

Exploring New Institutional Approaches in Comparative Education Policy Research

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ABSTRACT

With the deepening of globalization, cross-national comparative research on education policy has increasingly become a focal point in academic circles. New institutionalism, as an important theoretical analytical framework, provides unique perspectives and methodological tools for comparative education policy research. This paper systematically explores the application value of three major schools of new institutionalism in comparative education policy research, analyzing the theoretical characteristics and analytical advantages of historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism respectively. Through comparative analysis of education policy formulation processes, implementation mechanisms, and policy diffusion pathways across different countries, this study reveals the critical role of institutional factors in education policy evolution. The research findings indicate that new institutionalist analytical approaches can effectively explain the path-dependent characteristics of education policies, the behavioral logic of stakeholders, and the legitimacy construction processes of policies, providing important theoretical support and methodological guidance for deepening comparative education policy research.

KEYWORDS

New institutionalism; education policy; Comparative research; Institutional analysis; Policy diffusion

1 Introduction

Education policy, as an important component of national governance systems, is deeply influenced by multiple factors including social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Against the backdrop of globalization, education systems worldwide face similar challenges such as educational equity issues, quality improvement demands, and technological transformation impacts, making cross-national comparative research on education policy of significant theoretical value and practical importance (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021). However, traditional comparative education policy research often focuses on comparing policy content itself while neglecting the profound influence of institutional environments on policy formation and evolution. The rise of new institutionalist theory has opened new pathways for comparative education policy research, emphasizing the central role of institutions in shaping actor preferences, constraining policy choices, and influencing policy outcomes (Mahoney & Thelen, 2022). Since the 1980s, new institutionalism has gradually developed into three major schools: historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism, each providing unique analytical tools for understanding the complexity of education policy.

Historical institutionalism focuses on policy path dependence and critical junctures, revealing how historical legacies constrain current policy choices (Pierson, 2020). Rational choice institutionalism starts from actors' rational calculations, analyzing how institutional rules influence policy participants' strategic choices and interaction patterns (Shepsle, 2023). Sociological institutionalism pays more attention to cultural norms, organizational routines, and legitimacy construction processes, explaining why education policies exhibit cross-national convergence characteristics (Meyer & Rowan, 2020). In recent years, scholars have begun attempting to apply new institutionalist analytical frameworks to comparative education policy research, achieving fruitful results. This paper aims to systematically review the current application status of new institutionalism in comparative education policy research, deeply explore its theoretical advantages and analytical potential, and provide reference for promoting theoretical innovation and methodological development in education policy research.

2 Theoretical Framework and Core Concepts of New Institutionalism

2.1 Path Dependence Analysis of Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism views institutions as systems of rules and practices formed under specific historical conditions, emphasizing the path-dependent characteristics of policy development. In the field of education policy, path dependence means that early policy choices have lasting effects on subsequent policy development, even when these choices may not appear optimal from a current perspective (Thelen, 2021). For example, different countries' historical choices between educational decentralization and centralization profoundly influence the evolutionary direction of their education governance structures.

Historical institutionalism particularly focuses on the role of critical junctures, which typically occur during social crises, regime changes, or major reforms, providing windows of opportunity for institutional change. Through comparative analysis of the historical trajectories of education policies across multiple countries, we can discover that even when facing similar external pressures, different institutional legacies lead to vastly different policy response strategies. As

illustrated in Figure 1, the path dependence mechanism of education policy demonstrates how initial choices reinforce existing institutional trajectories through positive feedback mechanisms, while critical junctures simultaneously provide possibilities for institutional transformation. This analytical perspective helps understand why certain education reforms are difficult to implement and why policy transplantation often encounters acclimatization difficulties.

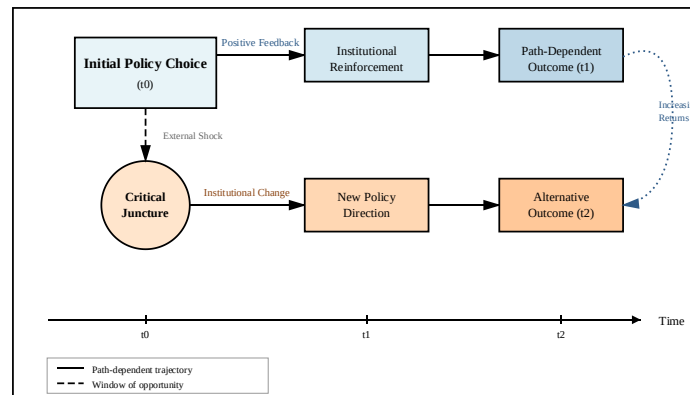


Figure 1 Path dependence mechanism of education policy

2.2 Incentive Mechanism Analysis of Rational Choice Institutionalism

Rational choice institutionalism assumes that policy participants are rational actors pursuing the maximization of their own interests, and institutions influence actors' strategic choices by providing incentive structures and constraints. In the education policy formulation process, different stakeholders such as government officials, educators, and student parents make decisions based on their respective preferences and constraints (Ostrom, 2020). This school particularly focuses on collective action problems, principal-agent relationships, and how institutional design resolves information asymmetry and opportunistic behavior.

