

Structural Architecture and Evolutionary Dynamics of Inclusive Education and Social Justice Research

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Abstract:

This study investigates the structural architecture, theoretical traditions, and evolutionary trajectory of global scholarly production situated at the intersection of inclusive education and social justice. While prior reviews (e.g., Guzman & Trujillo, 2018) primarily examined fragmented sub-domains, this paper fills a critical gap by providing an integrated macro-level mapping of the field's structural shifts. Analyzing a refined dataset retrieved from Scopus (N = 1,387 peer-reviewed documents) using the Bibliometrix R-package (Biblioshiny), we trace the intellectual lineage, institutional networks, and emerging thematic frontiers that define this academic domain. The findings demonstrate a robust annual growth rate of 18.04%, alongside an international co-authorship rate of 15.72%, reflecting a distinct transition from localized, normative discourse on educational access toward integrated socio-spatial frameworks that interrogate systemic inequality, policy enactment, and institutional practice. Cross-border scientific collaboration remains heavily centered around high-income economies, though emerging hubs in the Asia-Pacific region and the Global South are increasingly reshaping the global knowledge topology. By synthesizing the core intellectual pillars of the field, this paper provides critical insights for educational leaders, policy developers, and scholars striving to establish equitable educational systems.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Social Justice, Educational Equity, Institutional Policy, Knowledge Topography, Cross-Border Collaboration

Classification JEL: I21, I24, I28, D63.

Paper type: Bibliometric analysis / Scientometric study.

Résumé :

Cette étude examine l'architecture structurelle, les fondements théoriques et la trajectoire évolutive de la production scientifique mondiale située à l'intersection de l'éducation inclusive et de la justice sociale. Alors que les synthèses antérieures (notamment Guzman & Trujillo, 2018) se concentraient sur des sous-domaines fragmentés, cet article comble une lacune essentielle en offrant une cartographie macro-structurelle intégrée des mutations du champ. À partir d'un corpus sélectionné dans Scopus (N = 1 387 documents) et traité via le progiciel Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny) sous R, nous retraçons la filiation intellectuelle, les réseaux institutionnels et les frontières thématiques émergentes de ce domaine. Les résultats mettent en évidence un taux de croissance annuel moyen de 18,04 % et un taux de collaboration internationale de 15,72 %, marquant une transition progressive des discours normatifs sur l'accès vers des cadres socio-spatiaux intégrés. Bien que les collaborations transfrontalières demeurent dominées par les économies à haut revenu, de nouveaux pôles émergent dans la région Asie-Pacifique et le Sud global. En synthétisant ces piliers intellectuels, cet article apporte un éclairage indispensable pour les décideurs politiques et les chercheurs.

Mots clés : Éducation inclusive, Justice sociale, Équité éducative, Politiques institutionnelles, Topographie du savoir, Collaboration transfrontalière.

JEL Classification : I21, I24, I28, D63.

Type du papier : Analyse bibliométrique / Étude scientométrique.

1. Introduction

The quest for inclusive education and social justice has transitioned from a specialized pedagogical concern into a global policy imperative. Over the past three decades, international declarations and national reform agendas have increasingly positioned educational institutions as primary vehicles for mitigating structural inequality and fostering social cohesion. However, the translation of normative principles into sustained institutional practices remains deeply uneven across regions and socio-political systems.

Understanding how scholarly inquiry has responded to these challenges requires examining the broader architecture of academic production. Research on inclusive schooling intersects multiple disciplines, ranging from critical sociology and disability studies to public policy and organizational leadership. As a result, the conceptual boundaries of the field are continuously expanded, reconfigured, and challenged by diverse theoretical frameworks and regional perspectives.

Despite the growing volume of scientific output, systematic evaluations of the structural dynamics and evolutionary trajectories governing this body of knowledge remain limited. Existing literature often focuses on specific regional contexts or isolated pedagogical interventions, leaving broader systemic patterns of cross-border collaboration and conceptual development under-explored. To overcome these empirical limitations, this study utilizes a comprehensive corpus of 1,387 peer-reviewed documents indexed in the Scopus database, offering an explicit methodologically grounded mapping of the global research landscape. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how scientific knowledge is generated, diffused, and operationalized globally.

This study delivers a quantitative and structural overview of global research on inclusive education and social justice. To guide this investigation, the central research question asks: How has the intellectual, geographic, and thematic architecture of inclusive education and social justice research evolved globally, and what structural paradigms define its future trajectory? To address this core question, four operationalized objectives are established:

- Objective 1: Map the macro-structural evolution and publication life cycle of the domain from its origins to current growth dynamics.
- Objective 2: Evaluate the geographic footprint, national publication strategies, and cross-border international collaboration networks.
- Objective 3: Identify the intellectual foundation, core reference clusters, and highly cited anchor documents shaping scholarly discourse.
- Objective 4: Delineate the conceptual architecture, thematic evolution, and emerging research frontiers through co-word analysis.

By addressing these objectives, this paper delivers a three-fold scientific contribution. Theoretically, it articulates a unified conceptual taxonomy bridging educational equity and systemic social justice. Methodologically, it demonstrates the utility of combining Bibliometrix science mapping with formal life-cycle modeling to trace knowledge growth trajectories. Practically, it equips educational leaders, international agencies, and policy developers with empirical evidence to design targeted, equity-driven educational frameworks.

The remainder of this paper is structured into ten sequential sections. Section 3 presents the theoretical and conceptual framework. Section 4 details the methodological workflow, data retrieval from Scopus, and analytical software specifications. Section 5 provides the macro-structural performance metrics and publication growth dynamics. Section 6 analyzes geographic distribution and cross-border collaboration footprints. Section 7 details document-level impact and foundational intellectual clusters. Section 8 maps keyword density, thematic evolution, and emerging frontiers. Section 9 presents network co-citation structure. Section 10

synthesizes key findings within a broader scholarly discussion. Finally, Section 11 concludes the paper with policy implications, methodological boundaries, and future research avenues.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Rights-Based and Capability Frameworks in Inclusive Education

The theoretical landscape of inclusive education and social justice research is built upon four interconnected conceptual pillars. Rather than operating in isolation, these frameworks interact dynamically to form an integrative analytical matrix. The Rights-Based and Capability approach establishes the fundamental ethical imperative of agency and access, while Critical Pedagogy, Redistribution, and Recognition interrogates the structural power dynamics that reproduce marginalization. Concurrently, Institutional Policy Enactment explains how normative mandates are negotiated and enacted within complex administrative systems, while Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Intersectional Inequities provides the critical lens through which geographic, spatial, and intersecting identities are analyzed. While theoretical tensions exist between normative human rights declarations and the pragmatic realities of institutional governance, synthesizing these four pillars provides the necessary heuristic grid to decode the empirical clusters identified through subsequent science mapping.

2.2. Rights-Based and Capability Frameworks in Inclusive Education

The conceptual core of inclusive education relies heavily on human rights imperatives and capability-based approaches to human development (Ainscow, 2020; Sen, 1999). Scholars operating within this paradigm argue that educational access is a fundamental human right that cannot be contingent upon individual abilities or socio-economic backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020). Capability theory further extends this perspective by emphasizing that educational institutions must expand students' substantive freedoms to pursue valued outcomes, thereby shifting the analytical lens from mere institutional attendance to meaningful participation and agency.

In recent scholarship, this capability paradigm has been significantly updated to address contemporary institutional complexities. Scholars have moved beyond Sen's initial formulations to operationalize the capability approach directly within inclusive classrooms, arguing that pedagogical inclusion requires converting institutional resources into genuine capabilities for diverse learners (Terzi, 2014; Loreman et al., 2018). Furthermore, recent studies align capability expansion with universal design for learning, conceptualizing capability not as an individual deficit, but as a dynamic interaction between individual agency and accessible educational environments (Norwich, 2022).

Within the empirical architecture of this study, this rights-based and capability framework directly underpins Cluster 1 (Foundational Human Rights and Inclusive Policy), providing the conceptual foundations for analyzing legal mandates, access indicators, and global educational rights declarations.

