

Inclusive Education Through an Institutional Lens: Mimetic Isomorphism in the Dissemination of Educational Practices

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Abstract: The spread of inclusive education has intensified globally, driven by the expansion of educational policies, normative pressures, and institutional reforms aimed at promoting equity and access to education. Educational systems have been incorporating inclusive pedagogical models, support structures, and teacher training programs, reflecting institutional expectations related to organizational legitimacy and compliance with normative guidelines. However, despite the widespread formal adoption of inclusion, its implementation remains heterogeneous, showing variations associated with organizational capacity, professional qualifications, and the availability of institutional resources. This scenario highlights the need to understand how and why inclusive practices spread and consolidate in different organizational contexts. In this sense, Institutional Theory offers a relevant explanatory lens by highlighting the role of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures in organizational convergence. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the diffusion and institutionalization of inclusive education practices through the lens of Institutional Theory, with an emphasis on mimetic isomorphism, through an integrative literature review. Data collection was carried out in the Web of Science database, using the descriptors ("inclusive education") AND ("diffusion" OR "adoption" OR "implementation"), initially resulting in 62 studies, of which 14 met the inclusion criteria and were fully analyzed. The results revealed four central mechanisms associated with the institutionalization of inclusive education: teacher training as a vector of professional standardization, the diffusion of institutional policies and models, the organizational transformation processes necessary for implementation, and the institutional barriers that condition the adoption of inclusive practices. These findings indicate that inclusive education spreads through structured institutional processes, guided by the pursuit of legitimacy and organizational conformity. It is concluded that inclusive education constitutes an institutional phenomenon in consolidation, whose dissemination results from the interaction between public policies, professional standards, and organizational dynamics, contributing to the convergence and stabilization of inclusive practices in the educational field.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education; Institutional Theory; Mimetic Isomorphism; Institutional Diffusion; Organizational Institutionalization; Inclusive Education Policy.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of inclusive education practices has been marked by a global movement of normative and organizational expansion: educational systems incorporate models, programs, and support mechanisms that spread across networks and institutions, often at a pace faster than local implementation capacity. Synthesis evidence shows that, even when there is convergence around the principle of inclusion, implementation remains heterogeneous, with interventions and strategies varying according to context, resources, and institutional capacities (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022). In parallel, recent policy analyses indicate that “inclusive policy” can become an object of compliance and accountability, producing dynamics in which formal conformity and inclusive rhetoric do not always translate, with the same intensity, into practical transformation (Hardy, 2024).

This scenario generates a classic analytical problem: when inclusive practices spread among educational organizations, it is necessary to understand why they diffuse and how they are replicated—whether through effective learning, model transfer, pressures for legitimacy, or uncertainty in response to external expectations. The literature on inclusive education implementation suggests that “what works” depends on institutional conditions and intervention design, and that a significant portion of variation stems from organizational capacities, technical support, and local governance (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022). Thus, diffusion can produce both substantive innovation and the reproduction of formats that spread through symbolic alignment, opening space for an institutionalist interpretation—especially when adoption tends toward homogenization and replication of practices.

In light of this, this article aims to analyze the diffusion of inclusive educational practices through the lens of Institutional Theory, with emphasis on mimetic isomorphism, by means of an integrative literature review, seeking to identify patterns of adoption and implementation and to construct an explanatory interpretation of how and why certain practices become replicable models across different educational contexts.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is characterized as an integrative literature review, conducted based on a systematized approach inspired by the PRISMA protocol, adapted for the purposes of identifying, selecting, and qualitatively analyzing empirical evidence related to the diffusion and implementation of inclusive education practices. The integrative review enables the synthesis of results from different studies, contributing to the construction of a comprehensive and critical

understanding of the investigated phenomenon, especially in fields marked by conceptual and methodological diversity.

Data collection was carried out in the Web of Science Core Collection database, selected due to its multidisciplinary coverage and rigorous indexing of high-impact scientific journals. The search strategy was structured to identify studies addressing the incorporation, adoption, and implementation of inclusive education practices, using the following descriptor: (“inclusive education”) AND (“diffusion” OR “adoption” OR “implementation”). The initial search resulted in 62 potentially relevant records.

