Inclusive Education and Equity: Contemporary Challenges and Emerging Practices

Adriana Dias Penha[1]; Cynthia Almeida De Souza[2]; Evanilde Mariano Dos Santos[3]; Felipe Gramonski Dos Santos[4]; Fernanda Guimarães Silva Ribeiro[5]; Jorge Martins Fagundes[6]; Laís Jéssica De Oliveira Veloso[7]; Maria Eneida Da Silva Pinheiro Almeida[8]; Paulo Roberto De Araújo[9]; Claubério Nascimento Da Silva[10]

[1]MUST University
[2]Universidade De Brasília
[3]MUST University
[4]MUST University
[5]Instituto Federal De Educação, Ciência E Tecnologia Do Rio De Janeiro
[6]Universidade Federal Fluminense
[7]MUST University
[8]Universidade De La Empresa
[9]Universidade Federal Fluminense
[10]Instituto Federal De Pernambuco

Abstract: Inclusive education has consolidated itself as a central axis in contemporary educational agendas, being recognized as a fundamental mechanism for promoting equity and reducing educational inequalities in contexts marked by social, cultural, and cognitive diversity. Despite normative and policy advances, structural challenges persist that limit the effective operationalization of equity, including gaps in teacher training, institutional barriers, infrastructure limitations, and difficulties in integrating inclusive pedagogical practices. In this context, understanding contemporary challenges and identifying emerging practices becomes essential to strengthen the capacity of educational systems to promote sustainable and equitable inclusion. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze contemporary challenges and emerging practices associated with inclusive education and equity through an integrative literature review. Data collection was conducted in the Web of Science Core Collection database using descriptors related to inclusive education, equity, and educational practices, initially resulting in 344 records. After applying inclusion criteria — open access, review articles, and a time frame between 2021 and 2026 — 17 studies were selected for full analysis. The results indicated that promoting equity in inclusive education depends on multiple interrelated factors, including systemic educational leadership, teacher professional development, adoption of innovative pedagogical practices, integration of educational technologies, and strengthening of inclusive public policies. Furthermore, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and adaptive digital environments were found to have significant potential to enhance accessibility and personalize learning, although their effectiveness depends on institutional capacity and resource availability. It is concluded that inclusive education represents a continuously evolving process whose effectiveness depends on the articulation between public policies, pedagogical innovation, professional development, and institutional support, being essential for the construction of more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable educational systems.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Educational Equity; Emerging Practices; Integrative Literature Review; Educational Inclusion; Educational Policy; Pedagogical Innovation; Educational Technology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has consolidated itself on the international agenda as a structuring axis for expanding opportunities and reducing educational inequalities, shifting the debate from mere "integration" toward the development of systems capable of responding to the diversity of students' profiles and needs. In recent years, discussions on equity and inclusion have emphasized that effective policies and practices depend on robust institutional arrangements — including governance, financing, capacity building, and school-level interventions — as well as monitoring mechanisms capable of sustaining results over time (OECD, 2023). Similarly, recent reviews indicate that inclusion is not achieved solely through normative guidelines but through concrete pedagogical and organizational practices, which vary significantly across contexts, reinforcing the central role of strategies and barriers in shaping educational equity (Filippou, 2025; Oswal, 2025).

Despite the advancement of inclusive discourse, a persistent misalignment remains between policy intentions and school-level implementation, resulting in implementation gaps and inequalities that continue to be reproduced in everyday pedagogical practice. Recent literature highlights that barriers such as insufficient resources, limited teacher training, and governance inconsistencies tend to constrain the ability of educational institutions to translate equity principles into sustainable practices (OECD, 2023; Filippou, 2025). Thus, the challenge is not merely to "have inclusion," but to understand which contemporary obstacles hinder the operationalization of equity and which emerging practices effectively expand access, participation, and learning.

In light of this scenario, this article aims to analyze contemporary challenges and emerging practices associated with inclusive education and equity through an integrative literature review, seeking to synthesize recent evidence, identify convergent patterns, and highlight analytical gaps that may inform future research agendas and educational management strategies.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is characterized as qualitative research of a theoretical-analytical nature, structured through an integrative literature review. This methodological design was adopted to synthesize recent scientific evidence on contemporary challenges and emerging practices associated with the promotion of equity in inclusive education, enabling the identification of convergent patterns, analytical gaps, and emerging trends in the educational field.