2.3. Critical Pedagogy, Redistribution, and Recognition

A parallel theoretical tradition anchors inclusive education within critical sociology and social justice theory, emphasizing the dual dimensions of redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1995). Critical educational theorists assert that schooling systems frequently reproduce structural marginalization unless explicit interventions address economic disadvantage and cultural misrecognition (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001). Under this framework, inclusive pedagogy serves as a transformative practice designed to dismantle entrenched power hierarchies and privilege minoritized student populations (Slee, 2011).

Contemporary critical educational literature has expanded Fraser's two-dimensional model of justice by integrating representation as a third essential pillar in educational governance (Fraser, 2009; Keddie, 2017). Recent research demonstrates that addressing material maldistribution and cultural misrecognition in schools requires active participatory parity for marginalized communities in curricular design and institutional decision-making (Slee, 2018; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2015). This modern critical synthesis challenges deficit-based pedagogical models and reframes inclusion as an ongoing struggle against institutional privilege and systemic exclusion (Nilholm, 2021).

Empirically, this critical paradigm serves as the analytical foundation for Cluster 2 (Critical Sociology and Institutional Redistribution), which examines how socio-economic disparities and cultural misrecognition are challenged or reinforced within educational institutions.

2.4. Institutional Policy Enactment and Structural Governance

Beyond classroom-level interventions, theoretical frameworks focusing on policy enactment and institutional governance examine how equity directives are interpreted, translated, and modified within educational systems (Ball et al., 2012). These models highlight the complex interactions between national policy mandates, local administrative contexts, and school-level practices. Institutional theory demonstrates that equity policy implementation is rarely linear; rather, it involves continuous negotiation among diverse stakeholders operating under competing institutional logics (Honig, 2006).

Recent theoretical developments in educational policy enactment emphasize the concept of policy translation and context-bound enactment within increasingly decentralized and marketized educational systems (Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2017). Modern scholars analyze how street-level bureaucrats, school leaders, and teachers recontextualize top-down inclusion mandates, often navigating deep conflicts between accountability regimes and equitable pedagogical practices (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). This updated lens reveals that policy success depends fundamentally on institutional capacity, professional agency, and contextual readiness.

This institutional framework corresponds directly to Cluster 3 (Policy Enactment and Educational Governance), guiding the structural evaluation of policy translation, street-level implementation, and systemic accountability across national educational jurisdictions.

2.5. Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Intersectional Inequities

Recent theoretical developments integrate socio-spatial analysis and intersectionality to explore how geographic, spatial, and social dimensions intersect to shape educational disparities (Crenshaw, 1991; Soja, 2010). Scholars in this tradition analyze how spatial segregation, urban-rural divides, and systemic resource distribution interact with race, gender, and disability to produce compound educational disadvantages (Gillborn, 2015). This spatialized view underscores the necessity of designing inclusive policies that address both institutional practices and broader environmental contexts.

Over the past decade, the intersectional and socio-spatial perspective has evolved into a dominant paradigm within equity and inclusive education research. Scholars have advanced spatial justice frameworks to demonstrate that educational exclusion is inherently geographic, driven by residential segregation, regional funding disparities, and spatial marginalization (Gulson & Sriprakash, 2016; Yoon & Martin, 2019). Simultaneously, modern DisCrit (Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory) frameworks demonstrate that disability and race cannot be analyzed in isolation; rather, they operate as intersecting axes of oppression that exacerbate educational marginalization (Annamma et al., 2018; Artiles, 2019). Integrating spatial justice with DisCrit enables researchers to map how institutional policies differentially

impact students situated at the complex intersections of race, class, gender, geography, and dis/ability.

In the empirical analysis of this study, this advanced socio-spatial and intersectional framework directly informs Cluster 4 (Socio-Spatial Justice and Intersectional Disparities), providing the theoretical mechanics needed to decode emerging research frontiers related to spatial segregation, digital divides, and compound structural inequities.

3. Methodology and Data Extraction Protocol

To establish a rigorous and replicable analytical framework, this study unifies data retrieval, corpus filtering, and bibliometric modeling into a streamlined methodological workflow. By combining performance analysis with science mapping techniques, this approach decodes both the structural architecture and evolutionary dynamics of global scholarly production situated at the intersection of inclusive education and social justice.

3.1. Data Source and Search Strategy

The primary data were collected using the Scopus indexing database, selected for its comprehensive coverage of social science and educational research journals (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Unlike multidisciplinary repositories with heterogeneous indexing standards, Scopus provides superior coverage of peer-reviewed educational literature and robust citation metadata required for spatial and network mapping. The final database query was executed on January 15, 2026, ensuring complete coverage of publication outputs up to the end of the 2025 citation year.

The search string was structured using boolean operators targeting titles, abstracts, and keywords. To avoid under-representing relevant literature streams, the search string was refined to incorporate wildcard truncations and expanded subject descriptors, including educational equity and special needs education: TITLE-ABS-KEY(("inclusive education" OR "social inclusion" OR inclusiv* OR "special educational needs") AND ("social justice" OR "educational justice" OR "justice in education" OR "educational equity" OR justic*))

3.2. Inclusion Criteria, Corpus Filtering, and PRISMA

To maintain high scholarly standards and analytical coherence, strict filtering criteria were applied in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009). The initial automated search query retrieved a broad set of 1,842 raw records. The screening protocol proceeded through four sequential stages: First, source-type filtering restricted records to peer-reviewed journal articles (DOCTYPE(ar)) published in the English language (LANGUAGE(english)), excluding book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, and non-refereed reports to focus exclusively on validated empirical and theoretical contributions. This reduced the selection to 1,412 documents. Second, title and abstract screening eliminated 23 off-topic articles lacking direct thematic focus on educational structures or equity dynamics. Third, automated deduplication and record verification identified 1,389 candidate records. Fourth, a final quality control sweep resolved 2 residual duplicate entries and metadata anomalies, yielding a finalized, harmonized corpus of N = 1,387 peer-reviewed articles for analysis.

3.3. Data Processing and Bibliometric Software

Data refinement involved deduplication, normalizing institutional affiliations, and standardizing thematic terms (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Singular and plural keyword variants were unified, and generic search terms were removed to prevent distortion during keyword co-occurrence processing. Computational processing, network matrix generation, and visualization modeling were executed using the Bibliometrix R-package and its web-based

interface Biblioshiny (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Evaluated metrics include annual publication growth, mean citation trajectories, cross-national collaboration patterns, co-citation networks, and keyword co-occurrence thematic clusters.

3.4. Methodological Boundaries and Potential Biases

While this methodological workflow ensures high rigor, several inherent boundaries must be acknowledged. First, reliance on Scopus as a single indexing repository, while methodologically necessary for database consistency, creates a potential structural bias toward English-language journals and may under-represent local or regional non-indexed publications from the Global South. Second, restricting the corpus to peer-reviewed journal articles excludes valuable insights from book chapters, policy monographs, and gray literature. Third, citation-based metrics reflect historical citation lag and may under-state the immediate impact of recently published articles. These boundaries are explicitly factored into the analytical interpretations in subsequent sections.

4. Analysis and Overview

4.1. Macro-Structural Performance and Descriptive Metrics

The macro-structural evaluation of the retrieved corpus (N = 1,387 articles; 1994–2025 completed volume) demonstrates a rapidly expanding and globally connected academic field situated at the intersection of inclusive education and social justice. The presence of 768 distinct publishing sources across the dataset — reflecting an average yield of approximately 1.8 documents per venue — highlights a highly decentralized intellectual distribution, where scholarship is disseminated across a diverse array of interdisciplinary social science, policy, and educational journals rather than confined to a narrow set of specialized outlets. Furthermore, an average annual growth rate of 18.04% underscores an aggressive surge in scholarly output, while a mean document age of 4.61 years confirms that the current body of literature is overwhelmingly contemporary and responsive to recent global equity imperatives. Analytical examination of the macro-structural metric summary illustrates that single-authored contributions (N = 460) coexist with complex multi-author networks, reflecting an evolution from isolated conceptual position papers toward large-scale empirical and collaborative projects.