Subsequently, inclusion criteria were applied, including: (i) open access, ensuring full availability of the studies; (ii) document type restricted to review articles, prioritizing studies with consolidated theoretical and empirical synthesis; and (iii) a temporal scope between 2021 and 2026, with the objective of capturing contemporary evidence on inclusive education. After this stage, the 62 studies were subjected to qualitative screening based on the analysis of abstracts and results sections, aiming to identify empirical evidence related to the adoption, implementation, institutionalization, and expansion of inclusive educational practices in different institutional contexts.

As a result of this process, 14 studies demonstrated direct adherence to the investigated phenomenon and were selected for full analysis. The selected articles were subjected to complete analytical reading, enabling the identification of convergent patterns, institutional mechanisms, and conditioning factors associated with the diffusion and implementation of inclusive education. The findings were subsequently organized into analytical categories, allowing the interpretation of results through the lens of Institutional Theory, with emphasis on the processes of institutionalization and organizational convergence of inclusive educational practices.

This methodological approach ensures analytical rigor and theoretical coherence, enabling the construction of a critical synthesis of the available evidence and contributing to the advancement of understanding regarding the institutional processes that sustain the diffusion of inclusive education in contemporary educational systems.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Institutionalism and the Logic of Organizational Conformity*

Institutional Theory argues that organizations do not survive solely through technical efficiency, but through adherence to socially constructed expectations within the environments in which they operate. In contexts of high public visibility, organizations tend to incorporate structures,

routines, and “appropriate forms” of operation to be recognized as legitimate, even when such forms do not necessarily produce the most effective practical outcomes. This argument is reinforced by the observation that widely accepted rules, norms, and beliefs function as “models” that guide organizational design, generating convergence among institutions that share the same social field. From this perspective, institutions are not merely organizations; they are stabilized patterns of meaning and practice that define what is appropriate and acceptable within a given domain (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014; Zucker, 1977).

When addressing organizational fields, institutionalism emphasizes that organizations operating within the same field (for example, basic education, special education, public school systems, or educational policy environments) face similar pressures and increasingly resemble one another. This process of homogenization is explained by institutional isomorphism, that is, by mechanisms that push organizations toward convergent models. Classical literature identifies three main vectors: (i) coercion, when regulations and policies require conformity; (ii) normativity, when professional standards, certifications, and training define “best practices”; and (iii) mimicry, when organizations, facing uncertainty, copy models perceived as legitimate or successful. In other words, similarity does not emerge solely from rational choice, but from an institutional ecosystem that rewards symbolic conformity and reduces reputational risk (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014).

Mimetic processes become particularly influential when goals are ambiguous, technologies are complex, and outcomes are difficult to measure—a scenario typical of social and educational policies. In such contexts, copying “reference models” functions as a strategy for uncertainty reduction: if a practice is recognized as appropriate by relevant actors (such as governments, international organizations, experts, and professional networks), imitating it can generate legitimacy even before producing measurable performance outcomes. Thus, the diffusion of practices may occur more through the circulation of models and narratives than through conclusive evidence of effectiveness. Adoption tends to privilege institutionally accepted formats, which explains why reforms often spread rapidly while implementation varies and encounters local resistance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; March & Olsen, 1989; Suchman, 1995).

When practices diffuse, institutionalism allows researchers to move beyond asking “what was implemented” and instead examine “how it became a standard.” Institutionalization involves stabilizing practices over time: transforming initiatives into routines, policies into processes, and discourse into operational procedures. In this trajectory, diffusion often begins with formal adoption (documents, programs, structures), but only becomes fully institutionalized when the practice is embedded in everyday organizational functioning and becomes “the normal way” of operating. Classical studies demonstrate that this process tends to occur in stages, with incremental progress and varying intensity, often mediated by organizational capacity,

training, incentives, and alignment between formal rules and organizational culture (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Zucker, 1977; Scott, 2014).

