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Time and Policy Diffusion: Analysing Subnational Education Policy in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Time has recently gained prominence as a critical factor in policy diffusion studies at the international level and in studies examining federal systems. Nevertheless, empirical research investigating the role of time in subnational policy diffusion processes remains scarce. This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by understanding how time interacts with other variables, such as agency, relations, ideas, and federal dynamics in the diffusion of education policies in Brazilian states. The qualitative and historical analysis of data collected in academic publications, documents, and in-depth interviews shows three different phases in which time intersects with actors, ideas, and relations. The sequence of events, timing, and rhythms prove crucial, and increasing returns reinforced Ceará's programme over time and its adoption elsewhere. Knowledge production, horizontal cooperation, and the growing legitimacy of Ceará's experience also create favourable conditions for diffusion. The process unfolds through multiple venues, directions, and actors, while reshaping policy instruments.

1 | Introduction

It is common sense that 'time matters' (Pierson 2004), but when it comes to diffusion processes, what role does the time variable play? Most studies focus on the first steps of the policy diffusion process, in which a policy, often recognised as a best practice, is promoted in different arenas and adopted by several governments (Shipan and Volden 2012). While the bulk of the literature looks into agenda-setting and at the early stages of policy formulation, information coming from other contexts might be used to support decisions at any moment of the policy process (Oliveira 2018; Oliveira and Bichir 2023). In other words, policy diffusion is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process.

Time has recently emerged in the literature as a key variable in policy diffusion at the international level (Oliveira 2018; Porto de Oliveira and Osorio Gonnet 2023; Silva and Porto de

Oliveira 2023; Steiner-Khamsi 2025). Yet, there is a lack of empirical studies that take time into account when discussing policy diffusion at the subnational level. This article addresses this gap by introducing the time variable in the analysis of the diffusion of state-municipal cooperation policies over the last two decades at the subnational level in Brazil. In doing so, this paper contributes to the understanding of this process as longitudinal and non-linear, rather than as a static one. Additionally, it moves the debate concerning policy diffusion at the sub-national level in a federal country forward.

Brazil is an interesting case as it is a federal country with 27 states and more than 5000 municipalities. In such a huge country geographically and administratively, time is certainly a variable that needs to be accounted for in the study of public policy. Brazil's education policy is highly decentralised, so states and municipalities have been the main decision-makers and

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providers, sharing the responsibility for elementary education without formal cooperation between them (Abrucio 2010). Even though national coordination has been strengthened in recent decades, there is no specific definition regarding state–municipal cooperation in national guidelines. As a result, policies that involve state–municipal cooperation vary greatly (Segatto 2018). However, following the successful experience of the state of Ceará, in the last few years, all Brazilian states have adopted policies that involve state–municipal cooperation, sharing common characteristics reflecting the existence of a diffusion process.

This article takes the variable time into consideration and presents a longitudinal analysis of the diffusion process of state–municipal cooperation policies that took place over the past two decades. This approach permits the identification of three different phases with specific characteristics: (1) the diffusion within the state of Ceará, following the municipality of Sobral's model; (2) an early moment in the horizontal and vertical diffusion process as a cascade in which the experience of Ceará served as an inspiration to other states and to the federal government, matching the first positive evaluations of Sobral and Ceará's educational policies and the first moments of diffusion; and (3) an 'organised' and intentional effort to use Ceará's model to inform policy choices in other states, leading to the adoption of similar arrangements by several other states.

The study is based on a qualitative and historical analysis of data collected through an extensive review of academic publications and official documents and complemented with in-depth interviews with federal, state, and municipal managers, representatives of civil society organisations, and specialists. The analysis highlights time as a key variable, not only as a chronological factor but also in terms of sequence, timing, and rhythm. These temporal dynamics generated increasing returns, as some events mattered and the sequence of these events was crucial. Indeed, the recognition of Ceará's policy as a successful best practice resulted in a process of increasing return in which Ceará's positive outcomes influenced its continuity in Ceará and diffusion to other states. The gradual production, dissemination, and legitimisation of Ceará's experience created favourable conditions for diffusion. Moreover, time intersects with other variables, including the circulation of political actors, bureaucrats, horizontal relations between states, the role of individual actors and policy networks and communities, which promoted and legitimised the main features of Ceará's policy. Furthermore, time influenced policy instruments that suffered incremental and non-linear adaptations during the three stages of the process, in which some of them faded, while others gained centrality, depending on local contexts, institutional legacies, and the evolving constellation of actors.

The article begins with a brief overview of the recent literature on diffusion studies, focusing on time as an important variable in such processes. This is followed by a methodological section. The article then delves into the analysis of the diffusion of state-municipal cooperation in the field of education policies at the subnational level in Brazil, a process that can be divided into three different phases. The fourth section discusses time as a relevant variable to the understanding of the process under analysis. The main findings are summarised in the concluding remarks.