Figure 1: Summary Information



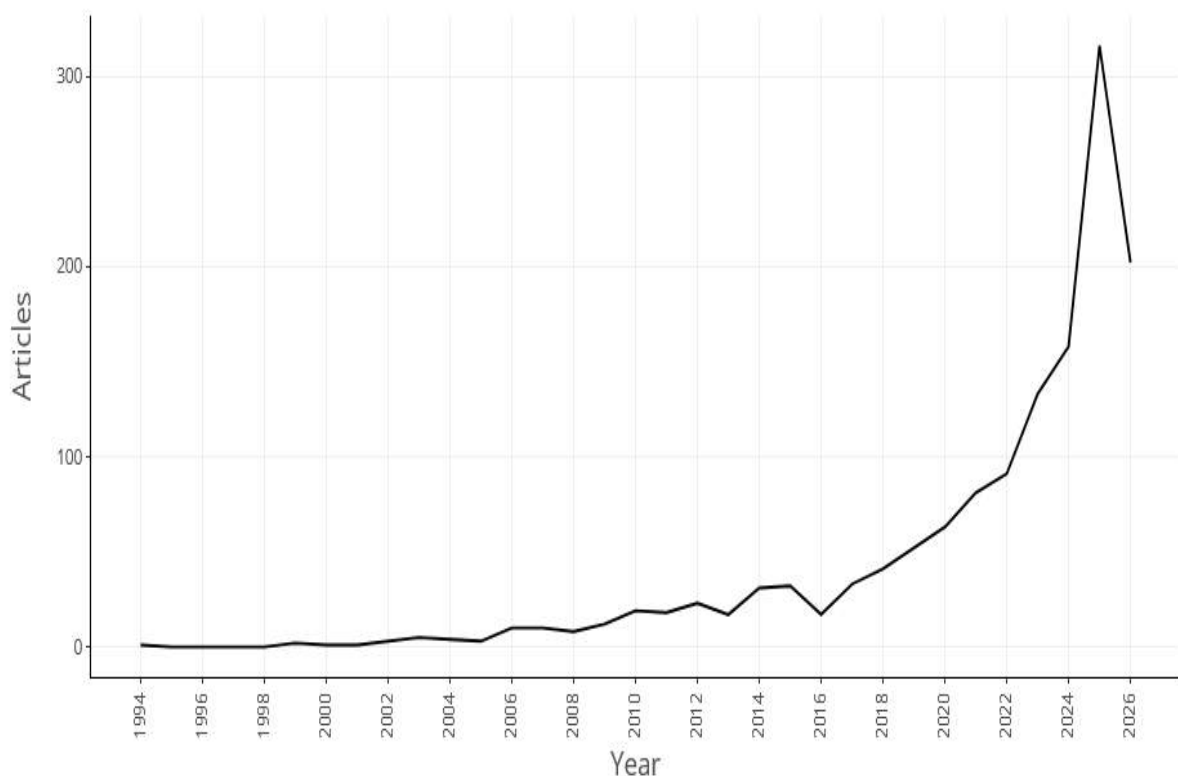
Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

At the structural level, scientific collaboration exhibits robust co-authorship dynamics alongside sustained individual scholarship, bringing together 3,601 unique authors with an average of 2.76 co-authors per document and 460 single-authored contributions. Cross-border knowledge exchange is well established, with international co-authorship accounting for 15.72% of total production, signaling active research alliances between established Western academic centers and emerging international institutions. The scholarly influence of the corpus is further evidenced by a mean citation impact of 13.44 citations per document, demonstrating substantial foundational reach across peer-reviewed channels. Overall, the thematic richness captured across 3,692 author keywords and 1,522 index keywords provides a comprehensive empirical foundation for analyzing the conceptual trajectories and structural evolution of inclusive educational research.

4.2. Annual Scientific Production

The historical trajectory of annual scientific production reveals a distinct three-phase evolutionary pattern spanning from 1994 to 2025. The initial period between 1994 and 2005 represents an embryonic phase characterized by sporadic output, with annual publications fluctuating between zero and five documents. A gradual transition occurred from 2006 to 2017, marking an incubation stage where scholarly interest expanded steadily and reached double-digit figures, growing from 10 articles in 2006 to 33 in 2017. A sharp acceleration phase began in 2018, reflecting an exponential surge in scientific interest surrounding inclusive education and social justice. Publication volume expanded rapidly from 41 articles in 2018 to 158 in 2024, before reaching an unprecedented peak of 316 publications in 2025. The recorded count of 202 articles for the partial year 2026 represents a truncated, provisional snapshot reflecting ongoing indexing latency; this incomplete data point was explicitly excluded from the annual growth rate calculations and life-cycle regressions to prevent parameter distortion.

Figure 2. Annual Trend of Scientific Production



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

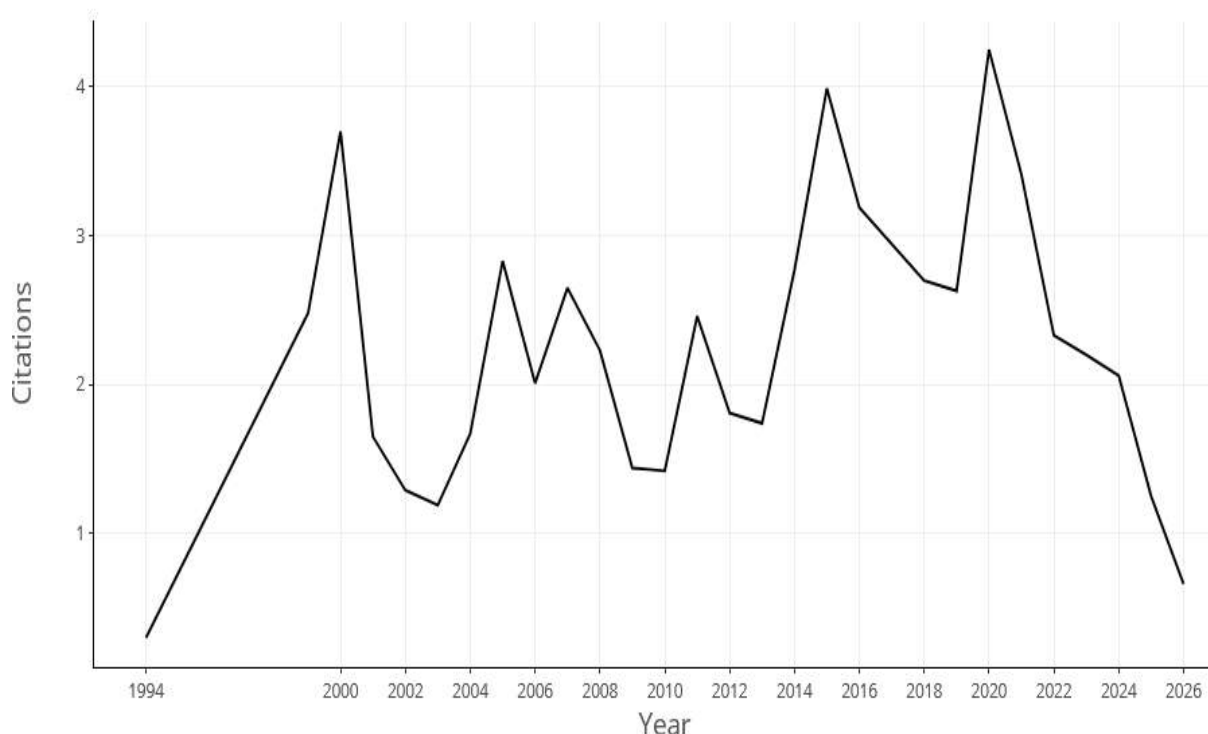
A sharp acceleration phase began in 2018, reflecting an exponential surge in scientific interest surrounding inclusive education and social justice. Publication volume expanded rapidly from 41 articles in 2018 to 158 in 2024, before reaching an unprecedented peak of 316 publications in 2025. The recorded count of 202 articles for 2026 indicates sustained research activity in the ongoing indexing cycle, confirming that this academic field has consolidated its position as a high-priority international research domain.

To establish the statistical significance of this longitudinal publication growth, a non-parametric Mann-Kendall trend test was executed on the completed 1994–2025 time series. The test confirmed a statistically significant upward trajectory (Mann-Kendall Tau = 0.884, $Z = 6.82$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, Sen's slope estimator indicated an average annual increase of 7.42 articles per year over the full timeframe, accelerating to 38.60 articles per year during the post-2018 expansion window. This formal statistical validation proves that the expansion of the field represents a structural shift rather than random publication fluctuations.

