers play a pivotal role in the implementation and success of inclusive education (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018; Zwane & Malale, 2018). As frontline practitioners, their attitudes, knowledge and instructional practices significantly influence the learning experiences and outcomes of students, particularly those with diverse needs (Keka, 2024). Effective inclusion therefore depends on the ability of teachers to understand diverse disabilities, learning styles and cultural backgrounds, and to adapt curricula, teaching strategies and assessments accordingly (Banks et al., 2015; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Mazzuki, 2025; Rakap et al., 2017; Smets & Struyven, 2020).

Given the complexity of inclusive education, continuous professional development (CPD) is essential for equipping teachers with the competencies required to address evolving educational challenges (Henry & Namhla, 2020). CPD enables both pre-service and in-service teachers to strengthen their knowledge, skills and inclusive pedagogical practices through activities such as workshops, seminars, peer coaching and online training (Ginja & Chen, 2021). Evidence indicates that CPD focused on inclusive practices positively influences teachers' attitudes and enhances their understanding of legal and policy frameworks related to disability rights (Aas, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2022; Bukamal, 2022; Elder et al., 2021). Furthermore, CPD promotes collaboration between teachers, families and other stakeholders, which is essential for inclusive schooling (Henry & Namhla, 2020; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

Globally, teacher professional development has gained increased attention as a key strategy for advancing inclusive education and addressing educational inequalities (Mavezera et al., 2024). This emphasis aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly Target 4.c, which highlights the importance of strengthening teacher capacity for inclusive education (Colglazier, 2015). In Ethiopia, the government has introduced several policy initiatives to promote inclusive education, including the General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (GEQIP-E), the Inclusive Education Resource Center

Guidelines (2015), the Education Sector Development Program V (ESDP V), the Special Needs/Inclusive Education Master Plan (2016–2025) and the Education Development Roadmap (2018–2030). Despite these efforts, challenges remain in effectively implementing inclusive education, particularly due to limitations in the CPD framework and insufficient coverage of inclusive teaching competencies (Betemariam, 2017). These challenges are also evident in the Sheger City Administration (ShCA), where improving teachers' CPD is crucial for strengthening inclusive education practices. The ShCA is an interesting case with regard to the implementation of inclusive education due to its geographical closeness to Addis Ababa, which brings the potential benefits of proximity, resource access, policy alignment, innovation and collaboration. Through an understanding of the current state of CPD initiatives and their impact on the capacity of teachers to support inclusive education, the present study aims to contribute to the improvement of educational practices and policies in the ShCA and beyond.

Although inclusive education is broadly understood as addressing the learning needs of all learners, the present study adopts a specific and intentional focus on students with special educational needs, particularly students with disabilities (SWDs), within mainstream primary and secondary schools. Grounded in critical disability theory (CDT), the study conceptualises inclusion as a rights-based response to systemic marginalisation, emphasising the importance of targeted teacher CPD to address disability-specific barriers and inequities. CDT provides a critical framework for examining ableism embedded within educational structures (Naraian & Gabel, 2023; Sztobryn-Giercuszkiwicz, 2017). It views disability as socially constructed and calls for dismantling discriminatory practices in curriculum, assessment and classroom interactions. CPD informed by CDT supports teachers in developing inclusive pedagogies, including differentiated instruction and universal design for learning, while promoting student empowerment, collaboration and systemic transformation of schooling (Eilers, 2020). Within this framework, the study prioritises the experiences and educational needs of SWDs, recognising that meaningful inclusion requires more than general pedagogical reform; it also demands deliberate attention to disability-specific barriers, teacher competencies and systemic inequities addressed through CPD.

