

Sociological Perspectives on Inclusive Pedagogy in Higher Education Classrooms in Pakistan

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1282>

Abstract

This study examines the sociological perspectives on pedagogy in higher education institutions in Pakistan, focusing on how teaching practices foster participation, collaboration, and critical reflection among students. Using a qualitative research design, published research documents were analyzed through purposive sampling, content analysis, and thematic analysis to examine patterns, challenges, and outcomes associated with inclusive teaching. The findings indicate that inclusive pedagogy enhances student engagement, promotes reflexivity, and facilitates hybrid learning experiences that integrate academic knowledge with students' lived social realities. However, its effectiveness is constrained by gendered classroom dynamics, socio-cultural expectations, hierarchical teaching structures, and limited institutional support, which particularly affect female students and those from marginalized backgrounds. Reflexive and participatory strategies, along with technology-mediated approaches, were identified as key mechanisms to promote equity and critical thinking, although their success depends on deliberate facilitation and access to resources. The study highlights the importance of embedding inclusive pedagogy in curriculum design, faculty development, and institutional policy to create learning environments that are equitable, participatory, and transformative.

Keywords: Inclusive Pedagogy, Higher Education, Classroom Practices, Equity, Critical Engagement

Introduction

Higher education in Pakistan is undergoing a significant transformation, with increasing enrollment and growing attention to pedagogical quality and inclusivity (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025; Shoaib, 2025b). Classrooms, in particular, provide a platform for critical thinking, social awareness, and engagement with diverse perspectives (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib, 2025a). However, traditional teacher-centered approaches, hierarchical structures, and socio-cultural norms often limit student participation, especially for marginalized groups (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Inclusive pedagogy, an approach that seeks to recognize and accommodate diversity, equity, and accessibility in teaching and learning, offers a lens for understanding how sociological education more participatory and equitable (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a, 2025b). Higher education in Pakistan has witnessed significant expansion over the

past two decades, with increasing enrollment across public and private universities (Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Alongside this growth, concerns about teaching quality, student engagement, and equitable access to learning opportunities have become central to higher education discourse (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib & Bashir, 2025; Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). Sociology, including social sciences, as a discipline, provides a unique lens for understanding society, social inequalities, and critical perspectives, making its classroom practices especially important for cultivating analytical skills, civic awareness, and social responsibility among students (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025; Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025). However, conventional pedagogical approaches in Pakistani universities often remain teacher-centered, hierarchical, and rigid, limiting students' opportunities to actively participate, challenge dominant narratives, or co-construct knowledge (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Such practices may reinforce existing social inequalities, particularly along lines of gender, socio-economic background, and regional or linguistic differences (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025).

Inclusive pedagogy, as a theoretical and practical framework, emphasizes equity, accessibility, and recognition of diversity within the learning environment (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025b). It seeks to create classroom spaces where all students, regardless of gender, social background, or prior educational experience, meaningfully engage, contribute, and learn collaboratively (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025c; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Inclusive pedagogy also highlights the importance of reflexive teaching, where educators critically examine their own biases, instructional strategies, and the broader socio-cultural contexts that shape classroom dynamics (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025; Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). In the Pakistani context, where socio-cultural norms, gendered expectations, and institutional hierarchies strongly influence classroom interactions, implementing inclusive pedagogical practices presents both significant challenges and opportunities (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a). This study explores how inclusive pedagogy is interpreted and practiced within classrooms in higher education in Pakistan, focusing on the experiences of both faculty and students. It examines the ways inclusive strategies such as participatory learning, collaborative projects, and critical discussions affect classroom engagement, student confidence, and reflective learning. Additionally, it investigates the barriers posed by institutional structures, gendered social norms, and cultural expectations, which may constrain the effectiveness of inclusive practices. By synthesizing insights from published research documents, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential and limitations of inclusive pedagogy in Pakistani higher education, highlighting pathways for creating equitable, participatory, and transformative learning environments.

Study Context

Higher education in Pakistan has expanded considerably over the past two decades, yet it continues to grapple with challenges related to access, quality, equity, and inclusivity (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025b; Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). Despite a growing number of students enrolling in universities, classroom practices often remain traditional and teacher-centered, emphasizing rote learning, lecture-based instruction, and hierarchical interactions (Shoaib & Ullah, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). This pedagogical model limits students' engagement, critical thinking, and opportunities to participate actively in the learning process, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds or underrepresented social groups (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). The classrooms, in particular, serve as crucial sites for fostering social awareness, analytical reasoning, and critical engagement with societal issues (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b, 2025c). However, structural and cultural constraints such as gendered norms, socio-economic disparities, and institutional hierarchies affect both teaching and learning processes (Shoaib & Zaman, 2025; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Female students, students from rural areas, and those from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds may experience restricted voice and participation, reflecting

broader societal inequalities (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib, 2024a).

