

## COMPLEXITY AND INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: POSSIBLE PATHS FOR A SCHOOL THAT EMBRACES DIFFERENCE

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article conducts a narrative literature review with the aim of analyzing how complexity theory can contribute to the construction of inclusive pedagogical practices directed toward students with intellectual disabilities. Grounded in authors such as Edgar Morin and Maria Teresa Eglér Mantoan, the study articulates theoretical and normative aspects of inclusive education with the principles of complexity, highlighting the need to overcome the fragmented school model. The analysis of ten academic works published between 2001 and 2025 reveals both convergences and tensions in the field, indicating that inclusion requires breaking with established patterns and adopting an epistemological stance open to uncertainty and diversity. It is concluded that complexity does not provide ready-made answers, but invites schools to constant reinvention, promoting belonging and the appreciation of particularities.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education; Complexity; Intellectual Disability; School; Singularity.

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### INTRODUCTION

The presence of students with intellectual disabilities in schools has highlighted tensions between the legal commitments assumed by the Brazilian State and the actual pedagogical practices in classrooms. Documents such as the Salamanca Statement (1994), the LDB (BRASIL, 1996), and the PNE 2014–2024 (BRASIL, 2014) express a normative plan pointing toward an inclusive school. However, the implementation of these principles still faces structural, cultural, and epistemological challenges that affect daily educational practices. This tension reveals not only a structural problem but also an epistemological one, requiring a profound review of how the subject, learning, and the role of the school are understood.

Over the past decades, the dominant conception of inclusion has been based on the requirement that the student adapt to school parameters, reinforcing integrative models that, although couched in inclusive language, maintain intact the logics of normalization and exclusion (MANTOAN, 2003). In contrast, the perspective of inclusion as an ethical, political, and pedagogical ideal presupposes the reconstruction of the school as a space for recognizing difference and human plurality (MANTOAN, 2015). This conception, however, demands more than pedagogical strategies: it requires a review of the structures of thought that sustain the organization of knowledge, didactics, and school relationships.

This article aims to analyze, in light of complexity theory, the possibilities and limits of school inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities, identifying possible paths for building a school more open to difference. To this end, a narrative literature review will be conducted, focusing on investigations that intersect the normative, conceptual, and didactic foundations of inclusion with the principles of complexity. The analysis covers works published between 2001 and 2025, with an emphasis on Brazilian authors contributing to this debate.

Although recent investigations have advanced in understanding the normative, conceptual, and didactic dimensions of school inclusion, most studies privilege theoretical and qualitative approaches, focusing on urban contexts and neglecting the regional and social diversity that characterizes Brazil. Furthermore, teacher training, critical evaluation of public policies, and the role of digital technologies in inclusion remain underexplored or superficially addressed in the literature.

Contradictions also arise when official discourses are confronted with everyday practices, signaling a gap between what is recommended and what actually occurs. Inclusion is still mostly understood as the student's adaptation to the system, when, in fact, it should be an ethical and structural transformation of the school system itself. Faced with these shortcomings, open questions remain: How can we conceive of inclusion that respects singularities without reinforcing exclusionary models? What methodological strategies can capture the complexity of the experiences of students with intellectual



disabilities in diverse contexts? These questions guide the present review and point to the relevance of the theoretical framework of complexity, which will be explored below.

By choosing complexity as a reference, this article proposes to reconnect knowledge, embrace uncertainty, and think of the school beyond standardization, recognizing that difference is not an exception but a condition of human existence. By breaking with simplifying divisions, this approach allows us to understand the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities as a process traversed by bodily, affective, cognitive, and social factors that do not fit into fixed categories.

It is a paradigm that embraces the unpredictable as a feature of educational reality and proposes reconnecting what reductionist tradition has separated. Complex thought, as proposed by Edgar Morin (2001), allows us to understand education as a living, autopoietic, and contradictory system, in which inclusion is not reduced to technical adaptations but is expressed as an ethical, epistemological, and pedagogical reinvention.