Data collection was conducted in the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS), selected due to its editorial rigor and multidisciplinary scope, ensuring the inclusion of relevant and high-quality scientific studies. The search strategy was performed in the Topic field using the following structured descriptor: ("inclusive education") AND ("equity" OR "educational equity" OR "social equity") AND ("practices" OR "strategies" OR "approaches").

The initial search resulted in 344 potentially relevant records. Subsequently, refinement criteria were applied to delimit a corpus aligned with the investigated phenomenon, 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 range between 2021 and 2026, aiming to capture contemporary evidence. After applying these criteria, the corpus was reduced to 17 studies, which were fully incorporated into the analysis.

The 17 selected articles underwent comprehensive analytical reading, including examination of objectives, methods, results, and conclusions. The analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, allowing the identification of recurring patterns, structural challenges, and emerging practices associated with the promotion of educational equity. Based on this process, the findings were organized into analytical categories, enabling the construction of a critical synthesis of the available evidence.

Although the study did not fully follow a formal systematic protocol with a complete PRISMA flow, the selection process was conducted in a structured manner, with explicit definition of the database, descriptors, inclusion criteria, and comprehensive analysis of the selected studies. This approach ensures methodological consistency, analytical transparency, and reliability in the interpretation of results, allowing the construction of an updated state-of-the-art regarding emerging practices and contemporary challenges in inclusive education and the promotion of educational equity.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education has been consolidated as one of the main guiding paradigms of contemporary educational reforms, grounded in the principle that all students should have equitable access to quality education, regardless of their physical, cognitive, social, or cultural conditions. This approach represents a significant shift from segregated educational models, moving the focus from adapting the student to the system toward adapting the system to the needs of students. In this context, inclusion is understood as a systemic process involving the removal of barriers to learning and participation, promoting educational environments capable of accommodating and responding to diversity. This movement is directly associated with the consolidation of education as a fundamental human right and as a central instrument for the promotion of social justice (UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow, 2020).

Educational equity constitutes one of the structural pillars of inclusive education and is understood as the provision of differentiated support conditions to ensure that all students can achieve meaningful educational outcomes. Unlike equality, which assumes uniform treatment, equity recognizes the diversity of needs and emphasizes the importance of adapted pedagogical and institutional strategies. Recent studies indicate that educational equity depends on structural factors, including inclusive public

policies, teacher qualification, availability of pedagogical resources, and institutional capacity to promote responsive educational practices. In this sense, inclusion is not limited to the physical presence of students but involves the creation of effective conditions for their participation and learning (OECD, 2021; Florian, 2019).

Despite normative and policy advances, the implementation of inclusive education still faces significant challenges. Among the main obstacles are insufficient teacher training, limited institutional resources, lack of adequate infrastructure, and the persistence of exclusionary educational practices. These challenges demonstrate that the transition to inclusive educational systems requires structural and cultural transformations, involving not only the adoption of policies but also the transformation of pedagogical and organizational practices. The literature highlights that the effectiveness of inclusive education depends on the articulation between educational policies, professional development, and institutional support, reinforcing the need for systemic and integrated approaches (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; UNESCO, 2020).

In response to these challenges, recent studies have identified a set of emerging practices aimed at promoting inclusion and educational equity. These practices include continuous teacher professional development, the use of assistive technologies, the adoption of differentiated pedagogical strategies, collaborative teaching, and the creation of institutional support structures. Such practices reflect efforts to translate the principles of inclusion into concrete actions, promoting more accessible and equitable educational environments. Furthermore, contemporary literature emphasizes that inclusion should be understood as a dynamic and evolving process, requiring continuous adaptation of educational systems to emerging social and educational demands (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018; OECD, 2021).