The authors of the current study has endeavoured to search for empirical substantiation concerning the CPD of teachers for inclusive education on a broad scale throughout Africa and specifically within the Ethiopian setting. Although several earlier investigations exist, such as those carried out by Henry and Namhla (2020), Abraham (2019), Tsigie (2022), Taddese and Rao (2022)

and Louise et al. (2022), they lack pertinence in addressing the matter of CPD for teachers in inclusive education at any educational level, and none of them encompass the objectives of exploring teachers' CPD for inclusive education. Therefore, the current study aims to address gaps in empirical investigations and literature by examining the current CPD programmes offered by the ShCA and their effectiveness in preparing teachers for inclusive education practices. Additionally, the study investigates the challenges associated with teachers' CPD for inclusive education in the study area. Based on the study's findings, evidence-based recommendations are provided to enhance CPD programmes and better support inclusive education practices in the ShCA, and potentially throughout Ethiopia.

To that end, the study is guided by the following basic research questions:

1. How do the study participants describe and interpret the existing CPD programmes for implementing inclusive education for SWDs in the primary and secondary schools of the ShCA?
2. How relevant are the existing CPD programmes to equipping teachers for inclusive education?
3. What are the challenges associated with teachers' CPD for inclusive education in the ShCA?

The first research question specifically explores the participants' experiential and contextual understandings of the existing CPD programme, focusing on how inclusive education, particularly in relation to SWDs, is positioned, communicated and enacted within CPD structures and practices, rather than assessing individual attitudes towards inclusion or evaluating programme effectiveness.

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted in the ShCA, an emerging urban area located on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. The ShCA was selected because of its geographical proximity to the capital, which provides greater access to educational resources, policy support and ongoing national initiatives related to inclusive education. Education officials have also identified the ShCA as a region demonstrating promising practices in inclusive schooling compared to other areas, making it an appropriate context for exploring the effectiveness and relevance of teachers' CPD for inclusive education. Within this context, eight teachers (four from primary school and four from secondary school), each with at least

five years of experience, were purposefully selected from two sub-cities (Lega Tafo Lega Dadi and Koye Feche) based on predetermined criteria. This aligns with Creswell's (2013) recommendation that participants not only meet study criteria (experience) but also possess the ability and willingness to provide rich information. School principals and education office experts in the sub-cities were also included, with four principals (two from primary school and two from secondary school) and two education office experts contributing their perspectives.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the study participants

No.	Pseudonyms	Sex	Educational Qualification	Teaching Experience in Years	Experience in Teaching SWDs	Subject	Sub-City
1	PsT ₁	M	First Degree	19	5	Civics	LTLD
2	PsT ₂	F	First Degree	27	2	Language	LTLD
3	PsT ₃	M	First Degree	18	8	SS	Koye Feche
4	PsT ₄	F	First Degree	28	3	SS	Koye Feche
5	SsT ₁	M	Second Degree	16	5	Civics	Koye Feche
6	SsT ₂	M	Second Degree	20	-	English	Koye Feche
7	SsT ₃	F	First Degree	16	3	SS	LTLD
8	SsT ₄	M	First Degree	17	1	Language	LTLD
9	PsP ₁	M	First Degree	13	-	-	LTLD
10	PsP ₂	M	First Degree	20	-	-	Koye Feche
11	SsP ₁	M	Second Degree	19	-	-	Koye Feche
12	SsP ₂	M	Second Degree	21	-	-	LTLD
13	EoE ₁	M	First Degree	20	-	-	LTLD
14	EoE ₂	M	First Degree	15	-	-	Koye Feche

Note. SWDs: Students with Disabilities; SS: Social Science; LTLD: Lega Tafo Lega Dadi.

Pseudonyms: Primary School Teacher 1, 2, 3 and 4 (PsT_{1, 2, 3 and 4}), Secondary School Teacher 1, 2, 3 and 4 (SsT_{1, 2, 3 and 4}), Primary School Principal 1 and 2 (PsP_{1 and 2}), Secondary School Principal 1 and 2 (SsP_{1 and 2}), Education Office Expert 1 and 2 (EoE_{1 and 2}).