The structure of the article is organized into four parts: first, the theoretical framework centered on Edgar Morin and Maria Teresa Eglér Mantoan; second, the methodological procedures of the review; third, a discussion of the main findings of the literature; and finally, the concluding remarks.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discussion on school inclusion finds its theoretical foundations in authors such as Edgar Morin (2021; 2022) and Maria Teresa Eglér Mantoan (2003; 2015), who broke away from traditional models of knowledge and education. Initially, inclusion was defined as a technical response to integrate students with disabilities into the regular school system, emerging in a context marked by social demands for civil rights and educational equality. At the time, concerns involved overcoming segregation and ensuring access, within a scenario influenced by sociological and pedagogical traditions that prioritized standardization and fragmentation of knowledge. Morin proposes the "reconnection of knowledge" and the appreciation of uncertainty as central elements for dealing with the complexity of life (MORIN, 2021; 2022). The concept of "reconnection of knowledge," central to Morin's work, refers to overcoming disciplinary fragmentation, proposing an articulation among different fields of knowledge to understand the complexity of educational phenomena. Meanwhile, Mantoan emphasizes inclusion as an ethical commitment, rejecting the mere adaptation of the student to the school (MANTOAN, 2003).

There are different definitions of inclusion, but the one that underpins this research understands inclusion as structural transformation rather than mere adaptive integration. It is necessary to distinguish inclusion from integration, as the latter maintains the logic of disguised exclusion. While integration presupposes that the student adapts to the already established school system, inclusion requires the school itself to transform in order to embrace singularities. Thus, integration maintains the logic of



normalization, whereas inclusion questions and reinvents this logic. Historically, integration emerged as an advance over segregation, as it allowed students with disabilities to enter regular schools, but under the condition of compliance with pre-established norms. Inclusion, consolidated from the Salamanca Statement (1994) and subsequent Brazilian legislation, breaks with this requirement, advocating that the school must reorganize itself in curricular, didactic, and cultural terms. This change implies understanding diversity as a constitutive element of the school community and not as an exception to be tolerated.

From this perspective, Morin's complex thought provides an essential interpretative key, as it challenges reductionist models and invites the reconnection of knowledge, articulating cognitive, social, and affective dimensions that sustain truly inclusive practice. Although widely recognized, the inclusive definition continues to be revised, mainly due to the difficulty of operationalizing it in practice. The founding authors strongly influence current studies but acknowledge that limitations and challenges remain.

In contemporary approaches, the literature privileges interpretations based on complexity theory and the ethics of inclusion, as evidenced by Santos (2009), who highlights the need to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge to restore integral education. The most frequent studies focus on regular schools, especially regarding students with intellectual disabilities, and explore strategies to broaden equality. However, most research tends to focus on the same institutional contexts, reinforcing the idea of inclusion as access or adaptation, with little questioning of its limitations. There is partial consensus on the importance of a plural school, but the tensions and conflicts inherent in the process are little explored. Authors recognize that their contributions help advance the debate but admit that crucial aspects, such as cultural and pedagogical resistance, remain neglected. This reveals a uniformity of perspectives that may restrict understanding of the phenomenon's complexity.

Authors such as Carvalho and Bach Junior (2025) offer strong criticism of the still predominant welfare-oriented approach, proposing that inclusion be regarded as a central and structuring axis of the educational project, not as a punctual response to specific legislation. These scholars, alongside other critical authors, incorporate decolonial and ethical perspectives to highlight the hierarchies and exclusions that persist in schools. They warn of the need for pedagogical practices that consider the tensions, conflicts, and possibilities of the school environment, promoting curricular justice and ethical neutrality. Their disagreement with traditional approaches lies in rejecting normative and fragmented models, proposing a paradigmatic shift that values coexistence of differences without hierarchies (CARVALHO; BACH JUNIOR, 2025). These emerging perspectives address contemporary social contexts and incorporate cultural and technological changes, revealing gaps that earlier studies did not address.