Additionally, faculty practices are often shaped by existing curricula, institutional expectations, and limited exposure to innovative teaching strategies that inhibit the adoption of inclusive approaches (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024c). Inclusive pedagogy offers a framework for transforming classroom interactions, emphasizing participation, equity, accessibility, and recognition of diversity (Shoaib, 2024d, 2024e). It encourages pedagogical strategies that value students' lived experiences, foster collaboration, and promote critical reflection, thereby bridging gaps between formal academic knowledge and students' social realities (Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a). In the Pakistani context, inclusive pedagogy is particularly relevant as it mitigates the effects of entrenched social hierarchies, cultural norms, and promotes equitable educational opportunities (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). This study situates itself within this evolving educational landscape, examining how inclusive pedagogy is operationalized in classrooms, the challenges encountered in implementation, and the potential benefits for student engagement, empowerment, and reflective learning.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how inclusive pedagogy is implemented in classrooms in higher education institutions in Pakistan.
2. To explore the experiences of students and faculty regarding inclusive teaching and learning practices.
3. To identify barriers and challenges to achieving inclusivity in classroom interactions.
4. To analyze the impact of inclusive pedagogy on participation, critical engagement, and collaborative learning.

Research Questions

1. How is inclusive pedagogy perceived and practiced in classrooms in Pakistani universities?
2. What are the experiences of students and faculty in relation to inclusive teaching and learning practices?
3. What institutional, cultural, or social factors hinder or support inclusive pedagogy in higher education?
4. How does inclusive pedagogy influence student participation, engagement, and learning outcomes?

The Data and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on published research documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant academic reports. Purposive sampling was used to select published research documents addressing inclusive pedagogy, sociology of education, and higher education in Pakistan. Data were analyzed through content analysis to identify recurring patterns, pedagogical strategies, and challenges related to inclusion. Thematic analysis was applied to generate core themes reflecting the ways inclusive pedagogy shapes classroom interactions and student experiences. The study is restricted to qualitative insights from published documents, without empirical fieldwork or primary data collection. Findings are therefore interpretive and contextualized within the literature available.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of published research documents revealed multiple interconnected themes that illustrate how inclusive pedagogy is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in classrooms in Pakistan. These themes highlight the interplay between teaching strategies, cultural norms, gender, institutional structures, and student engagement. The major themes that emerged include: 1) pedagogical practices promoting inclusion, 2) student participation and power dynamics, 3) institutional and cultural constraints, 4) reflexivity and critical thinking, 5) technology and hybrid learning, and 6) challenges

to the sustainability of inclusive practices. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Pedagogical Practices Promoting Inclusion

Inclusive pedagogical practices identified in the literature include participatory lectures, group discussions, collaborative projects, reflective writing, and case-based learning (Ahmed et al., 2025; Shoaib et al., 2024). These strategies create opportunities for students to actively engage with course content, share diverse perspectives, and co-construct knowledge with peers and instructors. These findings align with Freire's (1970) concept of dialogic learning, where students are active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Similarly, Hooks (1994) emphasizes teaching as a practice of freedom, fostering critical engagement and empowerment. The literature suggests that inclusive strategies increase student confidence, enhance collaboration, and encourage participation from marginalized groups, provided that these practices are implemented thoughtfully and consistently.

Student Participation and Power Dynamics

The analysis revealed that participation is often mediated by gender, socio-economic status, and cultural norms (Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023; Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023). Male students and students from urban or privileged backgrounds frequently dominate classroom discourse. However, female students and those from rural or marginalized backgrounds tend to participate less. Some female students reported hesitation in voicing opinions due to cultural expectations of modesty, deference, or fear of social judgment. These dynamics reflect Foucault's (1980) notion of power/knowledge and Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, where social and cultural capital influence classroom interactions. Luke (1996) similarly notes that educational spaces reproduce broader social hierarchies unless deliberate measures are taken to create equitable participation. The findings underscore the need for teachers to actively facilitate inclusive engagement, create safe spaces for dialogue, and encourage diverse student voices.

Institutional and Cultural Constraints

Institutional policies, hierarchical teaching norms, rigid curricula, and limited resources were identified as significant barriers to inclusive pedagogy (Shoaib, 2023a, 2023b; Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023). Segregated classes, large student-to-teacher ratios, and top-down evaluation methods further limit meaningful student participation (Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Cultural expectations, particularly regarding gender roles and social propriety, also shape classroom behavior and engagement patterns (Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022; Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022). These constraints highlight the importance of contextualizing inclusive pedagogy within the specific cultural and institutional landscape of Pakistani higher education (Mahmood, 2005; Morley, 2005). Without supportive policies and structural flexibility, even well-designed inclusive strategies may fail to achieve their transformative potential (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib, Anwar, & Mustafa, 2022). Faculty development, institutional encouragement, and curriculum reform are essential to overcome these barriers (Shoaib, Rasool, & Anwar, 2021; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a).

Reflexivity and Critical Thinking

Inclusive pedagogy encourages students to reflect critically on social norms, inequalities, and their own assumptions (Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Participatory discussions, reflective assignments, and collaborative projects enable students to question dominant narratives and develop analytical and ethical reasoning skills (Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, et al., 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). These findings resonate with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which emphasizes reflection as a mechanism for perspective transformation. Similarly, Giroux (2005) highlights the importance of border-crossing spaces in fostering critical consciousness. Reflexive learning not only enhances sociological understanding but also cultivates empathy, self-awareness, and social responsibility among students.