2 | The Importance of Time in the Analysis of Diffusion Processes

Over the past decades, scholars interested in policy diffusion have made advances in the construction of analytical lenses that make it possible to better understand these processes, including the variables that affect diffusion and the outcomes of these processes. Studies highlight the importance of similarities in contexts of different jurisdictions, including political and socio-demographic contexts, administrative and budgetary capacities, and convergences in the problems jurisdictions face and their local agenda (Farah 2008; Porto de Oliveira and Pal 2018). While these are not necessary conditions—see, for instance, the transposition of conditional cash transfers (CCT) from Latin America to the Philippines and Ghana (Béland, Foli, et al. 2018; Howlett et al. 2018) or of the Chilean pension model to post-soviet countries (Orenstein 2005)—proximity is indeed a facilitating factor and dissemination tends to occur first within the same geographical space (Walker 1969; Weyland 2005). This is due to spillover effects or because proximity enhances information exchange (Volden 2006). Political competition also plays an important role (Walker 1969) as administrative units do not wish to be perceived as laggards or less developed.

Weyland (2005) calls our attention to the effects of limited rationality in the decision-making process. Decision-makers tend to use cognitive shortcuts, thus replicating measures implemented in neighbouring countries or with cultural and/or political proximity. This can eventually lead to the consideration and even the adoption of policies that are not adequate for the new context. Moreover, under these circumstances, policies tend to maintain a design closer to the original.

The scholarship also identifies coercion as a mechanism of policy diffusion, while recognising that pure forms of coercion are rare. Indeed, as there is some room for agency on the side of the adopter, some authors prefer to use the term negotiation. It can originate at different levels—that is, pressure from international organisations (Blatter et al. 2021; Porto de Oliveira and Pal 2018) and induction by the federal government (Niedzwiecki 2016; Obinger et al. 2013; Shipan and Volden 2006; Sugiyama 2008, 2012; Volden 2006)—and take various forms, such as threats—that is, non-allocation of a loan or financing—or incentives and the promise of future gains.

The literature also discusses the intersections between ideas, actors, and institutions, such as horizontal relationships between political actors and bureaucrats who share similar ideas and interests (Wallner 2014); professional networks which allow actors to share ideas and to change or build consensus on how to understand specific problems (Sugiyama 2008); networks that enable policy entrepreneurs to articulate and disseminate their ideas (Mintrom and Vergari 1998); interest groups that pressure governments to adopt policies implemented in other jurisdictions (Volden 2006); and political actors and bureaucrats who circulate between governments carrying specific policy ideas (Segatto 2018; Leite et al. 2013). Scholars have also considered the role played by individuals, such as policy ambassadors (Porto de Oliveira 2017), think tanks, and non-governmental actors who exert influence on policy diffusion (Stone 2004), epistemic communities, and instrument constituencies, which

shape the policy instruments adopted by governments (Béland, Howlett, and Mukherjee 2018; Oliveira and Bichir 2021; Osorio Gonnet 2020). Additionally, institutional contexts, such as specific arenas, events, meetings, and conferences, shape actors and ideas, facilitating information exchange, policy legitimization, and network building (Peck and Theodore 2015; Porto de Oliveira and Pal 2018; Stone 2012).

Recently, time has been incorporated in the analysis of policy diffusion (Oliveira 2018; Porto de Oliveira and Osorio Gonnet 2023; Silva and Porto de Oliveira 2023; Steiner-Khamisi 2025; Weyland 2005). While this is still a fairly new topic in this field, the importance of time has long been recognised in the analysis of public policy.¹ By bringing attention to the effects of path dependency, neo-institutionalist scholars have brought time back into the analysis, suggesting that as time goes by, existing policies and norms reduce the options available in future policy choices, as they constrain both supply and demand (Hall and Taylor 1996; Pierson 1994). The discussion of the effects of time on policies was revamped by Pierson's (2004) book *Politics in Time*, in which the author argues that a full understanding of policies requires a longitudinal analysis and the acknowledgment of the changes they undergo in different temporalities, rather than examining only specific moments in their life cycle—this argument is taken up by Oliveira (2018) and Porto de Oliveira and Osorio Gonnet (2023) with regard to international diffusion processes.