This research aligns with studies that articulate Morin's complexity theory (2021; 2022) and the ethical commitment advocated by Mantoan (2003; 2015), as well as current critiques presented by



Carvalho and Bach Junior (2025) and Santos (2009). By revisiting these approaches, the work deepens the analysis of inclusion as a continuous and collective process, going beyond welfare-oriented practices. It is especially influenced by the view of the school as a living organism in constant transformation, seeking to challenge the limitations of current practices and highlight the concrete challenges of everyday school life. Thus, it contributes to broadening understanding of how inclusion can be effectively incorporated into pedagogical practices and educational policies.

Significant gaps persist in understanding inclusion, especially regarding the cultural and pedagogical dynamics that hinder its full realization. The literature often assumes homogeneity of the subject and the school context, disregarding internal diversity and the multiplicity of student experiences. Central debates remain open, particularly on reconciling the complexity of difference with curricular and institutional demands. This research aims to shed light on these issues by adopting a perspective that values pluralism and the emergence of singular practices. Incorporating complexity theory as a theoretical axis reinforces the relevance of the study by positioning inclusion as an unfinished, ethical, and political process that requires continuous reflection and constant transformation, overcoming merely normative or technical responses.

International evidence reinforces that the challenges of inclusion are not limited to the Brazilian context. A case study conducted in Portugal with a student with intellectual disabilities indicated that the effectiveness of inclusion depends not only on material resources but above all on the school's ability to reorganize its practices and promote a culture of acceptance (ALVES; GOMES, 2021). This finding converges with the perspective of complexity by showing that inclusion is a dynamic and collective process, traversed by pedagogical, cultural, and relational factors.

#### **METHOD**

This study employs a narrative literature review as its main strategy, aiming to understand how complexity theory can contribute to rethinking school inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities. The research is qualitative in nature, as it prioritizes an interpretative and integrative analysis of academic works rather than data quantification. This strategy proves suitable due to its methodological flexibility, allowing the articulation of different theoretical frameworks and a critical examination of a field still in expansion, especially when dealing with themes involving ethical, political, and cultural dimensions in education.

The bibliographic search was conducted between April and June 2025 through searches in renowned databases such as SciELO, Google Scholar, the CAPES Journal Portal, and institutional repositories of Brazilian public universities. For the search, descriptors in Portuguese were used — "teoria da complexidade" (complexity theory), "inclusão escolar" (school inclusion), "deficiência



intelectual" (intellectual disability), "educação inclusiva" (inclusive education), "religação dos saberes" (reconnection of knowledge), and "escola inclusiva" (inclusive school) — combined with synonyms and close variations, and Boolean connectors to optimize results.

The time frame adopted covers publications from 2001 to 2025, encompassing both classic reference works, such as those by Edgar Morin (2001; 2021; 2022) and Mantoan (2003; 2015), and recent studies that update the debate in light of contemporary transformations. The digital context of the selected databases is relevant, as it concentrates recent Brazilian academic production and offers broad access to texts in Portuguese, favoring linguistic and cultural adequacy of the analyzed material.

As inclusion criteria, works were considered that explicitly align with the theoretical frameworks of complexity theory and inclusive education, specifically address intellectual disability in a school context, and are available in full text in Portuguese. Duplicated texts, those lacking clear theoretical grounding or consistent problematization, as well as theses and dissertations, were excluded. Theses and dissertations were excluded due to the diversity of formats and evaluation criteria, prioritizing articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. The narrative review proved appropriate for allowing greater interpretative flexibility, essential for analyzing a field marked by multiple theoretical and practical dimensions.

After the initial screening, followed by careful analytical reading, fourteen main works were selected to form the study's basis. The choice is justified by the relevance and theoretical representativeness of the selected works for the topic in question. Although the number is small, it is justified by the incipient nature of the field and the methodological option for a narrative review, which prioritizes interpretative depth rather than numerical exhaustiveness.