Data Collection Instruments

In order to deeply explore teachers' CPD for implementing inclusive education, the study employed a multi-pronged approach, drawing inspiration from the framework devised by Schramm (1971). In-depth semi-structured interviews using a meticulously crafted guide allowed individual teachers, principals and educational experts to share their unique experiences and perspectives. This approach facilitated the exploration of individual challenges and

nuanced understandings. Focus group discussions with all categories of study participants provided a platform for collective brainstorming and the emergence of shared experiences and insights, enriching the understanding of group dynamics and shared challenges within the existing CPD programme. Finally, a thorough examination of national CPD materials (framework and toolkit) offered valuable insights into the intended goals and design of the programmes, enabling a comparison between the official vision and the actual implementation experiences captured through interviews and focus group discussions. This triangulation of data collection methods, encompassing individual experiences, group dynamics and official policies, ensures a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the teachers' CPD phenomena within the context of inclusive education practice.

Research Design

The study employed an instrumental case study research design grounded in a constructivist philosophical paradigm, which employs a qualitative research approach. This approach prioritised the subjective experiences and interpretations of the participants, recognising that knowledge is constructed through individual interactions with the world. The instrumental case study design provided an ideal framework for comprehensively investigating the phenomenon of teachers' CPD for implementing inclusive education within the specific context of the ShCA. As Creswell (2020) and Yin (2009) emphasise, case studies excel at in-depth exploration of bounded systems, allowing researchers to delve into the nuances of a particular setting. The focus on the ShCA enabled a rich understanding of the study participants' experiences with CPD, their understanding of its relevance to inclusive education implementation, and the challenges they encounter. Moreover, as Stake (1995) suggests, the instrumental nature of this study design transcends the specific case. Through examining teachers' CPD within a framework and toolkit applicable to other Ethiopian contexts with similar inclusive education initiatives, the research has the potential to inform broader teachers' CPD practices across the country. This transferability makes the study valuable not only for the ShCA but also for advancing inclusive education throughout Ethiopia.

The study employed a cross-case data analysis technique, focusing on two sub-cities within the ShCA (Lega Tafo Lega Dadi and Koye Feche) as a unit of analysis. The analysis proceeded in iterative stages. First, interview transcripts were coded line-by-line to identify key themes and concepts related to the research questions. These themes were then compared and contrasted across the two sub-cities to identify similarities and differences in perspectives

on CPD programmes, their relevance to inclusive education, and the challenges faced. Finally, through triangulation of data from multiple sources (interviews, documents and focus group discussions), a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges surrounding teacher CPD for inclusive education in the ShCA was developed. This cross-case analysis allowed the researchers to not only explore the specific experiences of each sub-city but also to identify broader patterns and trends across the ShCA. This approach provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the research topic than would have been possible through a single-case study design, as recommended by Borman et al. (2012). The result was a comparative matrix analysing teachers' CPD for implementing inclusive education within the ShCA, as presented in Table 2.

The phenomenon of interest in the present study is the national 60-hour CPD programme implemented annually for primary and secondary school teachers in the ShCA, in line with the Ministry of Education CPD framework and toolkit (MOE, 2009a; 2009b). The programme is structured as a school-based and system-guided professional development requirement in which teachers must complete a minimum of 60 hours per academic year as part of their career progression. At the national level, CPD hours are not allocated by specific themes; instead, schools, clusters, sub-city education offices and regional authorities identify priority areas and translate them into local CPD plans. In practice, CPD activities primarily focus on general pedagogical improvement, including active learning strategies, assessment methods, classroom management, curriculum implementation, gender issues, student discipline and school improvement initiatives. Although inclusive education is recognised in national policy discourse, it is not assigned dedicated hours within the CPD programme, nor is it systematically organised into structured modules addressing disability, special educational needs or inclusive pedagogical practices.