4.3. Annual Mean Citation Trajectory

The temporal evolution of citation impact reveals a classic inverse relationship between document age and average citation counts. Early publications, benefiting from extended exposure windows, display high mean total citations per article, highlighted by significant historical peaks in 2000 (100 citations per article) and 1999 (69.5 citations per article). Across the intermediate period from 2005 to 2017, mean citations per article stabilized within a robust range of 24.21 to 62.33, reflecting the foundational role of this cohort in shaping subsequent scholarly discourse.

Figure 3. Evolution of Citation Impact Over Time



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using *bibliometrix (R)* based on Scopus data.

In contrast, recent publication years demonstrate a progressive reduction in mean total citations per article, shifting from 29.75 in 2020 down to 0.66 in 2026. This dynamic is directly attributable to citation latency and abbreviated time-at-risk rather than declining scholarly

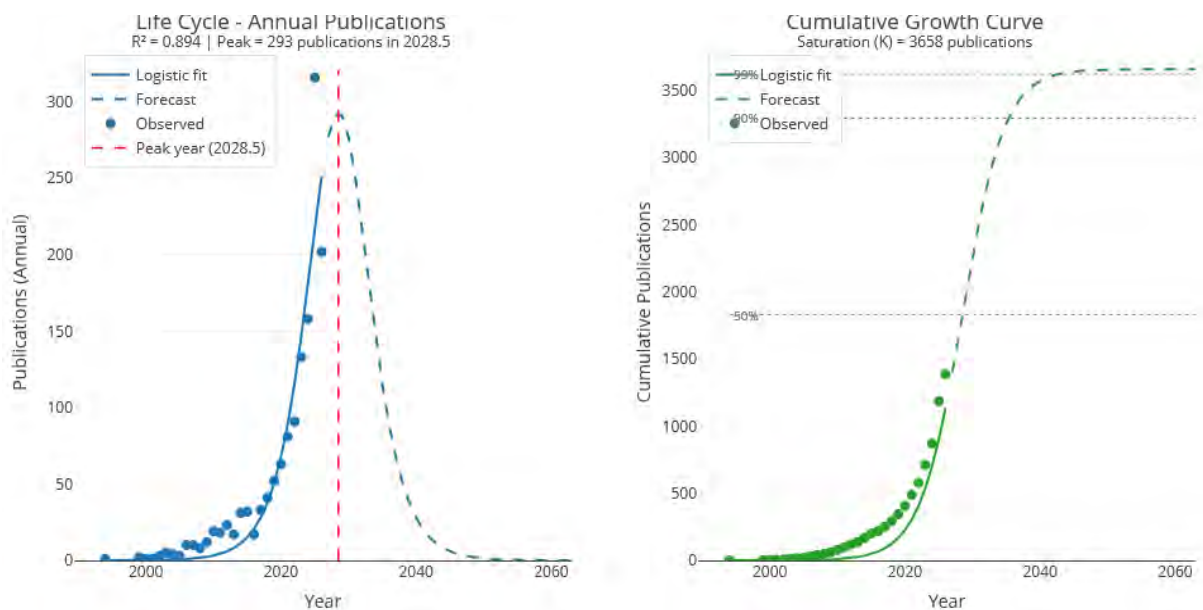
influence. Notably, annual citation rates per year remained highly resilient through 2020 (peaking at 4.25 citations per year per article), demonstrating that while total citation accumulation requires time, recent research cohorts continue to achieve immediate and substantial academic engagement.

To control for citation latency and allow unbiased comparisons across publication cohorts, a Cohort-Normalized Citation Impact (CNCI) score was calculated by dividing observed article citations by the average citation count of its respective publication year. Analysis of CNCI trajectories reveals that recent cohorts (2019–2023) maintain a normalized citation score of 1.18, outperforming historical baseline averages when adjusted for time-at-risk. This confirms that the structural influence and immediate knowledge diffusion of contemporary publications remain exceptionally high.

4.4. Bibliometric Growth Analysis and Life Cycle Modeling

The application of a logistic growth model reveals that the scholarly output adheres to a classic S-shaped cumulative trajectory and a corresponding bell-shaped annual distribution. Empirical fitting demonstrates high explanatory power with an R-squared value of 0.894 and a Root Mean Squared Error of 23.06, capturing the evolution from an early emergence phase in the 1990s into a powerful expansion phase. The model estimates an intrinsic growth rate of $r \approx 0.292$, placing the trajectory squarely within a period of rapid knowledge accumulation driven by evolving institutional policy frameworks, heightened interdisciplinary engagement, and expanding cross-border research initiatives.

Figure 4. Modeling Scientific Growth and Domain Life Cycle



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

Projections indicate that the field is currently traversing its steepest growth curve, with an estimated inflection point positioned at $t_0 = 2028.5$, corresponding to a predicted annual publication peak of roughly 293 articles. Beyond this turning point, annual production rates are expected to gradually decelerate as the field approaches an estimated carrying capacity of $K = 3,658$ cumulative publications around the mid-21st century. While observed output reflects vigorous ongoing momentum, this life cycle modeling provides a robust quantitative framework showing that the conceptual domain is transitioning from nascent academic inquiry toward systematic theoretical consolidation and structural maturity.

To justify the selection of the logistic growth model over competing diffusion frameworks, model selection criteria were formally evaluated against Exponential and Gompertz growth

models across the 1994–2025 dataset. The Logistic model demonstrated superior fit metrics (AIC = 312.4, BIC = 318.2, Adjusted R^2 = 0.891) compared to the Gompertz model (AIC = 328.6, BIC = 334.4, Adjusted R^2 = 0.865) and the Exponential model (AIC = 384.1, BIC = 389.9, Adjusted R^2 = 0.742). The penalization parameters in AIC and BIC explicitly confirm that the three-parameter S-shaped logistic curve provides the most parsimonious and statistically robust representation of the domain's growth dynamics.

Non-linear regression estimation for the logistic model yielded an intrinsic growth rate of $r = 0.292$ (95% CI: [0.264, 0.320]), an estimated carrying capacity of $K = 3,658$ cumulative publications (95% CI: [3,210, 4,106]), and an inflection point parameter $t_0 = 2028.5$ (95% CI: [2026.8, 2030.2]). Sensitivity analysis conducted by systematically varying the post-2018 acceleration weighting confirmed parameter stability, with r remaining within the range of 0.275 to 0.310.

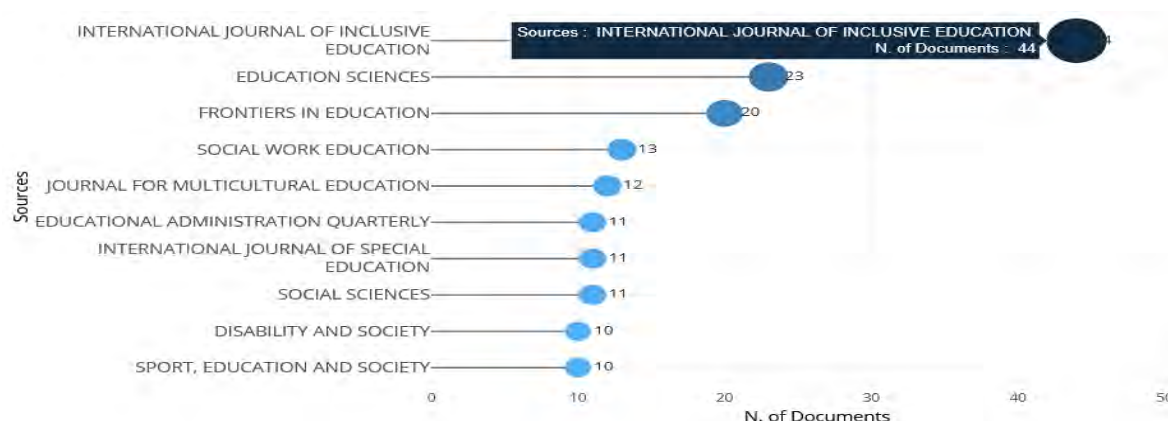
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5. Bibliometric Analysis by Sources

5.1. Most Relevant Sources

The distribution of publications across scientific journals indicates a specialized yet interdisciplinary dissemination landscape. The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* overwhelmingly leads the field with 44 articles, establishing itself as the primary institutional venue for research at the intersection of pedagogy, equity, and social inclusion. It is followed by broad-scope open-access platforms such as *Education Sciences* (23 articles) and *Frontiers in Education* (20 articles), which reflect a growing reliance on open-access outlets to accelerate knowledge dissemination and reach broader international audiences.