Data analysis followed an interpretative path, guided by the identification of convergences, tensions, and theoretical gaps, with special attention to how each author articulates complexity theory within the inclusive discourse. There was no need to use specific software for analysis, given the qualitative and interpretative nature of the review. The theoretical foundation for the analysis relied on classic and contemporary authors in the field of literature review methodology and thematic analysis.

#### ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The analysis of the selected material highlights a set of studies committed to criticizing the current educational model and seeking theoretical and practical alternatives aimed at including students with intellectual disabilities. Within this group, authors stand out who problematize the structural conditions of schools, the limitations of public policies, and the persistence of a restrictive pedagogical perception.

In this sense, empirical research has shown the gap between legal guidelines and everyday school life. França and Silva (2022), when investigating the perceptions of families and teachers of students with



intellectual disabilities in public schools in Minas Gerais, identified that the main difficulties are related to the lack of adequate teacher training, the overload of teachers' responsibilities, and the shortage of support resources. These findings reinforce criticism of the bureaucratic logic that tends to hold the student responsible for adapting, instead of proposing structural transformations in the school.

Most of the works adopt a qualitative approach and are based on epistemological frameworks such as complexity theory (MORIN, 2021; 2022) and the critical perspective of inclusive education (MANTOAN, 2003; 2015). In addition, they incorporate analyses situating inclusion within the context of Brazilian public policies, considering their legal developments and contradictions (BRASIL, 1996; 2014). Santos' (2009) study stands out by proposing educational principles aimed at reconnecting knowledge and overcoming the fragmentation that isolates subjects and school knowledge, while Carvalho and Bach Junior (2025) update the discussion by positioning inclusion as a central axis rather than a mere remediation policy.

A recurring pattern in the analysis is the criticism of the logic that levels and structures school life based on bureaucratic rationality. This logic views difference as an obstacle and imposes on the student the adaptation to a pre-established norm. In contrast, the authors converge on the need to reorganize the school based on a pedagogy of listening, collaboration, and indeterminacy—elements that, according to Morin (2022), constitute the foundation of complex thought.

Another common point in the studies is the understanding that the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities cannot be delegated only to specialists or support professionals, but must be configured as a collective responsibility. To this end, it is essential to cultivate a school culture founded on the ethics of coexistence and the appreciation of singularities. Mantoan (2015) emphasizes that an inclusive school becomes effective when it breaks with the idea that everyone must learn in the same way, recognizing that teaching consists of an inventive exercise in the face of difference.

The analyzed works reveal a strong articulation between theory and practice, going beyond diagnoses to propose principles and pathways for transforming educational practices. Santos (2009), for example, advocates adopting a transdisciplinary education that integrates fragmented knowledge, while Carvalho and Bach Junior (2025) reaffirm inclusion as the central axis of school policies and practices.

#### TENSIONS AND GAPS IN ACADEMIC PRODUCTION

Despite theoretical advances and the sophistication of analyses, tensions persist that deserve attention. One of them concerns the fragility of public policies, often formulated in spheres distant from school reality. Although Brazilian legislation has advanced in normative terms, its implementation faces cultural resistance, lack of adequate teacher training, and rigid school structures.



Another difficulty pointed out is translating the principles of complexity into concrete pedagogical practices. Although there is consensus on the need to overcome linear and disciplinary thinking, few studies delve into how this overcoming occurs in the daily classroom with students with intellectual disabilities. This gap indicates the need to expand research investigating complex and inclusive pedagogical experiences, considering the mediations, conflicts, and strategies of the real school environment.

Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research that articulates complexity theory with other critical frameworks, such as the historical and cultural perspective of special education or decolonial studies. This absence points to a fertile field for future investigations that broaden the theoretical repertoire and deepen the understanding of inclusion as a historical and interactive process.