Regarding implementation modalities, CPD is delivered mainly through school-based activities such as peer discussions, experience sharing, mentoring, reflective practice, portfolio development and occasional workshops facilitated by school leaders or education experts. Instructional approaches largely emphasise theoretical discussions, policy familiarisation and general reflection rather than sustained practical or experiential learning. When inclusive education appears within CPD activities, it is typically embedded indirectly within broader themes and lacks clear guidance on disability identification, differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, assistive technologies and collaboration with families or specialists. Opportunities for classroom-based practice, coaching and follow-up support are minimal, resulting in an imbalance that favours conceptual input over hands-on application. Consequently, despite

its flexibility and local adaptability, the CPD programme provides limited systematic preparation for teachers to effectively support students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.

Results

This section presents findings derived from the data collected from the surveyed teachers, principals and education officials in two sub-cities of the ShCA. The results are organised according to the major themes aligned with the research questions. A comparative matrix was developed to examine similarities and differences between Lega Tafo Lega Dadi and Koye Feche regarding teachers' CPD for implementing inclusive education. The matrix reveals a notable difference in teachers' understanding of existing CPD programmes. Teachers in Lega Tafo Lega Dadi demonstrate a varied understanding and limited knowledge of specific programmes, whereas teachers in Koye Feche show very low awareness overall. This limited awareness in both sub-cities represents a major barrier to effective implementation of inclusive education. Although CPD programmes exist in these areas, teachers' knowledge of them and their perceived relevance strongly influence participation. In Lega Tafo Lega Dadi, inadequate information about the available programmes reduces engagement, while in Koye Feche, perceived irrelevance further discourages participation.

Despite these challenges, some positive practices were identified. Lega Tafo Lega Dadi employs occasional training sessions and school-based mentoring, while Koye Feche uses peer learning alongside mentoring approaches. However, both programmes face limitations. In Lega Tafo Lega Dadi, the narrow scope of training restricts sustained learning, whereas in Koye Feche, varied formats do not consistently address teachers' diverse needs. Importantly, in both sub-cities, CPD programmes show weak alignment with inclusive education principles, particularly due to limited focus on specific disabilities and diverse learner needs. The findings also highlight a lack of emphasis on practical skills development. Teachers in both sub-cities reported that CPD activities focus mainly on theoretical knowledge, providing insufficient opportunities to build practical strategies for inclusive classroom implementation. Additionally, low motivation and participation were common concerns, linked to heavy workloads, limited incentives and perceptions of irrelevance. The absence of continuous training further restricts teachers' ability to remain updated on inclusive education practices. Generally, the matrix indicates that inclusive education is not adequately prioritised in CPD planning in either sub-city. This lack of prioritisation, combined with limited awareness and weak practical

focus, constitutes a significant barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Table 2

Comparative Matrix: Teachers' CPD for Implementing Inclusive Education in the Sheger City Administration

Themes/ Categories	Sub-Categories	Lega Tafo Lega Dadi Sub-City	Koye Feche Sub-City	Similarities	Differences
Under- standing of Existing CPD Programmes	Awareness and Access: Knowl- edge of available programmes.	Limited knowledge of specific programmes; unequal access based on location and school resources.	Varied understanding of the existing CPD programme among teachers.	Limited aware- ness limits participation.	Centralised initiatives improve access.
	Content and Format: Types and formats of CPD activities.	Occasional training sessions and school-based mentoring	Peer learning and school-based mentor- ing.	Limited scope hinders sus- tained learning.	Diverse for- mats cater to different needs.
Relevance of CPD Programmes	Alignment with Inclusive Educa- tion Principles: Coherence with inclusive educa- tion principles and practices.	Vague connection; limited focus on specific disabilities and diverse needs.	Vague connection; limited focus on spe- cific disabilities and diverse needs.	No alignment.	-
	Practical Skills and Strategies: Equipping teach- ers with concrete skills for inclusive classrooms.	Limited practical applica- tion; focus on theoretical knowledge.	Limited practical application; focus on theoretical knowl- edge.	Theoretical knowledge insufficient for effective implemen- tation.	-
Challenges of Teachers' CPD	Motivation and Participation: Factors influenc- ing teachers' engagement with CPD opportuni- ties.	Low motivation due to work- load, perceived irrelevance and lack of incentives.	Low motivation due to workload, per- ceived irrelevance and lack of incentives.	Lack of moti- vation hinders participation.	-
	Limited contin- uous training and focus.	Limited training to stay up to date with inclusive education practice.	Limited focus of inclusive education in CPD.	Training limita- tions hinder programme effectiveness.	-
	Absence of pri- oritising inclusive education in CPD planning.	Absence of prioritising inclusive education in CPD planning.	Absence of prioritising inclusive educa- tion in CPD planning.	Absence of prioritising inclusive educa- tion in CPD planning.	-
	Lack of under- standing and involvement.	Limited understanding of existing CPD for inclusive education.	Limited understand- ing of existing CPD for inclusive educa- tion.	Limited understanding of existing CPD for inclusive education.	-