Technology and Hybrid Learning

Some studies emphasized the potential of digital platforms and technology-mediated learning to support inclusive pedagogy (Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019). Online forums, multimedia resources, and learning management systems enable students to participate beyond physical classroom constraints (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013; Shoaib et al., 2025). However, unequal access to technology, internet connectivity issues, and digital literacy gaps pose challenges for equitable implementation. Technology enhances inclusivity, but it must be accompanied by institutional support, training, and equitable access to avoid reinforcing existing disparities (Nussbaum, 2000). Hybrid learning models, when carefully implemented, complement traditional methods and extend participatory opportunities for diverse learners.

Challenges to the Sustainability of Inclusive Practices

The literature highlights several challenges in sustaining inclusive pedagogical practices: resistance from students accustomed to traditional teacher-centered methods, faculty workload and time constraints, lack of institutional support, and cultural resistance to participatory learning (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025c; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). These factors often limit the long-term integration of inclusive strategies into classroom practice. Sustainability requires systemic, institutional, and cultural support, including policy frameworks, professional development programs, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that inclusive practices are embedded in everyday teaching (Connell, 2002). Faculty must be equipped to navigate cultural sensitivities, promoting equity, and institutional leadership must recognize and reward innovative pedagogical practices. The analysis suggests that inclusive pedagogy in Pakistani classrooms transforms learning experiences by fostering engagement, collaboration, and critical reflection (Shoaib et al., 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, et al., 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). However, its effectiveness is contingent upon careful facilitation, sensitivity to gender and social hierarchies, and supportive institutional structures (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, et al., 2025a). Inclusive pedagogy is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a contextually grounded framework that requires continuous adaptation, reflexivity, and commitment from educators and institutions alike (Shoaib et al., 2025; Shoaib et al., 2025).

Theoretical Insights

Inclusive pedagogy in higher education, particularly in classrooms, has been conceptualized through several interrelated theoretical lenses that explain how teaching practices interact with social structures, identity formation, and student engagement. First, inclusive pedagogy is understood as a gendered and socially situated practice, where participation, engagement, and voice are influenced by students' cultural, socio-economic, and gendered positions (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1996). Classroom interactions are not neutral; they are shaped by power relations and social hierarchies, privilege certain voices, and marginalize others. This aligns with Foucault's (1980) framework on power/knowledge, highlighting how institutional and cultural norms govern who speaks and how knowledge is validated within educational spaces.

Second, identity negotiation and hybrid learning are central to inclusive pedagogy. Students negotiate between academic expectations and their personal, social, and cultural identities, forming hybrid subjectivities that allow them to navigate complex learning environments (Bhabha, 1994; Nussbaum, 2000). This theoretical lens emphasizes that learning is not only the transmission of knowledge but also a process of identity construction influenced by social context and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990). Gendered norms and socio-cultural expectations affect these processes, shaping who participates confidently and who remains hesitant or silent.

Third, inclusive pedagogy fosters reflexivity and critical consciousness, providing students opportunities to critically examine societal structures, norms, and inequalities (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991). Participatory and dialogic learning strategies encourage students to question dominant

narratives and develop analytical and ethical reasoning skills. This perspective also resonates with Giroux's (2005) notion of border-crossing spaces, where students engage with ideas that challenge conventional thinking and encourage transformative learning.

Fourth, the theory highlights the interplay between pedagogy and institutional structures. Institutional norms, policies, and hierarchies either support or constrain the implementation of inclusive practices (Connell, 2002; Morley, 2005). Hierarchical classroom structures, rigid curricula, and assessment methods often reinforce existing inequalities unless deliberate strategies are employed to promote equity, participation, and voice. Mahmood (2005) emphasizes that cultural and institutional contexts shape the possibilities and limitations of pedagogical innovation, particularly in societies with deeply entrenched gender norms.

Finally, inclusive pedagogy is strengthened through technology-mediated and collaborative learning, creating hybrid spaces where students engage beyond the constraints of physical classrooms (Giroux, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000). Digital platforms, multimedia resources, and collaborative online tools offer opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and participation, though equitable access remains critical to prevent reproducing socio-economic disparities.

The theoretical insights suggest that inclusive pedagogy is a dynamic, contextually grounded framework that integrates gender sensitivity, critical consciousness, hybrid identity formation, and institutional awareness. Its effectiveness depends on the interaction between teaching strategies, student agency, and structural support, emphasizing the need for deliberate, reflexive, and equity-oriented approaches to pedagogy in Pakistani classrooms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that inclusive pedagogy in Pakistani classrooms enhances student engagement, collaborative learning, and critical reflection, providing opportunities for all students to participate meaningfully in the learning process. However, its effectiveness is mediated by gendered social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional hierarchies that often restrict equitable participation. However, inclusive strategies foster reflexivity and empower students to challenge dominant narratives; sustaining such practices requires deliberate faculty facilitation, supportive institutional policies, and contextual adaptation to local socio-cultural realities. Embedding inclusive pedagogy in teaching practices and classroom structures is therefore essential to create equitable, participatory, and transformative learning environments in higher education.

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