#### DISCUSSION – PSYCHOMOTRICITY AS AN AXIS OF COMPLEX INCLUSION

The analysis of the selected works reaffirms the relevance of complexity theory as a theoretical framework capable of reconfiguring the challenges of school inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities. According to Morin (2021; 2022), exclusion does not result merely from isolated pedagogical practices but stems from a simplifying educational structure that resists uncertainty. In this model, the school, by operating with rigid categories and inflexible norms, rejects what escapes predictability, denying difference as an essential characteristic of human experience.

This functioning directly opposes the goal of inclusion, which demands openness to the unpredictable and willingness to engage with varied forms of learning and interaction. For Mantoan (2003; 2015), there is no inclusive school without an ethical transformation of everyday school life, based on coexistence and acceptance.

By adopting the principles of complexity, it becomes possible to break with the classificatory logic that segments school relationships into divisions such as normal/abnormal and capable/incapable. Santos (2009) points out that this fragmentation harms not only knowledge construction but also the formation of bonds, impacting the affective, institutional, and epistemological spheres of the school. The reconnection of knowledge, as proposed by Morin, also involves the reconnection of subjects, framing inclusion as a collective process based on listening, mediation, and constant invention.

Complex thought proposes abandoning ready-made solutions and universal methods in favor of pedagogical practice attentive to each student's singularity. Thus, inclusion ceases to be a technique or concession and becomes a decision grounded in knowledge and politics, recognizing the teacher as an agent who articulates diverse knowledge, navigates zones of uncertainty, and develops new educational practices.



From this perspective, some pedagogical possibilities can be envisioned. For example, in a history class that includes students with intellectual disabilities, the teacher might lead a collective investigation on prehistory, integrating different languages, experimentation, videos, drawings, motor activities, and discussion circles. Students with varied cognitive profiles would participate according to their forms of expression, and planning would be flexible, open to surprises and mistakes. The content remains central but is reinvented in an interdisciplinary and collaborative dynamic, enabling a truly inclusive teaching-learning process rather than a merely adapted one. The example of a history class is included not as a universal model but as a practical illustration of how the principles of complexity can be incorporated into real teaching situations.

These principles also appear in real practices of teachers seeking inclusive pedagogical alternatives. Brito and Flores (2023), in a qualitative study with elementary school teachers, observed that curriculum flexibility and the use of diversified strategies were fundamental to enabling the participation of students with intellectual disabilities. The authors emphasize that such practices require an inventive and reflective stance from teachers, in line with the principles of complex thought.

The studies analyzed stress that this transformation requires more than curricular changes or well-intentioned legislation; it demands a profound shift in teacher attitudes, a type of training that embraces complexity and fosters more human pedagogical bonds. It is not about idealizing practices or ignoring institutional limitations but recognizing that every cultural change begins with the reinvention of school routines.

At this point, complexity theory demonstrates its value by rejecting the comfort of neutrality and ready-made solutions. It invites educators to navigate unstable territories where error and contradiction are integral parts of the educational process. This approach does not weaken the school; on the contrary, it points to its reinvention as a space for collective learning, mutual recognition, and shared knowledge production.

This investigation reinforces the importance of complexity theory as a basis for rethinking school inclusion, highlighting the need for a profound ethical and pedagogical change that goes beyond superficial adaptations. By showing how flexible and collective practices can rebuild bonds and educational processes, the research contributes to broadening the understanding of inclusion as a dynamic phenomenon involving the entire school community in building a more welcoming and diverse environment.

Another relevant aspect is considering the voices of the students themselves. In a study with children transferred from special schools to regular education, students' perceptions revealed feelings of greater belonging and recognition in mainstream schools, but also experiences of covert exclusion (Maturana & Mendes, 2017). This subjective perspective shows that inclusion cannot be reduced to



technical parameters, as it involves affective and relational dimensions that only a complex perspective can grasp.