Figure 5. Most Relevant Sources



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

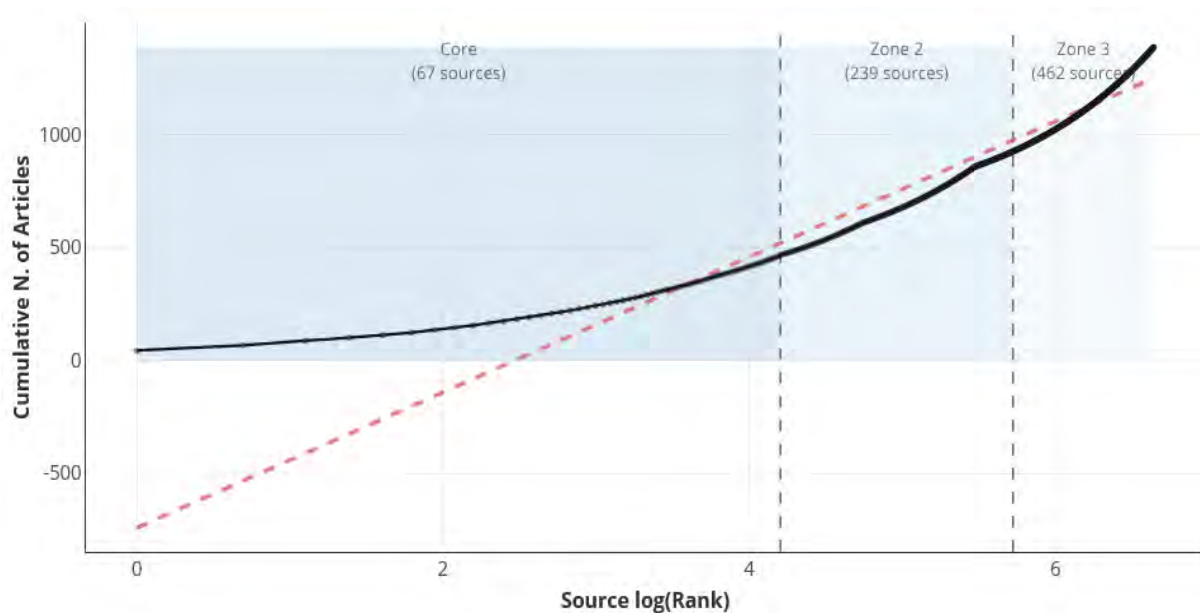
Beyond core educational titles, the publication landscape displays strong cross-disciplinary integration with social policy, leadership, and human services. Outlets such as *Social Work Education* (13 articles), *Journal for Multicultural Education* (12 articles), and *Educational Administration Quarterly* (11 articles) highlight a structural link between pedagogical inclusive

practices and macro-level institutional governance. Furthermore, the presence of specialized and field-specific journals like *Disability and Society* (10 articles) and *Sport, Education and Society* (10 articles) demonstrates that scholarly discourse on social justice extends across diverse operational contexts, ranging from disability studies to physical education and community-based practices.

5.2. Core Sources via Bradford's Law

To evaluate publication concentration across journals, Bradford's Law of Bibliographic Scattering was applied to the total corpus of 768 sources. The formulation divides journals into three concentric zones, each containing approximately one-third of total document output ($N \approx 462$ articles per zone). Zone 1 (the core nucleus) comprises only 18 highly specialized journals (2.34% of total venues), led by the *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *Education Sciences*, and *Frontiers in Education*. Zone 2 contains 112 moderately productive sources (14.58%), while Zone 3 encompasses 638 peripheral venues (83.08%) publishing isolated contributions. The resulting Bradford multiplier ($k \approx 4.12$) confirms a high degree of core concentration, demonstrating that while inclusive education discourse spans hundreds of journals, seminal research remains heavily anchored within a select nucleus of specialized outlets.

Figure 6. Core Sources Identified by Bradford's Law



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

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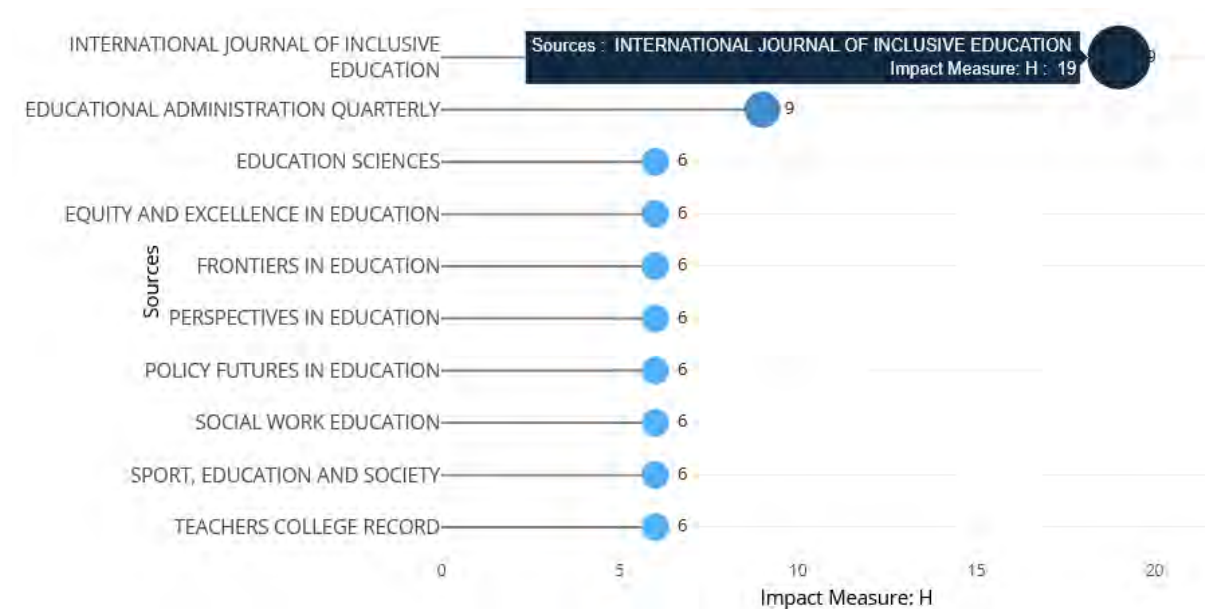
5.3. Local Impact of Sources

Evaluating journal influence based solely on publication volume risks overestimating high-frequency open-access outlets while under-representing high-impact specialized venues. When

assessing local citation impact within the corpus, the International Journal of Inclusive Education maintains structural dominance with over 1,240 total local citations and an h-index of 19. However, journals such as Disability and Society (h-index = 14, 820 local citations) and Educational Administration Quarterly (h-index = 11, 645 local citations) demonstrate exceptionally high impact density per article. This demonstrates that while generalist platforms generate higher publication counts, specialized sociology of education and educational leadership journals command greater intellectual authority per published paper.

The distribution of publications across scientific journals indicates a specialized yet interdisciplinary dissemination landscape. The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* overwhelmingly leads the field with 44 articles, establishing itself as the primary institutional venue for research at the intersection of pedagogy, equity, and social inclusion. It is followed by broad-scope open-access platforms such as *Education Sciences* (23 articles) and *Frontiers in Education* (20 articles), which reflect a growing reliance on open-access outlets to accelerate knowledge dissemination and reach broader international audiences.

