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Dr. Deepu Kumar

Associate Professor,
Department of Commerce,
Government first grade college
for women, KR Nagara,
Mysore, Karnataka, India

Role of diversity, equity and inclusion in shaping employee development and organizational learning

Deepu Kumar

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Abstract

This study explores the critical role of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in advancing employee development and organizational learning. The results reveal that equitable mechanisms-such as fair access to mentoring, training, and career progression-substantially enhance professional growth, while inclusive practices foster psychological safety, belonging, and knowledge sharing. Together, these factors create conditions that support collaborative learning, innovation, and adaptability.

At the same time, the study uncovers ongoing challenges, including tokenistic representation, limited diversity in leadership, and subtle inequities in opportunity allocation. These gaps highlight the disconnect between formal DEI policies and employees' lived experiences, underscoring the need for systemic change.

Theoretically, the research extends organizational learning models by positioning DEI as a central driver rather than a peripheral support, emphasizing the cultural and relational dimensions of learning alongside structural processes. Practically, the findings stress the importance of embedding DEI within human resource strategies, leadership practices, and governance frameworks to foster long-term resilience and competitiveness. Future research should pursue cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal studies to better understand how DEI interventions evolve over time and shape sustainable organizational learning.

Keywords: Diversity, equity, inclusion, employee development, organizational learning

Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become fundamental in shaping contemporary organizational culture and strategy. Diversity reflects the coexistence of differences within a workforce, including characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, and cultural background. Beyond demographic attributes, it also encompasses cognitive diversity-differences in approaches to thinking, problem-solving, and perspectives. Equity emphasizes fairness and justice by addressing systemic barriers and ensuring equal access to opportunities, resources, and career advancement. Unlike equality, which assumes uniform treatment, equity acknowledges historical and structural disadvantages and seeks to correct them. Inclusion ensures that diverse employees are not only present but also empowered to contribute meaningfully, with their voices, ideas, and experiences embedded in organizational decision-making processes. In this sense, DEI extends beyond ethical or compliance-driven imperatives; it functions as a transformative framework that drives innovation, enhances collaboration, and strengthens organizational resilience in a globalized economy.

Importance of Employee Development and Organizational Learning

The modern workplace-shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and the emergence of knowledge-based economies-demands continuous learning and skill development. Employee development refers to structured organizational initiatives aimed at enhancing workforce competencies, skills, and career trajectories. These initiatives include professional training, leadership development, mentoring, and reskilling or upskilling opportunities designed to meet evolving demands. Organizational learning, by contrast, is a collective process through which organizations acquire, share, and apply knowledge to adapt and innovate. It transcends individual learning by embedding knowledge into systems, practices, and organizational

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Deepu Kumar

Associate Professor,
Department of Commerce,
Government first grade college
for women, KR Nagara,
Mysore, Karnataka, India

culture. Together, employee development and organizational learning enable firms to remain competitive in volatile markets, respond effectively to technological disruptions, and cultivate cultures of agility and innovation. In the context of the 21st century-where the pace of change is unprecedented-these elements are no longer optional but essential for long-term organizational survival and success.

Research Gap

Although DEI has gained prominence in organizational and management research, much of the scholarship remains focused on representation, fairness, and compliance, rather than its strategic role in fostering knowledge creation and organizational learning. Most studies conceptualize DEI as the outcome of policy implementation or as an ethical obligation, rather than as an active driver of organizational processes. Yet, DEI has the potential to serve as a catalyst for organizational learning. Diverse and inclusive teams contribute unique perspectives that enhance problem-solving, creativity, and knowledge-sharing. Equity ensures that all employees have access to resources and opportunities to contribute, while inclusion provides a supportive environment in which such contributions can thrive. However, the absence of empirical research explicitly linking DEI to employee development and organizational learning constitutes a critical gap. Addressing this gap is vital for both theory and practice, as it reframes DEI from a compliance-cantered initiative into a strategic mechanism for organizational adaptability and innovation.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How does diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) influence employee development in organizations?
2. In what ways does DEI serve as a catalyst for organizational learning?
3. What are employees' perceptions of DEI initiatives in relation to their personal growth and skill acquisition?
4. How do inclusive organizational cultures contribute to knowledge-sharing and innovation?