# THE PSYCHOPEDAGOGY OF THE BODY: PSYCHOMOTRICITY AS A PATH TO COMPLEX INCLUSION

The complexity of the educational process for students with intellectual disabilities requires an approach that goes beyond curricular adaptations and cognitive support. Psychomotricity, as an interdisciplinary field that integrates motor, affective, cognitive, and social aspects, constitutes a pathway to promote the overall development and school inclusion of these students. In an educational model based on the reconnection of knowledge, as proposed by Morin (2001), psychomotricity acts as a bridge between body and mind, fostering learning that is not limited to content but includes gesture, rhythm, nonverbal communication, and awareness of one's own body in space.

Studies indicate that psychomotor stimulation in children with intellectual disabilities can significantly enhance socialization, autonomy, and school performance (MOREIRA; ANTUNES; FREITAS, 2022; ANJOS et al., 2017). This occurs because motor development is deeply linked to the ability to pay attention, concentrate, organize space and time, and regulate emotions—skills that are often compromised in this population. Thus, pedagogical practices that integrate playful activities, motor circuits, symbolic games, and body expression not only increase learning potential but also respect students' singularity.

Beyond its therapeutic function, psychomotricity, when incorporated into everyday school life as an integral component, contributes to rethinking inclusion as a living experience of participation. This perspective requires educators to adopt a broader view, capable of understanding that the teaching and learning process does not occur only through written or verbal language but also through gesture, balance, imitation, and rhythm. Following this logic, the body is part of the subject in its entirety. A school that truly embraces difference must therefore consider that psychomotor practices are not "complementary" but essential for promoting genuinely inclusive education.

### **FINAL REMARKS**

Thinking about school inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities from the perspective of complexity theory goes beyond a conceptual change; it is an exercise in destabilizing the certainties that sustain the modern school. This study sought to show that exclusion, often naturalized under narratives of limitation or adaptation, in fact masks a simplifying mindset that organizes knowledge, curricula, and school relationships based on conventional norms. Complexity emerges as an ethical and epistemic



perspective for an education that recognizes the subject in their full affective, cognitive, motor, social, and institutional dimensions.

The main contribution of this article lies in articulating the principles of complexity and their interaction with the reconnection of knowledge, uncertainty, and the foundations of inclusive education. By bringing together authors such as Morin, Mantoan, and Santos, it was possible to construct a critical reading of the school model, revealing the structural fragmentation that prevents the acceptance of difference. More than proposing universal solutions, complexity theory invites the reinvention of practices that escape technical rigidity and are built through listening, relationships, and openness to the unexpected.

It became clear that inclusion requires the reinvention of the school itself. This implies, for example, rethinking classroom time and space, making assessment methods more flexible, valuing the body and non-normative forms of expression, and embracing diversity as a structuring principle rather than an exception to be managed. The example developed in this study of an interactive class is just one among many possibilities. What matters, from a complex perspective, is not the model itself but the willingness to continuously reconstruct it based on the group's needs and the singularities of the subjects.

The analyzed works revealed significant advances in criticizing the current schooling model and in formulating inclusive proposals. However, they also highlighted relevant gaps, such as the scarcity of empirical research that articulates complexity and concrete pedagogical practices in public schools. This is a promising field for future investigations, especially to understand how educators, in real contexts, face the tensions of inclusion.

A school that truly embraces difference is not sustained by protocols or regulations but by bonds, listening, and pedagogical courage. It is in this uncertain, contradictory, and imperfect movement that inclusive education ceases to be an ideal and becomes reality. Complexity does not offer shortcuts but possible paths. It is about accepting uncertainty as a condition of knowledge and difference as a basic principle of educational experience. And it is along these paths that, ethically, we must proceed. Among the possible paths for a school more open to difference, the following stand out: adoption of flexible pedagogical practices that integrate multiple languages and ways of learning; valuing psychomotricity as an essential dimension of the educational process; teacher training focused on the ethics of coexistence and the reconnection of knowledge; critical review of public policies to overcome welfare-oriented approaches; strengthening a school culture based on listening, collaboration, and acceptance of diversity.



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