Given this scenario, it becomes essential to understand how emerging practices have been developed and implemented to address contemporary challenges in inclusive education and promote educational equity. The analysis of these practices enables the identification of effective strategies and conditioning factors associated with the consolidation of more inclusive educational systems, providing support for the improvement of public policies and educational practices. In this context, the present study analyzes contemporary challenges and emerging practices in inclusive education, seeking to contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms that sustain the promotion of equity and inclusion in contemporary educational systems.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The integrative analysis of the 17 selected studies allowed the identification of a convergent set of challenges and emerging practices associated with the promotion of equity in inclusive education across different educational contexts. The findings indicate that educational equity does not depend on isolated interventions, but rather on systemic

transformations involving educational leadership, teacher professional development, pedagogical innovation, technological integration, and the strengthening of inclusive public policies. These results demonstrate that inclusive education has evolved beyond formal access, increasingly incorporating emerging practices aimed at personalizing learning, removing structural barriers, and promoting educational environments responsive to diversity. Based on this analysis, the findings were organized into five analytical categories reflecting the main contemporary challenges and emerging practices associated with the promotion of educational equity.

➤ *Category 1 — Educational Leadership and Institutional Governance as Drivers of Inclusive Equity*

The results indicate that educational leadership plays a central role in promoting equity and developing inclusive educational environments. White et al. (2025) demonstrate that systemic leadership strengthens inclusion by integrating pedagogical, organizational, and policy decisions, fostering collaboration and a holistic approach to addressing diverse educational needs. This finding highlights that coordination across institutional levels contributes to overcoming structural barriers, enabling inclusive practices to be implemented in a coordinated and sustainable manner.

Lüdeckens (2025) reinforces this perspective by showing that distributed leadership promotes collaborative organizational cultures and strengthens inclusive pedagogical practices. The results indicate that leaders with a systemic perspective are able to align educational policies, teacher development, and pedagogical practices, contributing to the consolidation of more equitable educational environments. This finding demonstrates that educational leadership functions as a strategic element in the implementation of inclusive education.

Shen and Yin (2025) further expand this perspective by demonstrating that structured educational policies, such as China's Special Education Action Plan, promote equity through the establishment of institutional guidelines and support systems. This finding highlights the essential role of public policies in fostering inclusion by providing structural direction and implementation frameworks across educational contexts.

➤ *Category 2 — Teacher Professional Development and Pedagogical Innovation as Emerging Equity Practices*

The analyzed studies highlight that teacher qualification constitutes one of the main drivers of educational equity. Altes et al. (2024) demonstrate that teachers face limitations related to training and institutional support, which constrain the implementation of inclusive practices. This finding indicates that continuous professional development is essential for strengthening pedagogical competencies and promoting inclusive educational environments.

Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou (2025) show that inclusive pedagogical practices, such as responsive curriculum design and culturally sensitive pedagogies, promote equity by recognizing and valuing students'

linguistic and cultural diversity. This finding demonstrates that curriculum adaptation represents an emerging practice capable of promoting meaningful academic inclusion.

VanderKaay et al. (2025) reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that trauma-informed pedagogical approaches promote safe and inclusive educational environments, improving student well-being and academic performance. This finding highlights that pedagogical approaches responsive to student needs represent emerging strategies for promoting educational equity.

Ullah et al. (2024) complement this analysis by showing that virtual learning communities contribute to the development of teacher attitudes supportive of inclusion and social justice. This finding demonstrates that technology-mediated professional development represents an important emerging practice for strengthening educational equity.

➢ *Category 3 — Emerging Educational Technologies as Instruments for Inclusion and Equity*
The results indicate that emerging educational technologies play an increasingly important role in promoting inclusive education. Moral and Moreno-Tallón (2025) demonstrate that artificial intelligence–based systems enhance personalized learning, increasing student participation and autonomy. This finding highlights that digital technologies represent strategic tools for reducing educational inequalities.

Dhouib et al. (2025) reinforce this perspective by showing that intelligent learning environments improve educational accessibility, although their effectiveness depends on institutional support and teacher qualification. This finding demonstrates that the transformative potential of technology is directly linked to institutional capacity for effective integration.