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to examine DEI as a driver of organizational learning and change. Each theory provides distinct insights that, when combined, allow for a multi-level understanding of how organizations build inclusive capacity.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes that individuals learn by observing and modelling the behaviours of others (Bandura, 1977) ^[2]. Within organizations, inclusive practices are transmitted not only through formal policies but also through everyday interactions and role modelling. Reinforcing inclusive behaviours in collaborative contexts helps embed these practices into

organizational culture and normalize equity-oriented norms.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory positions employees' knowledge, skills, and experiences as assets that contribute to organizational performance (Becker, 1964) ^[3]. Applied to DEI, diversity expands the available talent base by introducing varied perspectives and cultural competencies. This reframes diversity from a compliance obligation into a strategic resource, justifying investments in equitable talent development and advancement.

Organizational Learning Theory

Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish between single-loop learning, which involves incremental adjustments, and double-loop learning, which entails re-examining underlying assumptions. In DEI contexts, single-loop learning may involve awareness training, while double-loop learning requires critical reflection on systemic inequities and cultural norms. This framework positions inclusion as an iterative process of questioning, unlearning, and adaptation.

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality

Critical race theory (CRT) interrogates the ways in which systemic racism and entrenched power structures shape institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) ^[8]. Intersectionality extends this framework by examining how overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, class) shape unique experiences of privilege and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989) ^[5]. Together, CRT and intersectionality reveal the structural nature of inequities and highlight the importance of centering marginalized voices in organizational learning processes.

Integrative DEI Frameworks

Recent integrative models (e.g., Ferdman, 2014; Shore *et al.*, 2018) ^[11, 18] emphasize that inclusion requires both the recognition of individual uniqueness and the cultivation of belonging within the collective. These frameworks extend beyond representational diversity to emphasize leadership practices, structural supports, and cultural systems necessary for sustainable inclusion.

Synthesis

Taken together, these theories highlight the interplay between individual learning, organizational systems, and structural inequities. Social learning theory emphasizes behavioural modelling; human capital theory frames diversity as a resource; organizational learning theory underscores reflection and adaptation; CRT and intersectionality reveal systemic barriers; and integrative DEI frameworks provide pathways for embedding inclusion. Collectively, these perspectives create a comprehensive foundation for analysing DEI as both a learning process and a structural imperative.

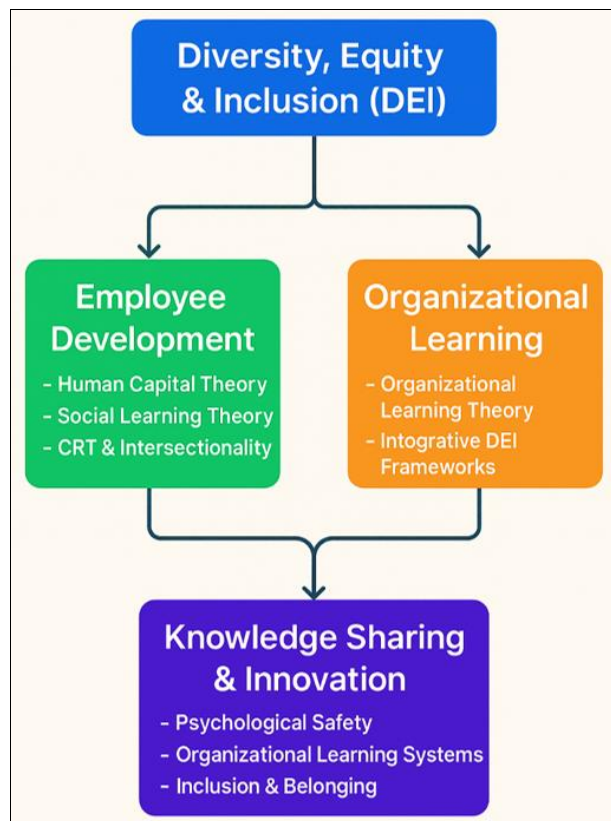


Fig 1: Theoretical framework

Literature Review

Research on DEI consistently demonstrates its influence on organizational learning, employee development, and long-term adaptability. This review synthesizes scholarship across three thematic areas: (1) diversity and employee development, (2) equity and access to learning opportunities, and (3) inclusion and knowledge sharing.