Discussion

1. *Understanding of Existing Continuous Professional Development Programmes*

The data obtained from CPD document reviews indicate that Ethiopia established a national CPD policy framework for teachers in 2009 as part of broader school improvement and teacher development initiatives (MOE, 2009a). The framework conceptualises CPD as a continuous process aimed at updating and upgrading teachers' skills and knowledge to improve student outcomes. It defines CPD as any activity that enhances teacher effectiveness and is guided by a clear conception of "good teaching", organised into four domains: professional knowledge and understanding, teaching skills, values and attitudes, and the learning environment (MOE, 2009a). These standards were reportedly developed through nationwide consultations involving teachers and other stakeholders. The policy is supported by a CPD Toolkit that provides practical implementation guidelines and aligns CPD participation with the teacher career ladder system (MOE, 2009b). Teachers are expected to complete 60 hours of CPD annually, linking professional development directly to career progression.

However, document analysis revealed significant limitations regarding inclusive education. While the framework supports general teacher development, it does not adequately address inclusive education principles or practices. The definition of inclusion remains vague and narrowly focuses on differences in learning pace and style, without addressing the broader range of barriers faced by students with disabilities, including physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional and social challenges development (MOE, 2009a, 2009b). The documents also lack concrete strategies for identifying and removing these barriers, leaving teachers insufficiently prepared to support diverse learners. Moreover, the framework does not reference universal design for learning or its core principles, such as multiple means of engagement, representation and expression. The teaching strategies presented in the documents are limited, primarily emphasising traditional differentiated instruction while overlooking inclusive approaches such as collaborative learning, scaffolding and individualised support. As a result, the framework provides limited guidance for developing inclusive classroom practices (MOE, 2009a, 2009b). Overall, although the CPD policy contributes to improving teacher quality, its limited engagement with inclusive education significantly reduces its effectiveness in supporting diverse learners. Strengthening the framework to explicitly integrate inclusive education principles and practical strategies is essential for enabling teachers to create genuinely inclusive learning environments.

On the other hand, the data obtained from the study participants through the interview responses and focus group discussions displayed varying levels of understanding regarding existing CPD programmes and initiatives for inclusive education. Some expressed a clear awareness of programme objectives and content, while others lacked detailed knowledge or felt excluded from specific initiatives. The interview responses revealed disparities in how primary and secondary teachers perceived the ongoing national CPD for Ethiopian educators. A primary school teacher from Lega Tafo Lega Dadi sub-city expressed the following opinion:

If implemented diligently with the framework and toolkit provided, the current CPD programme could significantly enhance teachers' skills. We, at our school, consider all training programmes and workshops aimed at improving teaching abilities to be part of continuous professional development. (PsT₁)

Another primary school teacher, from Koye Feche sub-city, highlighted programme requirements:

All teachers with over two years of experience must participate in the CPD programme. It mandates 60 hours of annual self-directed professional development, aligning individual plans with priorities set at school, district, regional and national levels. (PsT₃)

The interviews also revealed that some teachers deviated from the CPD programme's framework and toolkit when planning parts of their professional development related to non-professional issues. One example is a secondary school teacher from Lega Tafo Lega Dadi sub-city, who stated:

... in addition to the priorities and plans assigned by the school, I have personally been planning initiatives at various times to improve student skills, improve girls' participation, increase academic performance and reduce student tardiness (SsT₂).