Niu et al. (2025) demonstrate that artificial intelligence–based technologies improve diagnosis and intervention processes, particularly for students with dyslexia. This finding indicates that emerging technologies can significantly contribute to promoting educational equity, although challenges related to infrastructure and access remain.

Francis et al. (2025) further highlight that generative artificial intelligence has significant potential to promote inclusion but also presents risks associated with bias and digital inequality. This finding demonstrates that equitable technology integration depends on appropriate policy frameworks and responsible implementation strategies.

➢ *Category 4 — Structural Barriers and Contemporary Challenges in Promoting Educational Equity*
The analyzed studies indicate that the implementation of inclusive education continues to face significant structural barriers. Murillo-Jiménez et al. (2025) demonstrate that limitations in technological infrastructure and teacher training hinder the implementation of inclusive practices.

This finding highlights that promoting equity requires sustained structural and institutional investment.

Genovesi et al. (2022) demonstrate that institutional limitations and insufficient support constrain inclusive education, particularly in resource-limited contexts. This finding indicates that educational equity depends on institutional capacity to provide adequate support to both students and educators.

López-Hornickel et al. (2026) highlight that structural inequalities related to gender and socioeconomic factors continue to influence educational access and participation. This finding underscores the importance of intersectional approaches in promoting educational equity.

➢ *Category 5 — Public Policies and Systemic Strategies as Mechanisms for Promoting Educational Equity*
The results indicate that educational policies play a fundamental role in promoting educational equity. Bustamante-Mora et al. (2024) demonstrate that gender equity policies contribute to reducing educational disparities and improving equitable access to higher education.

Rad et al. (2022) demonstrate that multi-level educational models promote inclusion by integrating public policies, institutional practices, and pedagogical strategies. This finding indicates that educational equity depends on coordination across different levels of the educational system.

Hunt et al. (2025) reinforce this understanding by demonstrating that systemic interventions improve inclusive education in low-income countries, highlighting the importance of structured and sustainable strategies.

Lee et al. (2026) further demonstrate that educational programs focused on digital literacy and artificial intelligence promote inclusion and equity by reducing educational inequalities.

➢ *Synthesis of Results*
Overall, the findings indicate that promoting equity in inclusive education depends on the integration of educational leadership, teacher professional development, pedagogical innovation, strategic use of technology, and the strengthening of public policies. The identified emerging practices demonstrate that inclusive education is evolving toward more dynamic, responsive, and personalized models, reflecting a progressive movement toward the consolidation of more equitable and inclusive educational systems.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to analyze contemporary challenges and emerging practices associated with the promotion of equity in inclusive education through an integrative literature review based on 17 studies selected from the Web of Science database. The investigation enabled an understanding of how different educational systems have responded to the demands for inclusion and equity,

demonstrating that inclusive education has evolved beyond formal access by incorporating pedagogical, technological, and organizational strategies aimed at promoting participation and educational success for all students. By examining emerging practices and contemporary challenges, this study contributed to expanding the understanding of the factors influencing the consolidation of equity within inclusive educational contexts.

The findings revealed that the promotion of equity in inclusive education depends on multiple interrelated factors, including the role of educational leadership, the strengthening of teacher professional development, the adoption of innovative pedagogical practices, the integration of educational technologies, and the development of inclusive public policies. Furthermore, the results showed that emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and adaptive digital environments, have contributed to personalizing learning and expanding educational accessibility, although their effectiveness remains contingent upon infrastructure availability and professional qualification. At the same time, structural challenges persist, including institutional limitations, socioeconomic inequalities, and gaps in teacher training, demonstrating that educational equity depends on sustained and systemic transformations.

It is concluded that inclusive education represents a continuously evolving process in which emerging practices and innovative strategies play a fundamental role in promoting educational equity. The consolidation of truly inclusive educational systems requires strengthening teacher professional development, advancing structured public policies, investing in accessible educational technologies, and fostering educational environments responsive to diversity. As a theoretical contribution, this study expands the understanding of contemporary challenges and emerging practices related to educational equity, providing support for the advancement of research in this field. From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that promoting equity requires integrated approaches that combine educational leadership, pedagogical innovation, and institutional support, contributing to the development of more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational systems.

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