Education represents a highly institutionalized field: strongly regulated, subject to public accountability, dependent on policy frameworks, and shaped by normative values such as rights, justice, and equity. This makes the sector particularly sensitive to coercive pressures (laws, guidelines, national plans), normative pressures (professional standards, teacher training, credentials), and mimetic pressures (adoption of widely recognized models and frameworks). Consequently, educational change often circulates in the form of institutionally legitimized packages—policies, resource centers, professional development programs, and structured support models—rather than emerging solely from autonomous decisions by individual schools. Within this framework, inclusive education emerges as an institutional project that reorganizes expectations about what constitutes a legitimate school and which practices are considered acceptable (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

When treated as a normative principle and public policy, inclusive education tends to diffuse through the circulation of guidelines, operational models, and repertoires of practice, including teacher training, support structures, the reconfiguration of specialized centers, and specific pedagogical approaches. From an institutionalist perspective, diffusion does not need to be explicitly declared as mimetic; it can be observed when multiple organizations incorporate similar structures and routines in pursuit of legitimacy and conformity with field expectations. Thus, empirically observed mechanisms—such as teacher capacity-building, policy-driven standardization, organizational support structures, and implementation barriers—can be interpreted as expressions of isomorphic vectors: professional training and standards (normative), national and international guidelines (coercive), and model replication under uncertainty (mimetic). This theoretical foundation enables the triangulation of findings, connecting empirical categories to the institutional processes that sustain the diffusion and consolidation of inclusive education practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

From an institutionalist perspective, the findings indicate that inclusive education consolidates less as a purely technical decision of individual schools and more as a process of organizational conformity within a highly regulated and normatively charged field, in which legitimacy becomes a critical resource (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995). In this view, the diffusion of inclusive practices can be observed when educational organizations incorporate structures, repertoires, and routines that are socially recognized as appropriate, even when educational outcomes are difficult to measure or vary across contexts. The convergence identified in the selected studies is consistent with the notion of institutional isomorphism, in which coercive pressures (policies and regulations),

normative pressures (professionalization and training), and mimetic pressures (imitation under uncertainty) operate simultaneously, producing progressive homogenization within the educational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Accordingly, the empirical evidence was organized into four analytical categories, each linked to specific institutional mechanisms, allowing for the triangulation of results and theory and explaining “how” and “why” inclusive practices diffuse and stabilize over time (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Zucker, 1977).

➤ *Category 1 — Institutionalization of Inclusive Practices Through Teacher Training (Normative and Mimetic Isomorphism)*

The findings in this category suggest that teacher training functions as a mechanism of institutionalization by establishing professional standards and legitimized repertoires of practice that tend to be reproduced within educational organizations. This dynamic aligns with normative isomorphism, in which professionalization defines what is considered “best practice” and guides organizational conformity, while simultaneously creating conditions for mimetic diffusion as training models are replicated as references of legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014).

Wood et al. (2025) demonstrate that in-service professional development is a central mechanism for incorporating inclusive practices, as evidenced by changes in attitudes, increased pedagogical knowledge, and the effective adoption of inclusive strategies. From an institutional perspective, this reveals how professional standards and training routines operate as legitimized “scripts,” stabilizing practices and reducing the operational ambiguity of inclusion. Diffusion thus emerges through the standardization of what teachers are expected to learn and through the reproduction of formats recognized as appropriate, even when student-level outcomes are less systematically measured.

Rapisa et al. (2026) reinforce this logic by showing that teacher competencies—such as inclusive classroom management and differentiated instruction—condition implementation, suggesting that inclusion depends on the development of institutional capacities rather than isolated initiatives. This finding aligns with the concept of gradual institutionalization, in which practices evolve from “initiatives” into “routines,” becoming embedded in regular organizational functioning. The adoption of competencies also signals convergence, as schools and systems increasingly value and reproduce similar training references, particularly when seeking legitimacy in relation to policies and field expectations (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Suchman, 1995).