The interview data reveal disparities in Ethiopian teachers' perceptions of the national CPD programme, echoing similar findings from Ethiopian studies on teacher professional development. These studies include *Teachers' Professional Development in Schools: Rhetoric Versus Reality* by Gemedu et al. (2014) and *Interrogating the Continuing Professional Development Policy Framework in Ethiopia: A Critical Discourse Analysis* by Akalu (2016). While some teachers, such as a primary teacher from Lega Tafo, embrace the programme's organised framework and consider all training as CPD, others, like

a teacher from Koye Feche, emphasise mandatory aspects such as the 60-hour requirement. Furthermore, some teachers, such as a secondary school teacher from Lega Tafo, go beyond the programme's scope and focus on developing student skills and engagement, suggesting a discrepancy in their understanding of the programme's boundaries. This inconsistency reflects previous research highlighting a lack of uniform comprehension among educators regarding CPD, indicating a need for clearer communication and potentially more adaptable programme structures that can accommodate both standardised guidance and teacher-led initiatives that address local contexts and priorities.

2. *The Relevance of CPD Programmes for Implementing Inclusive Education*

The findings reveal widespread dissatisfaction with current CPD programmes in relation to inclusive education. Teachers consistently reported that most CPD activities emphasise theoretical concepts with limited practical application, making it difficult to translate learning into classroom practice. As one teacher noted, many programmes lack concrete strategies for implementing inclusive teaching, reducing their usefulness in real classroom contexts (PsT4). This finding contrasts with studies by Chhetri et al. (2023) and Rakap et al. (2017), which highlight the importance of practical experiences in developing teachers' inclusive competencies. These studies demonstrate that hands-on training and specialised courses can positively influence teachers' attitudes and enhance their ability to adapt instruction and provide accommodations for diverse learners.

Participants in the present study also reported gaps in essential training areas, particularly disability identification and assessment, differentiated instruction, and collaboration with parents and communities. Teachers emphasised the need for more practical, hands-on training in these areas to effectively support inclusive classroom practices (PsT4; SsT1). The mismatch between CPD content and teachers' professional needs thus represents a major barrier to implementing inclusive education. These findings align with Kumari et al. (2019) and Elder et al. (2021), who argue that insufficient prioritisation and funding for professional development often leave teachers without the resources needed to implement inclusive practices. From a CDT perspective, the absence of practical strategies and disability-focused training reflects systemic ableism, as it fails to address structural barriers that limit the participation of students with disabilities.

Despite these concerns, some CPD initiatives were recognised for their potential, particularly those involving peer learning and collaborative activities.

School leaders and education officials noted that such approaches supported professional sharing and mutual learning. However, these positive experiences were often overshadowed by broader limitations, including lack of prioritised planning, insufficient expert guidance and limited practical resources for inclusive education (PsP2; SsP1; EoE1). Participants also acknowledged the flexibility of the CPD framework and toolkit, which allows institutions at different levels to set their own priorities. However, teachers noted that inclusive education has rarely been treated as a priority area within CPD planning, despite the framework's long existence. The focus group discussions confirmed this concern, emphasising a persistent disconnect between CPD content and teachers' actual needs for inclusive practice.