For instance, the formulation of education resource allocation policies involves games between central and local governments, and the design of teacher performance evaluation systems needs to consider how to incentivize teachers to improve teaching quality rather than simply pursue test scores. Through establishing game theory models and conducting rational choice analysis, we can predict the strategies that various actors might adopt under different institutional arrangements and their resulting policy outcomes. Comparative research shows that similar education policies may produce different effects in different countries, partly because the incentive structures provided by institutional environments in each country differ. Rational choice institutionalism provides a micro-foundation for understanding these differences, helping to design more effective education policy incentive mechanisms.

2.3 Legitimacy Construction Analysis of Sociological Institutionalism

Sociological institutionalism understands institutions as complexes of cultural cognitive frameworks, normative expectations, and symbolic systems, emphasizing the central position of legitimacy in institutional maintenance and diffusion. In the field of education policy, policy adoption is often based not only on technical rationality or efficiency considerations but is more influenced by social norms, professional standards, and international trends (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The phenomenon of policy convergence in global education governance, such as the popularization of standardized testing, the promotion of education accountability systems, and the dissemination of lifelong learning concepts, is largely the result of institutional isomorphism mechanisms.

Coercive isomorphism stems from political power and legitimacy pressures, mimetic isomorphism arises from

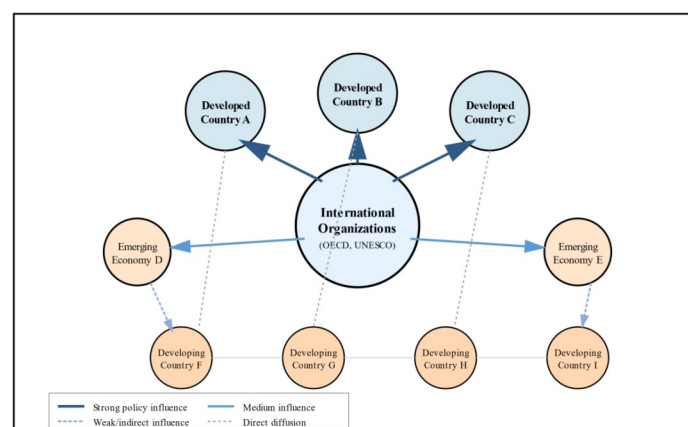


Figure 2 Cross-national diffusion network of education policy

imitation of successful models in uncertain situations, and normative isomorphism comes from professionalization processes. International organizations such as the OECD and UNESCO play important roles in disseminating "best practices" and constructing global education discourse systems, influencing national education policy agendas through knowledge production, policy recommendations, and technical assistance. As shown in Figure 2, the cross-national diffusion network of education policy presents a center-periphery structure, with developed countries and international organizations occupying central network positions, from which their educational concepts and policy models diffuse outward. The analysis of sociological institutionalism reveals the cultural logic and symbolic meaning behind education policies, helping to understand why certain policies can be widely disseminated even without empirical support.

3 Application Practice of New Institutionalism in Education Policy Comparison

3.1 Institutional Comparison of Education Governance Structures

Education governance structures involve the distribution and coordination mechanisms of educational power among different levels of government, public and private sectors, and schools and communities. New institutionalist analysis reveals the institutional roots and evolutionary logic of different countries' education governance models. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, differences in education governance structures can often be traced back to critical choices in the nation-building process (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011). For example, the educational decentralization tradition in federal countries like the United States and Germany is rooted in their federalist political structures, while the unified educational management in centralized countries like France stems from their centralized historical legacy. Rational choice institutionalism focuses on how different governance structures affect the behavioral incentives of stakeholders. Decentralized systems may bring about local innovation and better response to local needs but may also lead to uneven distribution of educational resources and regional disparities in education quality. Centralized systems are conducive to unified standards and the realization of educational equity but may suppress local initiative and policy innovation. Sociological institutionalism notices the transformation of global education governance discourse, such as the marketization reforms driven by New Public Management ideas, the introduction of accountability systems, and the expansion of school autonomy. These concepts present diversified appearances in their localization processes in different countries. Through comparative analysis, we can discover that the success or failure of education governance reforms depends not only on policy design itself but is more profoundly influenced by existing institutional structures, power relationships among interest groups, and socio-cultural norms.