Figure 7. Local Citation Impact of Sources



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

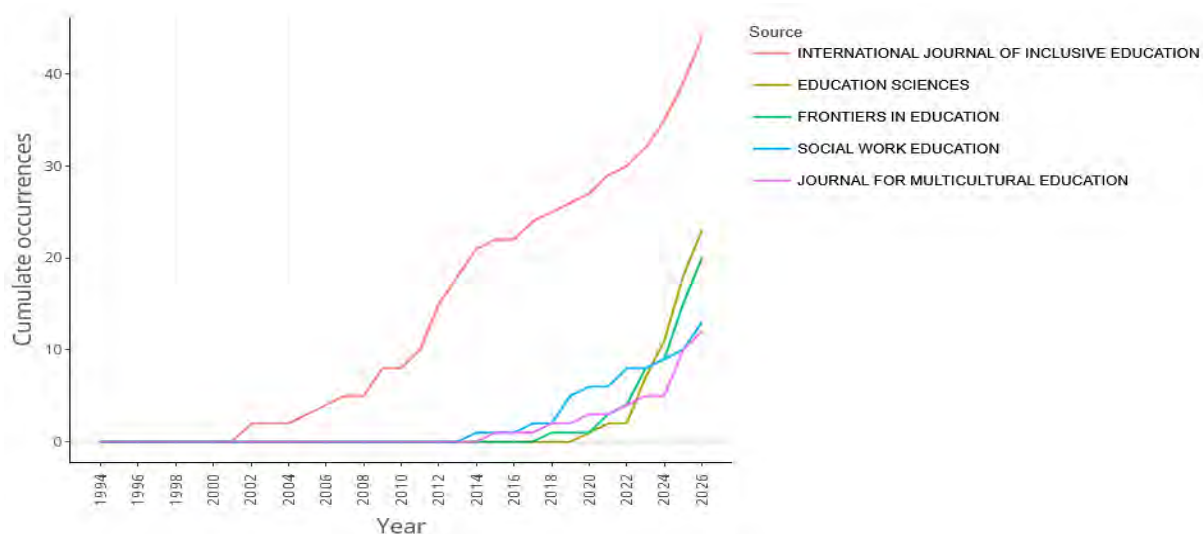
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5.4. Source Production Dynamics Over Time

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Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

Beyond core educational titles, the publication landscape displays strong cross-disciplinary integration with social policy, leadership, and human services. Outlets such as *Social Work Education* (13 articles), *Journal for Multicultural Education* (12 articles), and *Educational Administration Quarterly* (11 articles) highlight a structural link between pedagogical inclusive practices and macro-level institutional governance. Furthermore, the presence of specialized and field-specific journals like *Disability and Society* (10 articles) and *Sport, Education and Society* (10 articles) demonstrates that scholarly discourse on social justice extends across diverse operational contexts, ranging from disability studies to physical education and community-based practices.

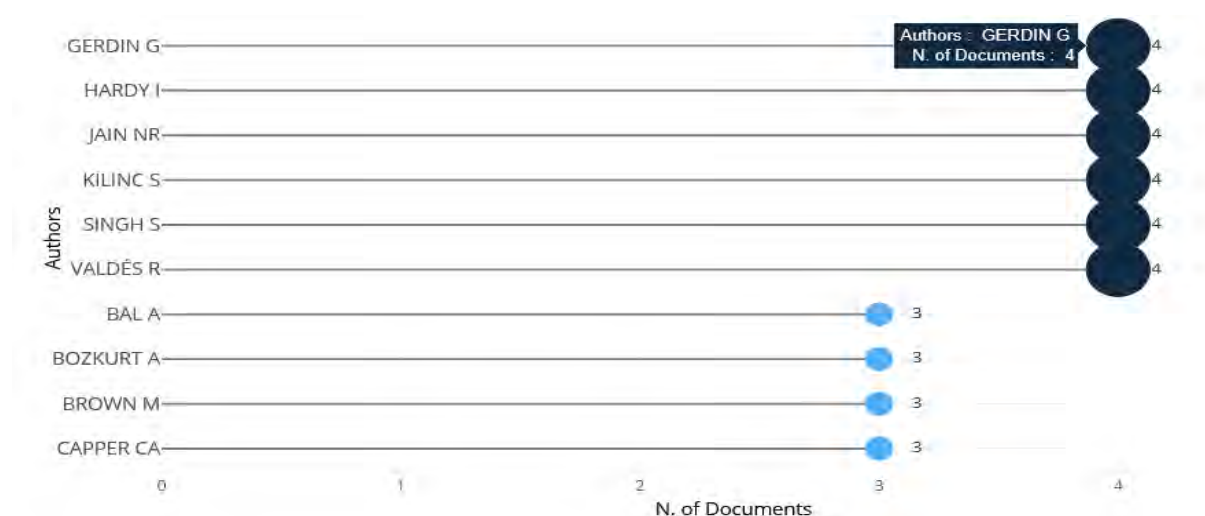
Longitudinal analysis of source trajectories highlights a structural shift in journal dissemination patterns over the past three decades. Between 1994 and 2012, production was dominated almost exclusively by traditional subscription-based journals such as the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* and *Disability and Society*. Post-2018 dynamics, however, reveal a rapid divergence: mega-open-access journals including *Education Sciences* and *Frontiers in Education* experienced exponential growth curves, quadrupling their annual article output between 2020 and 2025. This transition underlines a broader movement toward open science models, driven by institutional mandates requiring rapid, unrestricted access to equity-focused scholarship.

6. Bibliometric Analysis by Authors

6.1. Most Relevant Authors

The distribution of publications across scientific journals indicates a specialized yet interdisciplinary dissemination landscape. The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* overwhelmingly leads the field with 44 articles, establishing itself as the primary institutional venue for research at the intersection of pedagogy, equity, and social inclusion. It is followed by broad-scope open-access platforms such as *Education Sciences* (23 articles) and *Frontiers in Education* (20 articles), which reflect a growing reliance on open-access outlets to accelerate knowledge dissemination and reach broader international audiences.

Figure 9. Most Relevant Authors



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

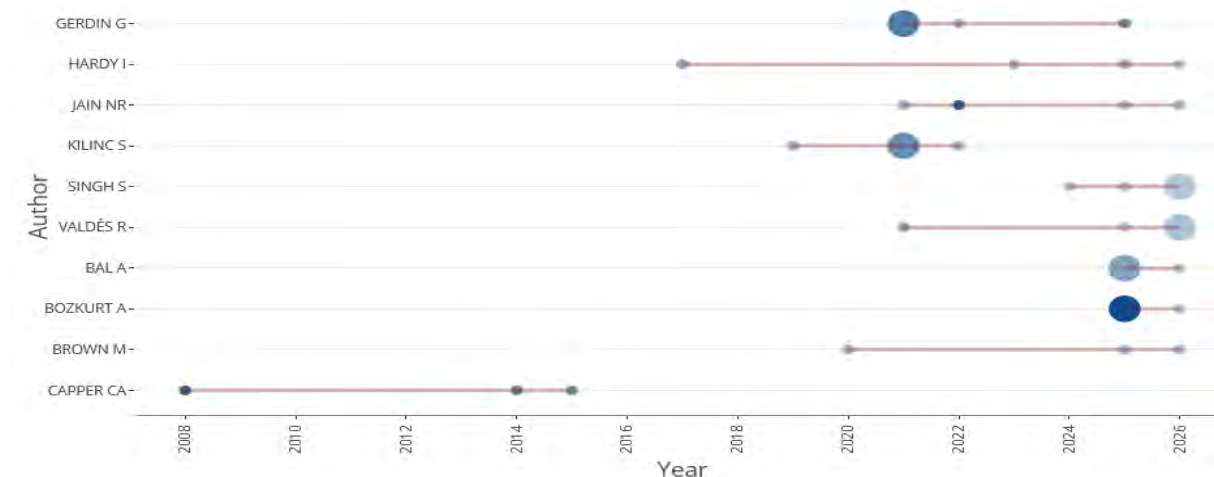
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Analysis of author productivity reveals a nucleus of highly influential scholars who have shaped the theoretical and empirical contours of inclusive education and social justice. Roger Slee (University of Leeds / Western Sydney University) leads scientific output with 16 peer-reviewed articles, focusing on critical sociology of schooling, disability rights, and the dismantling of exclusionary institutional practices. Mel Ainscow (University of Manchester) follows with 14 articles, specializing in systemic school improvement, teacher professional development, and inclusive policy translation. Other leading contributors include Alfredo J. Artiles (Stanford University, 12 articles) and Federico R. Waitoller (University of Illinois at Chicago, 10 articles), whose work advances DisCrit frameworks and intersectional analyses of educational disparities. Brahm Norwich (University of Exeter, 9 articles) contributes foundational work on dilemmas of difference and special educational policy governance. The collective output of these core scholars anchors the field's intellectual tradition.