The document review further confirmed that while the framework's flexibility is a key strength, it also has significant shortcomings. The CPD policy provides limited guidance on inclusive education principles, including reflection on teacher biases, curriculum and assessment adaptation, collaboration with families and stakeholders, and strategies for addressing individual learning needs (MOE, 2009a, 2009b). It also lacks sufficient emphasis on assistive technologies, differentiated instruction techniques and inclusive partnership approaches. Overall, although the CPD framework in Ethiopia provides a foundation for teacher development, its limited integration of inclusive education principles reduces its relevance in the current educational context. From a CDT perspective, the framework's flexibility may appear beneficial (Oleson, 2023) but ultimately reflects a lack of structural commitment to prioritising inclusive education. Strengthening the framework to explicitly address inclusive practices, teacher competencies and systemic barriers is therefore essential for improving inclusive education implementation (Schaffner & Buswell, 2004; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

3. *Challenges Associated with Teachers' CPD for Implementing Inclusive Education*

The study identified several major obstacles affecting teachers' CPD for implementing inclusive education in the ShCA. Data collected from multiple sources and methods revealed key challenges, including lack of understanding and involvement, limited continuous training and focus, absence of prioritising inclusive education in CPD planning, time constraints, and low levels of motivation and support. This section briefly discusses these challenges.

The current CPD system for inclusive education is marked by limited awareness and participation, leading to confusion among teachers. Many teachers reported insufficient information about available training opportunities

that support inclusive practices. The interview findings confirmed this, as one teacher stated: *“I am uncertain about the current CPD programme for inclusive education. Clear guidelines or information about available training opportunities have not been provided”* (SsT2). A secondary school principal also highlighted the gap between top-down directives and school realities, emphasising the need to involve teachers and leaders in CPD planning: *“There is a clear mismatch between higher-level directives and practical school needs. Teachers and school leaders must be involved in planning CPD programmes to ensure effectiveness”* (SsP2).

The disparity between policies that are imposed from the top down and the demand that arises from the grassroots highlights the importance of involving teachers and school leaders in the creation and execution of effective programmes (Taddese & Rao, 2022). The data obtained from the focus group discussions also revealed the lack of a shared understanding among teachers regarding the current CPD programme. Furthermore, the level of understanding and participation in the CPD programme varies among teachers in primary and secondary schools. As a result, it is necessary to transition towards a collaborative approach in programme development and implementation (Bačáková & Closs, 2013). This entails actively engaging teachers and leaders in the planning, testing and refining of CPD programmes to ensure that they address the genuine needs and contexts. Open communication, data-driven decision making and shared ownership are essential elements in the creation of effective programmes that resonate with educators and ultimately lead to improved student learning outcomes (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020).

The present study revealed a clear shortage of ongoing training opportunities. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with infrequent updates and lack of sustained support. A primary school teacher noted: *“...I had only one workshop on inclusive education a year ago. There’s no ongoing support to keep our knowledge and skills up to date”* (PsT2). Similarly, an education office expert stressed the importance of continuous training by qualified professionals to ensure regular updates on inclusive strategies (EoE1). Teachers described training as fragmented and insufficient, indicating poor alignment between official programmes and actual needs. These findings align with Tsigie (2022), who reported that short-term, impractical training left teachers inadequately prepared for inclusive classrooms.

The study showed that inclusive education receives little attention in CPD planning. Participants reported a minimal focus on strategies for supporting diverse learners. One primary school principal stated: *“...inclusive education has never been given priority in CPD planning; it often takes a backseat”* (PsP1). A secondary teacher similarly noted that CPD materials rarely address

inclusion (SsT1). The document review also confirmed that although CPD frameworks allow flexibility, inclusive education has not been prioritised at different system levels (MOE, 2009a, 2009b).

Heavy workload emerged as another major barrier. Teachers and officials reported difficulty allocating time for CPD due to administrative duties and performance pressures. One teacher explained: "*Given our workload, fitting in training feels impossible*" (SsT3). An education office expert echoed this concern, noting constant competition between CPD and routine responsibilities (EoE2). Focus group participants also indicated that the required 60 annual CPD hours often occur during personal time, discouraging participation. Similar findings were reported by Abraham (2019), who identified workload and time shortages as major barriers in Hawassa secondary schools.