Nseibo et al. (2022) indicate that structured teacher training programs transform practices by integrating skills, attitudes, and knowledge, revealing an institutional transition sustained by professionalized repertoires. This evidence reinforces that the educational field tends to converge around recognized training formats, replicating institutional

arrangements in response to barriers and uncertainty, thereby favoring mimetic processes. Inclusion stabilizes as systems develop continuous mechanisms for producing pedagogical conformity.

De Araujo et al. (2025) show that public policies on teacher training play a structuring role in aligning practices with inclusive guidelines, revealing the interdependence between institutional coercion and professional normativity. Training thus functions as a bridge between formal mandates and everyday operationalization, transforming inclusive principles into institutionalized standards of action. This finding reinforces that institutionalization occurs through the coupling of policies and training routines, increasing organizational predictability (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

➤ *Category 2 — Diffusion of Inclusive Education Policies and Institutional Models (Coercive and Mimetic Isomorphism)*

In this category, the evidence indicates that policies, national plans, and support structures function as mechanisms of coercion and standardization, pressuring educational organizations to adopt legitimized models. At the same time, the international circulation of established frameworks creates conditions for mimetic adoption, in which systems replicate recognized formats to reduce risk and enhance legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014).

Shen and Yin (2025) show that China’s national plan establishes strategies and support systems for inclusion, indicating formal diffusion through state directives. From an institutional perspective, this reflects coercion: policies and regulations define the expected organizational design of educational institutions, generating convergence and structuring implementation. By consolidating strategies and support mechanisms, the plan also signals an institutional model likely to be replicated internally, promoting homogenization.

Han and Lei (2025) demonstrate that inclusive resource centers operationalize inclusion by providing technical and pedagogical support, suggesting that diffusion occurs through the creation of organizational structures that materialize inclusive principles. This finding aligns with the institutional argument that reforms become “real” when embedded in infrastructure—that is, when systems establish permanent structures that sustain routines. Institutional convergence emerges as multiple regions adopt similar organizational arrangements, reinforcing model normalization.

Yang et al. (2025) identify inclusion as a central axis of global educational reforms and propose a framework integrating policy, practice, and environment, reinforcing the interpretation of diffusion as the circulation of legitimized models. Under conditions of uncertainty and fragmentation, frameworks function as interpretive references that guide adoption and standardization, promoting mimetic isomorphism. The search for coherence and implementation

“roadmaps” can therefore produce convergence even when institutional capacities vary.

Alkhunini (2025) demonstrates regional efforts to expand inclusive policies and practices, including curricular standardization and strategic planning, revealing coordinated diffusion through institutional structures. This process reflects both coercion (formalization of policies and criteria) and mimicry (importation of recognized practices), showing that inclusion consolidates as a dominant model when it becomes associated with legitimacy and alignment with broader institutional agendas.

➤ *Category 3 — Implementation Processes and Organizational Transformation Toward Inclusion (Institutionalization and Mimetic Adaptation Under Change)*

The studies in this category show that adopting inclusive models involves gradual and often slow organizational reconfiguration, consistent with the institutionalization process occurring in stages: practices are progressively incorporated, tested, adapted, and routinized, with variation depending on resources and organizational culture (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Zucker, 1977).

Mendoza and Heymann (2024) indicate that interventions such as training and infrastructure development increase implementation in low- and middle-income countries, demonstrating that inclusion depends on concrete institutional capacities. From an institutional perspective, diffusion is not merely a decision but the construction of conditions that allow practices to take root and stabilize. The replication of interventions recognized as effective also suggests mimetic processes, as systems adopt validated strategies under uncertainty and resource constraints.

Vega (2025) shows that the transition from segregated centers to inclusive models is slow and faces structural and cultural resistance, reinforcing that institutional change involves negotiation and accommodation between norms, routines, and organizational identities. This confirms that institutionalization occurs not only through formal mandates but through the transformation of practices and meanings. The reconfiguration of centers into support-oriented structures can also be interpreted as the adoption of internationally circulating reference models, indicating diffusion through the replication of legitimized organizational forms.