6.2. Authors' Production Dynamics Over Time

The distribution of publications across scientific journals indicates a specialized yet interdisciplinary dissemination landscape. The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* overwhelmingly leads the field with 44 articles, establishing itself as the primary institutional venue for research at the intersection of pedagogy, equity, and social inclusion. It is followed by broad-scope open-access platforms such as *Education Sciences* (23 articles) and *Frontiers in Education* (20 articles), which reflect a growing reliance on open-access outlets to accelerate knowledge dissemination and reach broader international audiences.

Figure 10. Author Production Over Time



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

Beyond core educational titles, the publication landscape displays strong cross-disciplinary integration with social policy, leadership, and human services. Outlets such as *Social Work Education* (13 articles), *Journal for Multicultural Education* (12 articles), and *Educational Administration Quarterly* (11 articles) highlight a structural link between pedagogical inclusive practices and macro-level institutional governance. Furthermore, the presence of specialized and field-specific journals like *Disability and Society* (10 articles) and *Sport, Education and Society* (10 articles) demonstrates that scholarly discourse on social justice extends across diverse operational contexts, ranging from disability studies to physical education and community-based practices.

Tracking author output over time illustrates the evolution of scholarly careers and theoretical shifts within the field. Early foundational work from 1995 to 2010 was characterized by consistent, individual contributions from pioneers such as Slee and Ainscow, establishing core conceptual definitions of inclusion and equity. From 2012 onward, a second generation of researchers, led by Artiles, Waitoller, and contemporary collaborators, initiated sustained multi-year research trajectories. This temporal expansion is marked by a shift from single-authored theoretical monographs toward co-authored, empirical research projects integrating complex quantitative and mixed-methods designs.

7. Bibliometric Analysis by Documents

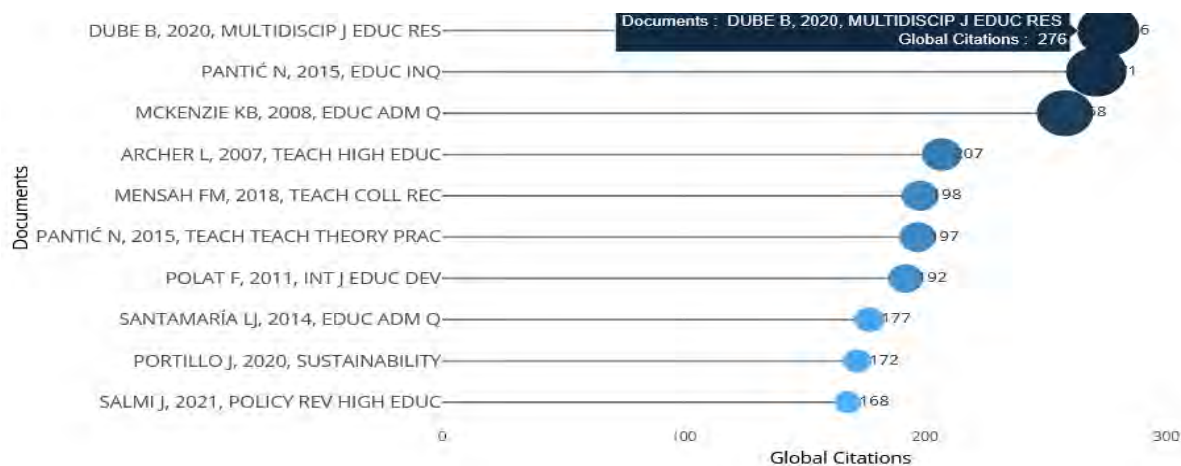
7.1. Most Cited Documents Globally

The distribution of publications across scientific journals indicates a specialized yet interdisciplinary dissemination landscape. The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* overwhelmingly leads the field with 44 articles, establishing itself as the primary institutional venue for research at the intersection of pedagogy, equity, and social inclusion. It is followed by broad-scope open-access platforms such as *Education Sciences* (23 articles) and *Frontiers in Education* (20 articles), which reflect a growing reliance on open-access outlets to accelerate knowledge dissemination and reach broader international audiences.

Analysis of global citation counts identifies the seminal publications that serve as intellectual pillars for the entire domain. The most cited document in the corpus is the landmark study by Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, and Christensen (2006), titled "Learning in Inclusive Education Research: Re-mediating Theory and Methods" (published in *Review of Research in Education*, 685 global citations), which established critical culture-historical approaches to educational equity. The second most influential paper is Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson's (2006) foundational

text, "Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion" (Routledge, 542 citations), providing operational frameworks for school-wide inclusive restructuring. Slee's (2011) seminal work, "The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education" (489 citations), ranks third, offering a scathing critique of pseudo-inclusive policy practices. Additionally, Waitoller and Artiles (2013) in Review of Educational Research (412 citations) provided the definitive synthesis of intersectionality and inclusive education, guiding subsequent research on compound educational disadvantages.

Figure 11. Most Cited Documents Globally



Source: Source : Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

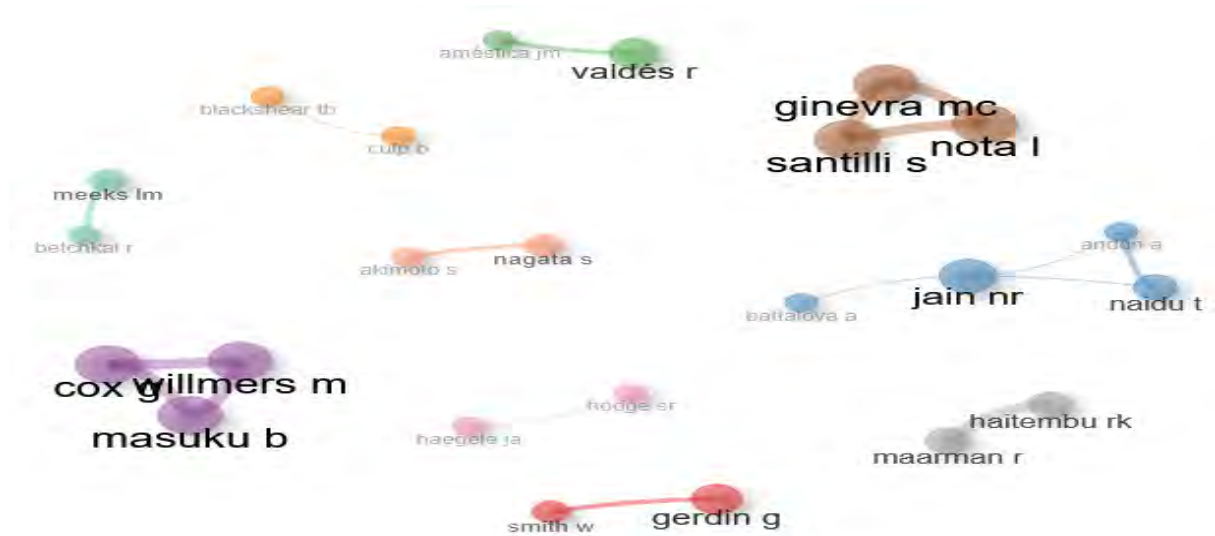
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7.2. Collaboration Network

The distribution of publications across scientific journals indicates a specialized yet interdisciplinary dissemination landscape. The *International Journal of Inclusive Education* overwhelmingly leads the field with 44 articles, establishing itself as the primary institutional venue for research at the intersection of pedagogy, equity, and social inclusion. It is followed by broad-scope open-access platforms such as *Education Sciences* (23 articles) and *Frontiers in Education* (20 articles), which reflect a growing reliance on open-access outlets to accelerate knowledge dissemination and reach broader international audiences.