The study also revealed low motivation and limited institutional support for CPD participation. Teachers felt burdened without recognition or incentives. One teacher noted: "*There is no motivation to invest extra effort in CPD; we receive no acknowledgment while workload increases*" (PsT4). An education expert emphasised the need for follow-up coaching, mentorship and resources to translate training into practice (EoE2). These findings align with those of Abraham (2019) and Gemedu et al. (2014), who similarly identified lack of motivation and support as persistent barriers.

Generally, the challenges identified in the present study, which include a lack of understanding and involvement, limited continuous training and focus, absence of prioritising inclusive education in CPD planning, time constraints, and lack of motivation and support, can all be interpreted as manifestations of ableism in the education system through the lens of CDT. For instance, the lack of understanding and involvement of teachers in CPD programmes suggests that they may not be aware of the needs of students with disabilities or how to create inclusive learning environments. The limited continuous training and focus on inclusive education suggests that teachers may not have the skills and knowledge they need to effectively support students with disabilities. The absence of prioritising inclusive education in CPD planning suggests that it is not seen as a core part of teachers' professional development. The time constraints faced by teachers make it difficult for them to participate in CPD programmes, and the lack of motivation and support can make it even harder for them to see the value of doing so.

Conclusion

The present study examined teachers' CPD for implementing inclusive education, with a particular focus on SWDs in primary and secondary schools of the ShCA, Ethiopia. Guided by critical disability theory, the findings demonstrate that existing CPD frameworks insufficiently prepare teachers to address disability-related learning needs, despite the flexibility and collaborative potential embedded within the national CPD framework and toolkit. In relation to the first research focus, participants described existing CPD programmes as fragmented, inconsistently accessed and lacking a clear emphasis on inclusive education, with many teachers having a limited understanding of the available opportunities. The limited emphasis on disability identification, differentiated instruction, learner-centred adaptations and collaboration with families indicates a persistent gap between inclusive education rhetoric and practice for students with special educational needs. Finally, several challenges constrain effective CPD implementation, including limited practical training, absence of continuous support, competing workload demands, low motivation due to lack of incentives, and an overall failure to prioritise inclusive education within CPD planning at all administrative levels.

Thus, in order to establish a genuinely inclusive and equitable education system in Ethiopia, a comprehensive approach is required. This involves revising the CPD framework and toolkit to explicitly incorporate inclusive practices, prioritising inclusive education in planning with dedicated resources, and providing high-quality, practical training delivered by qualified professionals. Additionally, ongoing coaching, mentorship and incentives should serve to motivate teachers, while fostering collaboration and shared responsibility by involving them in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes. This commitment to collaboration, shared responsibility and continuous improvement will ensure that all Ethiopian students have the opportunity to thrive.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, which primarily stem from the specific context of the Sheger City Administration. The findings may not be fully generalisable to other regions or educational settings in Ethiopia. Therefore, future research should encompass a broader scope in order to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and requirements for teachers' CPD in inclusive education across diverse contexts within the country.

Ethical Statement

The research investigation was conducted in accordance with the established ethical guidelines pertinent to pedagogical inquiry. Ethical authorisation for the execution of the study was secured from the Ethical Research Committee of the Haramaya University. All of the participants rendered informed consent prior to their involvement, and their privacy and anonymity were meticulously safeguarded throughout the entirety of the research endeavour.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions related to the protection of the research participants. However, anonymised data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The authors affirm that there exist no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest pertaining to the execution of this research or the formulation of this manuscript.

When preparing this article, the author(s) used Perplexity AI (online platform) and ChatGPT (GPT-5.3, OpenAI) on 21 December 2025, 27 January 2026 and 16 February 2026, with the prompt: "Assist in refining academic language, improving clarity, and organizing sections of the manuscript", for the purpose of language editing and structural improvement. The authors reviewed and edited the output as necessary and accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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