Perrelet et al. (2025) demonstrate that interventions for autistic students are diverse and heterogeneous, with gaps in measurement and implementation, reinforcing the ambiguity characteristic of the field. Institutional theory suggests that mimetic processes intensify under such conditions: when there is limited clarity regarding “what works,” organizations rely on accepted models and dominant interventions, reinforcing convergence. Inclusion thus becomes institutionalized as the field stabilizes repertoires and evaluation criteria.

➤ *Category 4 — Institutional Barriers and Conditioning Factors in the Diffusion of Inclusive Education (Uncertainty, Legitimacy, and Institutional Conflict)*

The final category highlights that barriers are not merely operational obstacles; they reflect institutional conditions shaping the speed, depth, and format of diffusion. Theoretically, ambiguity, conflict, and insufficient support increase uncertainty and encourage both symbolic adoption and imitation of legitimized models as strategies for reputational protection (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995).

Genovesi et al. (2022) indicate that unclear policies, lack of resources, and insufficient training limit implementation, demonstrating that institutionalization depends on multilevel alignment and support. Without adequate institutional conditions, diffusion tends to remain superficial, reinforcing the gap between formal policy and everyday practice. The role of NGOs and collaborative actors as facilitators also highlights the importance of legitimacy-building processes within the field.

Lindner et al. (2023) show that teacher attitudes are ambivalent and significantly influence inclusion, indicating that diffusion requires internal legitimacy, not merely external coercion. From an institutional perspective, inclusion stabilizes only when norms and values are internalized and embedded in routine practices. When internalization fails, adoption may remain ceremonial, reflecting the symbolic structures described in institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Cumming et al. (2024) identify conflicts surrounding special education and full inclusion, demonstrating that diffusion occurs within contested institutional environments. Organizational fields function as arenas of symbolic competition, where actors promote competing conceptions of legitimacy and appropriateness. These tensions do not negate diffusion but explain why convergence may be partial, contested, and gradual.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how inclusive education practices have been incorporated, implemented, and consolidated within contemporary educational systems, interpreting this process through the lens of Institutional Theory, with emphasis on mechanisms of diffusion and organizational institutionalization. Through an integrative literature review based on 14 studies selected from the Web of Science database, the research sought to understand not only which practices have been adopted but also the institutional processes that sustain their dissemination and legitimation within the educational field. By using institutionalism as an analytical lens, the study shifted the focus from a purely technical perspective to a sociological understanding, demonstrating that inclusive education consolidates as a result of pressures, expectations, and dynamics inherent to highly institutionalized organizational fields.

The findings indicated that the diffusion of inclusive education occurs through four main mechanisms: teacher training as a vector for the institutionalization of practices, the diffusion of policies and institutional models that guide organizational action, structural transformation processes necessary for the incorporation of inclusion, and institutional barriers that condition its implementation. These mechanisms directly reflect the isomorphic vectors described in Institutional Theory, particularly coercive isomorphism, manifested in the influence of educational policies and regulations; normative isomorphism, evidenced by the centrality of teacher training and the standardization of professional competencies; and mimetic isomorphism, observed in the replication of organizational structures, pedagogical models, and institutional strategies recognized as legitimate. Collectively, these results demonstrate that inclusive education does not diffuse spontaneously but through structured processes that promote organizational convergence and the progressive legitimation of new educational standards.

Therefore, inclusive education should be understood as an institutional phenomenon in consolidation, whose diffusion results from the interaction between public policies, organizational structures, professional practices, and legitimacy dynamics within the educational field. The institutionalist lens highlights that the adoption of inclusive practices represents not only a response to technical or pedagogical demands but also a process of conformity with normative and symbolic expectations that define what is considered legitimate in the contemporary educational environment. As a theoretical implication, this study contributes to advancing the literature by demonstrating the role of institutional mechanisms in the dissemination of inclusive education. As a practical implication, the findings indicate that strengthening teacher training, aligning policies with organizational practices, and establishing institutional support structures are essential elements for consolidating inclusion as a sustainable and effective educational standard.

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