Diversity and Employee Development

Diversity yields the greatest impact when it is coupled with structures that actively promote employee development. Representation alone is insufficient unless employees also gain access to mentoring, sponsorship, and advancement opportunities, which increase visibility, accelerate career growth, and help dismantle barriers for underrepresented groups (Ragins & Kram, 2007; Thomas, 2001) [17, 10]. Without such supports, diversity risks devolving into tokenism and weak retention. Building on this, Gupta (2022) [12] emphasizes that DEI practices strengthen learning cultures by framing diverse perspectives as resources for organizational growth. Ely and Thomas (2001) [10] further demonstrate that diversity enhances performance and learning when organizations adopt an “integration-and-learning” perspective that treats varied experiences as knowledge assets. Diversity as a driver of creativity and problem-solving when well-managed, but also a potential source of conflict if neglected (Deepu Kumar and Suresh B.H. (2018) [7]. Collectively, this body of scholarship highlights that diversity, when linked with robust development mechanisms, expands human capital, fosters inclusion, and strengthens organizational learning systems.

Equity and Access to Learning Opportunities

Equity concerns the fairness of access to developmental opportunities such as training, promotions, and leadership

pipelines. Systemic inequities frequently persist, limiting underrepresented employees’ access to high-value experiences (McKay & Avery, 2005; Castilla, 2015) [15, 4]. Leadership pipelines, for example, remain stratified by race and gender, restricting the influence of diverse talent at strategic levels (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010) [13]. Research further links equitable DEI practices to organizational adaptability, finding that fairness in developmental opportunities strengthens resilience in volatile environments. Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) [14] demonstrate that accountability-based interventions are more effective than voluntary programs in improving equity outcomes. These studies confirm that equity is not merely an ethical mandate but an operational necessity for leveraging the full spectrum of employee talent.

Inclusion and Knowledge Sharing

Inclusion addresses the extent to which employees feel respected, valued, and safe to contribute their perspectives. Psychological safety is a precondition for inclusive learning, enabling employees to share ideas, experiment, and raise concerns without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999) [9]. Shore *et al.* (2018) [18] find that inclusive practices predict higher employee engagement, which fosters knowledge sharing and collaboration. Gupta (2022) [12] similarly connects inclusive climates with innovation, while Ferdman (2014) [11] and Nishii (2013) [16] argue that inclusion requires balancing individual uniqueness with collective belonging. Research also shows that inclusive teams outperform homogeneous groups in creativity and problem-solving by drawing on diverse perspectives (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004) [20]. These findings position inclusion as both a cultural condition and a structural enabler of organizational learning.

Synthesis

Across these themes, the literature converges on the conclusion that DEI is essential for organizational adaptability. Diversity expands developmental resources, equity guarantees fair access to opportunities, and inclusion creates the conditions for knowledge sharing and innovation. Together, these dimensions enhance employee engagement, strengthen talent pipelines, and bolster organizational resilience in dynamic environments.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design to investigate the relationship between DEI practices, employee development, and organizational learning. A convergent parallel approach is adopted, enabling simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Integration of findings provides a comprehensive understanding of both broad patterns and lived experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) [6].

Quantitative Strand

The quantitative component consists of a cross-sectional survey administered to employees across various industries. Standardized instruments are employed to ensure reliability and validity of measurement (Author, Year). Key constructs include:

- Perceived DEI Climate, capturing employees’ assessment of fairness, representation, and inclusion.
- Employee Development Opportunities, including

access to mentoring, training, and career advancement.

- Learning Culture, reflecting the extent to which organizations support reflection, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement.

Qualitative Strand

The qualitative component comprises semi-structured interviews with HR managers, senior level managers and executives. This strand explores lived experiences, organizational narratives, and perceived barriers and enablers of inclusive learning environments. The interviews

are designed to capture perspectives across hierarchical levels, providing a nuanced account of how DEI practices are implemented and experienced. Survey responses will be analysed using descriptive statistics and regression modelling. These techniques enable testing of hypothesized relationships among DEI climate, developmental opportunities, and organizational learning outcomes, while accounting for mediating and moderating effects.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Demographics data

Category	Sub-Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	67%
	Female	33%
Age	20-30	18%
	31-40	38%
	41-50	32%
	50+	12%
Religion	Hindu	67%
	Christian	18%
	Muslim	9%
	Others	6%
Mother Tongue	Kannada	36%
	Marathi	15%
	Tamil	26%
	Telugu	13%
	Malayalam	10%
Caste	General	44%
	SC/ST	16%
	OBC	30%
	Others	10%
Education	Bachelor's	42%
	Master's	37%
	Doctorate	21%
Role	Entry-level	21%
	Mid-level	28%
	Senior-level	26%
	Manager	17%
	Executive	8%
Annual Income	< ₹3 lakh	24%
	₹3-9 lakhs	48%
	₹9 lakhs >	28%
Tenure	< 1 year	8%
	1-5 years	29%
	6-10 years	36%
	10+ years	27%