3.2 Institutional Logic of Education Resource Allocation

Education resource allocation policies are directly related to the realization of educational equity and efficiency, and their institutional arrangements reflect a country's basic value orientations regarding educational purposes, government responsibilities, and fairness and justice. The new institutionalist analytical framework helps understand the institutional foundations of different countries' education resource allocation models. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, the formation of education finance systems is closely related to the historical evolution of national tax systems, fiscal federalism traditions, and social welfare systems. The high-tax, high-welfare model of Nordic countries supports their generous educational investment and equalized resource allocation, while the American education finance system relying on local property taxes has led to significant differences between school districts.

Rational choice institutionalism focuses on how resource allocation institutions influence the strategic choices of various actors. For example, different financial support methods such as per-student funding, project-based funding, and

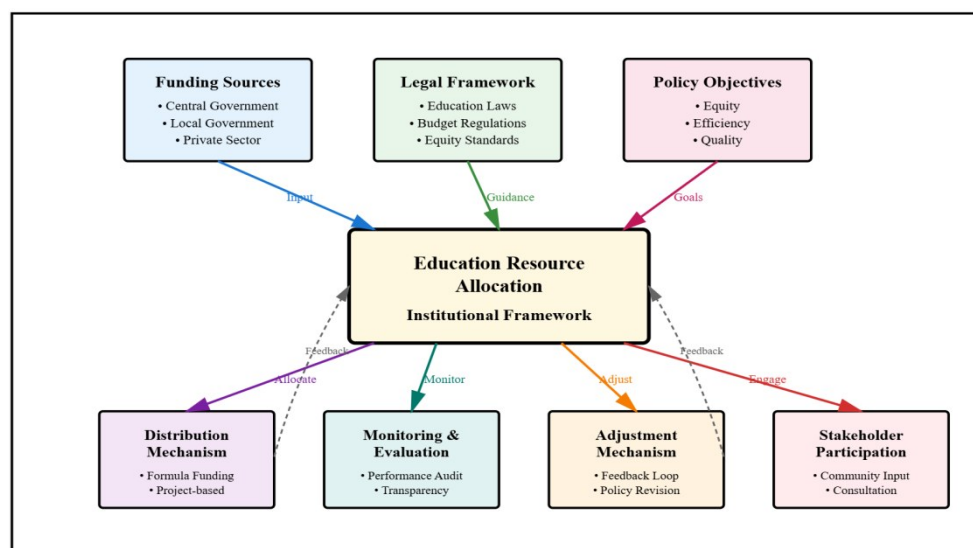


Figure 3 Institutional framework of resource allocation of education policy

performance-based funding produce different incentive effects, affecting schools' operating behaviors and resource use efficiency. As illustrated in Figure 3, the institutional framework of education resource allocation includes multiple dimensions such as funding sources, distribution mechanisms, and supervision and evaluation, with interactions among these dimensions jointly shaping resource allocation outcomes. Sociological institutionalism reveals how the evolution of educational equity concepts drives reforms in resource allocation policies. From equality of opportunity to process fairness to outcome equity, different conceptions of fairness have led to different resource distribution principles, such as compensatory resource allocation policies favoring disadvantaged groups. The concepts of "Education for All" and "Inclusive Education" advocated by international organizations also influence the policy agendas of countries' education resource allocation.

3.3 Institutional Analysis of Teacher Policies

Teacher policies cover multiple aspects including teacher training, recruitment, evaluation, compensation, and professional development, and are key factors affecting education quality. New institutionalism provides powerful analytical tools for comparing teacher policies across different countries. Historical institutionalism focuses on the historical process of teacher profession institutionalization. There are significant differences in teachers' professional status, social prestige, and professional autonomy across countries, which are related to each country's education development history, the strength of teacher unions, and the relationship model between the state and the teaching profession (Ingersoll, 2023). Finnish teachers enjoy high professional autonomy and social respect, which is inseparable from the historical tradition of positioning teachers as professionals.

Rational choice institutionalism analyzes how teacher policies influence teacher behavior through incentive and constraint mechanisms. Teacher performance pay systems aim to incentivize teachers to improve teaching quality, but their effectiveness depends on specific institutional design, such as the scientific nature of performance evaluation standards, the appropriateness of incentive intensity, and the improvement of supporting systems. Comparative research has found that simply transplanting teacher performance evaluation systems from other countries is often ineffective because teacher cultures and school organizational characteristics differ across countries. Sociological institutionalism reveals how the teacher professionalization movement shapes modern teacher policy frameworks. Teacher qualification certification systems, standardization of teacher education, and continuous professional development requirements are all manifestations of teaching profession professionalization. These institutional arrangements not only have technical functions but also carry the symbolic meaning of enhancing the legitimacy and social status of the teaching profession.