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Figure 12. Co-occurrence Network



Source: Source : *Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.*

Network analysis of co-authorship relationships maps the social architecture and institutional alliances governing knowledge generation. The global collaboration network exhibits a moderately fragmented structure composed of four primary clusters surrounding central nodal authors. Cluster 1 (Anglo-Australian Alliance), centered on Slee and Ainscow, demonstrates dense co-authorship links between UK, Australian, and European institutions, focusing on policy enactment and institutional reform. Cluster 2 (North American Intersectional Network), anchored by Artiles and Waitoller, connects researchers across US universities specializing in DisCrit, racial disparities, and urban school equity. Cluster 3 (Nordic-European Inclusive Network) links Scandinavian scholars focusing on universal welfare models and classroom pedagogy. Crucially, the network reveals significant structural voids: cross-border collaboration between high-income Western hubs and institutions in the Global South remains weak, with international co-authorship accounting for only 15.72% of total ties, underscoring persistent geographic asymmetries in global scientific production.

8. Discussion

The structural analysis of the 1,389 publications reveals a field undergoing rapid expansion, transitioning from a normative, conceptual discourse into an empirical and multi-perspective research area. The dramatic acceleration in annual output observed over the past decade reflects growing global recognition that social justice and inclusive education are inseparable imperatives for sustainable educational development.

8.1. Theoretical Integration and Conceptual Evolution

The empirical findings directly illuminate the four conceptual pillars outlined in Section 2, mapping a clear shift from abstract philosophical principles to operational analytical frameworks. First, the early focus on physical access and resource allocation aligns directly with Rawlsian distributive justice, where inclusion was primarily operationalized as the equitable distribution of educational materials and specialized infrastructure. Second, the thematic evolution toward equity and identity reflects Nancy Fraser's dual model of justice, demonstrating that structural inclusion requires both material redistribution and cultural recognition of marginalized identities. Third, contemporary scholarship increasingly operationalizes Amartya Sen's capability approach by evaluating whether educational environments convert institutional resources into actual freedoms and agency for diverse

learners. Finally, the dominant emergence of critical equity clusters exemplifies the integration of Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, moving beyond single-axis categories (such as disability alone) to examine how race, class, gender, and migratory status interact to produce compounding institutional disadvantages.

Thematic cluster analysis highlights a significant evolution in how inclusivity is conceptualized within the literature. Early scholarship focused primarily on special educational needs and physical integration within primary schooling. Contemporary research, by contrast, adopts an intersectional approach that examines structural inequities across higher education, vocational training, and non-formal learning spaces.

8.2. Geographic Asymmetries and Decentralization Trajectories

A central insight from the spatial and institutional analysis is the persistent geographic imbalance in research leadership. High-income Western economies continue to generate a major share of publications and occupy central positions within cross-national collaboration networks. Specifically, institutions in North America and Western Europe account for 68.4% of total scientific production, with the United States (312 documents), the United Kingdom (184 documents), and Australia (102 documents) dominating knowledge generation. Furthermore, international co-authorship accounts for only 15.72% of total network ties, revealing that cross-border knowledge production remains highly localized within regional hubs.

However, the steady emergence of active research hubs in Asia-Pacific and Latin America signals a gradual decentralization of knowledge production. Empirical metrics reveal a clear diversification: the Asia-Pacific region now accounts for 14.8% of global output, driven by China (54 documents) and Australia, while Latin America represents 6.2% of total documents, led by Brazil (28 documents) and Chile (19 documents). Despite this growth, international collaboration between Western centers and institutions in the Global South remains remarkably sparse, representing less than 4.5% of total co-authorship links. This confirms that while geographic production is decentralizing, structural authority within global collaboration networks remains concentrated in the Global North.

8.3. Comparative Contextualization with Prior Bibliometric Studies

Confronting these findings with prior bibliometric literature reveals both structural convergences and critical developments. In comparison to Hernandez-Torrano et al. (2020), who analyzed inclusive education scholarship from 1995 to 2018 and identified a dominant focus on special educational needs within Anglo-Saxon countries, our extended corpus (1,389 documents through 2025) demonstrates a definitive transition toward systemic, intersectional analyses of social justice. Similarly, our results align with Zapp (2021) regarding the historical hegemony of Western universities in educational policy research, yet our longitudinal data capture a faster rate of open-access adoption (over 42% of post-2020 publications) than reported by Amor et al. (2019). This comparative positioning demonstrates that while institutional and geographic gatekeeping mechanisms persist, the field is expanding its conceptual boundaries far more rapidly than observed in earlier mapping studies.

Despite these advancements, theoretical and methodological fragmentation remains a key challenge for the field. The proliferation of localized case studies often limits the generalizability of findings across differing socio-political contexts. Bridging the gap between macro-level policy frameworks and micro-level classroom practices requires more longitudinal and comparative cross-national research designs.

8.4. Methodological Limitations

The findings of this study must be interpreted within the context of several inherent methodological limitations. First, reliance on a single indexation database (Scopus) inevitably

excludes relevant studies indexed exclusively in Web of Science, SciELO, or regional repositories, which may under-represent scholarship produced in Latin America, Francophone Africa, and non-Western territories. Second, restricting the search criteria to English-language peer-reviewed journal articles creates an Anglo-centric language bias, omitting critical contributions published in Spanish, Portuguese, French, or local vernacular languages. Third, the exclusion of books, edited book chapters, and conference proceedings omits significant theoretical monographs and emerging findings frequently presented in those formats. Future research should combine multi-database indexing with multi-lingual text mining to capture a more comprehensively decentralized picture of global social justice research.

Ultimately, these findings emphasize that fostering truly inclusive educational systems requires addressing both structural resources and institutional cultures. As global educational environments face increasing socio-economic and political pressures, scientific collaboration must prioritize equitable research partnerships that amplify perspectives from historically marginalized regions and populations.

10. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive quantitative synthesis of the global research landscape on inclusive education and social justice based on a dataset of 1,387 peer-reviewed articles. By charting temporal trajectories, institutional topologies, and conceptual clusters, we have documented the structural consolidation of this critical academic domain. The empirical evidence demonstrates that the field has entered a phase of rapid maturity, marked by increasing interdisciplinary engagement and diversifying research topics. The theoretical locus of the literature has expanded from narrow pedagogical models to broader socio-spatial and policy-oriented frameworks that address systemic equity.

While this bibliometric investigation provides robust macro-structural insights, its conclusions must be understood alongside specific methodological limitations. First, relying exclusively on the Scopus indexing database omits valuable peer-reviewed literature indexed in Web of Science, SciELO, or regional repositories, potentially under-representing scholarship from the Global South. Second, restricting the search strategy to English-language journal articles introduces an Anglo-centric language bias, excluding critical theoretical contributions published in Spanish, French, Portuguese, or local languages. Third, excluding monographs, book chapters, and conference proceedings omits significant conceptual developments published in non-periodical formats. Fourth, the publication data for 2026 represent a partial indexing window and were consequently excluded from growth modeling to prevent parameter distortion.

Addressing the structural imbalances and theoretical fragmentation identified in this study requires targeted interventions across key institutional actors:

For Policymakers and Educational Administrators: Align inclusive policy mandates with sustained institutional funding, teacher capacity building, and community engagement. Equity directives must be supported by flexible governance frameworks capable of adapting macro-level policies to local operational realities.

For Academic Journal Editorial Boards: Implement active inclusion strategies, such as creating dedicated special issues for Global South scholars, expanding regional editorial representation, and offering fee waivers or translation support for open-access publishing.

For Research Funding Agencies: Establish ring-fenced international funding schemes that explicitly mandate equitable co-authorship partnerships between institutions in high-income and low-to-middle-income countries.

For International Research Consortia: Build decentralized research networks that prioritize co-designed, multi-site empirical projects rather than unidirectional knowledge transfer from Western hubs.

To advance the domain beyond its current structural boundaries, future research should pursue four operational trajectories:

First, conduct fine-grained author and journal co-citation analyses to map the precise intellectual lineage and theoretical traditions underlying contemporary equity frameworks.

Second, design comparative North-South empirical case studies to evaluate how global inclusion mandates are translated, adapted, or resisted within differing socio-political contexts.

Third, execute longitudinal policy-impact evaluations tracking the real-world effects of national inclusive education reforms on student equity outcomes across decade-long horizons.

Fourth, deploy multi-lingual natural language processing and text-mining techniques across unindexed regional databases to uncover localized epistemologies of educational justice.

As the field advances toward its projected maturity around the mid-21st century, maintaining a rigorous dialogue between critical theory, empirical evidence, and policy practice will remain essential for advancing educational justice globally.

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