Source: Primary data

Interpretation

The demographic landscape depicts a mostly male (67%) work force bunched up across mid-career age groups 31-40 (38%) and 41-50 (32%) to reflect maturity and experience. Hindu is dominant (67%), with linguistic diversity also being high with Kannada (36%) and Tamil (26%) being most dominant. Respondents mostly belong to the General category (44%) and OBC (30%) to reflect social heterogeneity. Educational levels are very high with nearly 60% having postgraduate or doctoral degrees. In function

also, mid-level (28%) and senior-level (26%) personnel dominate with a smaller core of entry-level employee (21%), managers (17%), and executives (8%) to reflect a hierarchical but balanced hierarchy. Pay distribution reflects a plurality having a salary of ₹3-9 lakhs (48%) or more to reflect financial security. In addition, data for tenure also reflects high retention among employees with nearly two-thirds having stayed for over six years. Overall, the sample reflects a matured highly qualified but stable work force with cultural and social diversity.

Table 2: Survey Results Across Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Employee Development, Organizational Learning, and Engagement

Section	Statement	Mean Score
Diversity	My team includes people with different backgrounds and perspectives.	3.32
	Project teams here are intentionally composed to include diverse skills and viewpoints.	3.53
	Candidate slates for open roles are consistently diverse.	3.32
	I see visible diversity in leadership positions in my organization.	3.57
Equity	Access to high-visibility assignments is fairly distributed.	3.82
	Performance evaluations in my organization are free from bias.	3.95
	Pay and rewards are equitable for similar roles and performance.	3.52
	Processes exist to address bias or discrimination and are trusted by employees.	4.05
Inclusion	Promotion criteria are transparent and applied consistently.	3.93
	I can voice a different opinion without negative consequences.	3.61
	In meetings, everyone's input is welcomed and considered.	4.05
	My manager demonstrates inclusive behaviours (e.g., invites quieter voices).	4.25
Employee Development	I feel a sense of belonging on my team.	4.05
	Jokes or comments that exclude or stereotype are addressed by leaders.	3.00
	I have equal access to training, conferences, or certifications as my peers.	4.19
	I receive timely feedback that helps me grow.	4.06
Organizational Learning	I have clear development goals agreed with my manager.	4.22
	Mentors/sponsors are available to support my career growth.	3.36
	My development opportunities are not limited by my identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age).	3.78
	We reflect on projects (retrospectives/post-mortems) and share lessons.	3.78
Engagement	Experimentation is encouraged, even if some attempts fail.	4.22
	Leaders model continuous learning (e.g., share what they're learning).	3.99
	Knowledge sharing across teams is supported.	4.20
	Lessons from failures are openly discussed without blame.	3.99
	The organization adapts quickly based on employee feedback.	3.97
	Cross-functional collaboration is encouraged to learn new practices.	4.32
	I feel motivated to contribute my best work here.	4.11
	I intend to stay with this company for the next two years.	4.23
	I would recommend this organization as a great place to work.	4.53

Source: Primary data

These results indicate favourable organizational impressions among employees overall for most but some improvement opportunity. Diversity scores were moderate (3.3-3.6), indicating presence but weak intensity. Equity scored more positively (3.5-4.0), but fair access to evaluations and promotion were believed. Pay equity is an area requiring attention. Inclusion results were mixed: managers' inclusive behaviours (4.25) and feelings of belonging (4.05) were highly regarded but exclusionary joking or stereotyping lowest overall (3.00), an area critical to improvement. Employee development scores were positive overall (4.0+), with high learning access and developmental feedback but low access to mentors (3.36), a noted weakness. Organizational learning scored very high overall (3.8-4.3), with cross-functional collaboration especially high (4.32), a learning-based culture. Engagement scored highest overall (4.1-4.5), with highly committed employee-motivation to stay and recommend their workplace. In summary, results indicate a good learning, development, and engagement practices-based organization but one where focused efforts would be valuable to deepen perceived depth of diversity, reinforce pay equity, and offset everyday inclusion concerns.