4 Advantages and Limitations of New Institutional Analytical Approaches

4.1 Theoretical Contributions of New Institutionalism

New institutionalism has brought important theoretical contributions to comparative education policy research, expanding the depth and breadth of research. New institutionalism transcends simple policy content comparison and shifts the analytical focus to the shaping role of institutional environments on policy processes, revealing the deep institutional logic behind seemingly technical policy choices. The path dependence concept of historical institutionalism explains why education policy reforms are often constrained by historical legacies and why similar policies produce different effects in different countries, helping policymakers recognize the complexity and gradualism of reforms (Hall, 2020). Rational choice institutionalism provides micro-foundations by analyzing how institutional rules affect actors' incentives and strategies, enhancing the scientific nature of policy design and helping predict possible resistance and deviation that may be encountered during policy implementation, thereby optimizing institutional design. Sociological institutionalism reveals the cultural dimensions and symbolic meanings of education policies, explaining policy diffusion phenomena and why certain "unreasonable" policies can continue to exist, reminding researchers to focus on legitimacy construction processes rather than solely on the actual effects of policies. Although the three schools have different theoretical assumptions and analytical focuses, they complement each other and jointly constitute a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexity of education policy. In recent years, scholars have begun exploring the possibility of integrating different schools, developing more comprehensive institutional analysis paradigms.

4.2 Challenges Faced by New Institutionalism in Application

Despite its many theoretical advantages, new institutionalism also faces some challenges when actually applied to comparative education policy research. First is the problem of conceptual ambiguity. Different scholars have different definitions of "institutions," ranging from formal rules to informal practices, from organizational structures to cultural norms. The boundaries of institutions are often unclear, which to some extent affects the comparability of research and the precision of research conclusions (Greif & Kingston, 2021). Second is the difficulty in identifying causal mechanisms. Institutional factors are often intertwined with other social, economic, and political factors. How to distinguish institutional effects from the influence of other factors and how to prove that institutional variables are indeed key links in the causal chain are methodological problems faced by empirical research.

Historical institutionalism emphasizes path dependence and critical junctures, but how to operationalize these concepts, how to avoid hindsight bias, and how to determine which events constitute true critical junctures all require researchers' prudent judgment. The rational actor assumption of rational choice institutionalism is also questioned

regarding its applicability in the education field. Educational actors' motivations are often multiple and complex, involving both instrumental rationality and value rationality. Simple cost-benefit analysis may not fully explain behavioral patterns in education policy processes. Although sociological institutionalism focuses on cultural norms and legitimacy, it sometimes has difficulty explaining institutional change and policy innovation. Overemphasis on convergence may overlook significant differences that still exist in countries' policy practices.

4.3 Future Research Directions and Methodological Innovation

To fully leverage the potential of new institutionalism in comparative education policy research, future research needs to make efforts in theoretical integration and methodological innovation. In terms of theoretical integration, we should explore combining insights from historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism to develop multi-level, multi-dimensional analytical frameworks (Fioretos et al., 2016). For example, we can use historical institutionalism to analyze the evolution of macro-institutional environments, rational choice institutionalism to explain micro-actors' strategic interactions, and sociological institutionalism to understand the cultural meaning and legitimacy construction of policies, thereby forming a panoramic understanding of education policy processes. In terms of methodological innovation, we should strengthen the combination of qualitative and quantitative research, using qualitative methods such as comparative historical analysis, process tracing, and case studies to deeply reveal institutional mechanisms, while employing quantitative methods such as large-scale data analysis, natural experiments, and quasi-experimental designs to test institutional hypotheses. Cross-national comparative research should pay more attention to the theoretical orientation of case selection, choosing countries with differences in key institutional variables for comparison to better identify institutional effects. With the development of digital technology, big data and computational methods provide new tools for education policy research, enabling more refined tracking of policy diffusion networks, measurement of institutional distance, and analysis of policy discourse evolution. Interdisciplinary approaches are also important development directions. Dialogue and integration among different disciplines such as education, political science, sociology, and economics will enrich the application of new institutionalism in education policy research.

5 Conclusion

New institutionalism provides a profound and enlightening analytical framework for comparative education policy research. By focusing on the shaping role of institutional environments on policy processes, it reveals the deep logic of education policy evolution. Historical institutionalism's path dependence analysis helps us understand why education reforms are often constrained by historical legacies. Rational choice institutionalism's incentive mechanism analysis provides micro-foundations for optimizing policy design. Sociological institutionalism's legitimacy construction analysis explains the phenomenon of cross-national diffusion of education policies. This paper systematically reviews the theoretical characteristics of the three major schools of new institutionalism, analyzes their application practices in areas such as education governance structures, resource allocation policies, and teacher policies, and summarizes the theoretical contributions and challenges faced by new institutionalism. Although there are still areas for improvement in conceptual definition and causal identification, new institutionalism undoubtedly opens important pathways for deepening comparative education policy research. Looking forward, theoretical integration, methodological innovation, and interdisciplinary approaches will further enhance the explanatory power and application value of new institutionalist analysis, providing more powerful theoretical support for education policy research and practice in the era of globalization.

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