Findings and Discussion

This study describes how Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are relevant to employee development practices, organizational learning, and employee engagement. Survey results reveal where strengths lie and where improvement is necessary with respect to how DEI is implemented across the organization.

Equity and Employee Development

Employees treasure equity as a core foundation to professional growth. High scores for fair access to opportunity for development, feedback, and development goals reveal that fair systems enable skills building and career progression. However, a low access to mentors score suggests that systems-level access exists but one-on-one career support is less consistent. This inconsistency highlights value in incorporating equity into policy but also into practice so that workers also have access to sponsorship and coaching to be promoted.

Inclusion and Psychological Safety

Inclusion functioned as a key facilitator of psychological safety, aligned with Edmondson's (1999) ^[9] learning climates. Workers also showed high levels of belonging experience and valued contributions to meetings, to which inclusive leadership behaviours were found aligned. However, low responsiveness to excluding humour and stereotypes suggests a vulnerability of everyday interpersonal behaviours. Such tension suggests that despite organizational-level inclusion being supported, micro-level behaviours still hinder workers' full experience of safety. Addressing such voids is fundamental to open talk being maintained, knowledge being exchanged, and problems being solved collectively.

Contradictions and Challenges

Results also reveal contradictions. Diversity produced moderate scores, indicating low leadership representation and hiring practices that could be perceived by workers as tokenistic. In a similar manner, although equity and

inclusion as a whole are supported, recurrent issues about pay equity and bias persist. These contradictions reveal a disconnect between theoretical intentions for DEI and daily realities and suggest additional systemic alterations to better anchor inclusivity across a complete organizational hierarchy.

Strategic Implications

In tandem, results confirm that DEI is an organizational moral imperative as well as a strategic organizational driver related to innovation and flexibility. Substantial organizational learning and participation results indicate that inclusive environments facilitating equity contribute to collaboration, resilience, and motivation. As organizations fill knowledge deficiencies related to mentoring, pay equity, and everyday inclusion, learning process participation can be expanded, knowledge circulation strengthened, and competitiveness sustained even amidst changing contexts.

Implications

Theoretical Contribution

It contributes to organizational learning theory by positioning DEI as an organizational driver rather than a side-line support function. Traditional models emphasize technical structures and feedback loops but these findings confirm that learning procedures are socially and culturally constructed. Psychological safety, uptake of feedback, and knowledge exchange are enabled by equity and inclusion. Integrating DEI into learning paradigms redrafts organizational learning as structural and cognitive but also relational and inclusive.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, results also support emphasizing the integration of DEI into leadership plans and talent development. Easy access to learning, balanced career progress, and broad-based management practices of inclusivity should be cast as core talent management attributes. Addressing weaknesses-e.g., low mentoring levels and a lack of attention to exclusion behaviours-could unlock higher orders of innovation as well as participation. Managerial leaders should therefore tie their DEI interventions to overall innovation and performance agendas to be sure all workers invest in and share knowledge creation benefits.

Policy Implications

At a governance level, the paper emphasizes having institutionalization of DEI through company policies. Such processes as leadership representation goals, annual mandatory DEI audits, and anti-bias talent acquisition frameworks ensure accountability and credibility. Matching DEI outcomes with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) metrics also strengthens organizational resilience and legitimacy. In doing so, for example, DEI must be regarded as a social responsibility as well as a policy requirement that enhances long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

These findings support the value of DEI as an agent of worker development and organizational learning. Psychological safety-enhancing inclusive practices paired with fairness-based access to good training decisions and mentoring have particular importance to creating highly

versatile knowledge-based organizations. Beyond supporting strengths such as accessibility and inclusivity, our findings also confirm persistent weaknesses such as tokenism and structural inequities that prompt organizations to move beyond symbolic movements to substantial systemic improvements.

One of the distinctive strengths of this work is its blend of a mix-method design that embraced both generalizable survey trends and rich description. In combining both quantitative and qualitative data, the investigation did more than chart how workers view DEI policy; it shed additional light upon their organizational learning experience. In combining a dual focus, reliability is augmented as is depth to present a richer multidimensional picture about the relationship between DEI and learning.

Future research should expand these findings through cross-cultural comparisons to examine how DEI-driven learning processes differ across global contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess how DEI interventions evolve over time and shape long-term organizational learning outcomes. Such approaches will deepen understanding of how inclusive and equitable practices help organizations remain adaptive, innovative, and socially responsible in a dynamic environment.

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