Most studies examine only the initial phase or take a snapshot of a specific moment in the diffusion process. However, some of these processes are long-lasting (Oliveira 2018; Porto de Oliveira and Osorio Gonnet 2023; Silva and Porto de Oliveira 2023). Porto de Oliveira and Osorio Gonnet (2023, 377) state that 'time can be analysed as (1) a sequence of events, (2) the timing and (3) rhythms of policy adoption, and (4) the lifetime of diffusion.' The authors point to the existence of two different kinds of analysis focusing on time: the first examines the domestic events leading to the adoption of a global policy, while the second concerns the adherence of new governments to a given policy model. Regarding this latter aspect, Weyland (2005) argues that diffusion is an S-shaped process: in the beginning, the number of adoptions is fairly limited, then a rapid expansion takes place, followed by a decline. Steiner-Khamisi (2025) claims that time periods, which place the diffusion process in a given temporal context, should also be taken into account.

In order to circulate, policies undergo a process of 'simplification' whereby they lose all the particularities that associate them with their context of origin and become a generic model (Olivier de Sardan 2018; Silva and Porto de Oliveira 2023). International organisations and other stakeholders, who identify best practices and produce and disseminate knowledge, play a significant role in the process of identifying the most elementary mechanisms of the policy (Olivier de Sardan 2018). It is precisely the fact that these are very loose constructs that makes them palatable to different audiences. However, as time goes by, different elements might be introduced to the programme. New actors in new spaces emerge, advocating for different instruments and challenging specific models, while old actors introduce new interpretations of policies (Silva and Porto de Oliveira 2023). This argument is in line with Peck and Theodore (2015), who argue

that diffusion should be seen as policy mutation, rather than as a mechanical process of replication.

Moreover, it is important to move the analysis beyond the initial phases of the policy process because certain dynamics might not be visible in the early moments of adoption. Indeed, external influences might continue to be relevant even when policies have been established for a long time and can reopen the debate and lead to policy reformulation (Oliveira 2018; Oliveira and Bichir 2023).

This study aims to advance the analysis of policy diffusion within federal countries by introducing time as an explanatory factor and by moving beyond the sole examination of the initial stages of the process to explore how it unfolds over time. Specifically, the objective is to understand whether diffusion follows an S-shaped pattern (i), investigate if the following mechanisms—(1) a sequence of events, (2) the timing, and (3) rhythms of policy adoption, and (4) the lifetime of diffusion—shape the process (ii), assess how time intersects with other variables, such as actors and ideas (iii), and examine whether policy instruments change over time (iv). In doing so, the article also contributes to two narrower fields of the literature: policy diffusion in Brazil, and education policy diffusion.

In the first case, the scholarship provided significant contributions to the understanding of this process at the sub-national level and particularly within federal countries (Borges 2008; Coêlho 2012; Farah and Spink 2008; Niedzwiecki 2016; Obinger et al. 2013; Shipan and Volden 2006; Sugiyama 2008, 2012; Volden 2006; Wallner 2014), thus advancing knowledge regarding different aspects of the processes—that is, discussing the motivations behind policy adoption and the actors that take part in the process, as well as the institutional contexts that allow political actors and bureaucrats to circulate among jurisdictions, exchange policy ideas, and build formal and informal networks (see, for instance, Behnke and Mueller 2017; Gilardi 2016; Mintrom and Vergari 1998; Segatto 2018; Sugiyama 2008; Wallner 2014). Policy diffusion in the context of the Brazilian federation has also received some scholarly attention, and different sectoral policies have been examined—that is, PB (Wampler 2012), CCT (Coêlho 2012; Sugiyama 2008), family healthcare policies (Coêlho et al. 2016), and urban policies (Klug 2023). Authors have looked into both municipal and state actors and have discussed the diffusion mechanisms, facilitators of, and barriers to the circulation of policy models present in each case, and the actors involved in these processes. However, temporal aspects have been disregarded by these studies.

In the field of education policy, there is a growing recognition that external dynamics may affect the policy process, both in the case of national and local measures. The influence of policy diffusion in the adoption of different reforms and policy instruments has been examined—see, for instance, Verger (2016) on privatisation, Steiner-Khamisi (2025) on the movement for school autonomy with accountability, Mintrom and Vergari (1998) on the role of policy networks on the dissemination of school choice in the United States, Sá Alves (2025) on the relevance of the Francophonie in promoting educational policies in French-speaking African countries, Silva (2017) on the diffusion of CCTs from an education perspective, and Segatto (2018) analysis of the

diffusion of state-local partnerships in the field of education in Brazil, among others. The education policy diffusion literature provides an account of the diverse models that have circulated internationally over the past decades and the way they have been translated to fit local contexts, of the actors involved in these processes and of the mechanisms they have used, among other aspects. Authors have also set out to examine the policy outcomes of such processes. Nevertheless, the temporal dimensions affecting education policy diffusion have generally been left aside. An exception to this is Steiner-Khamisi's (2025) recent work on time and education policy circulation at the global level, which states that time interferes in the policy process in numerous ways—that is, time sequences, timing, policy lifespan and age, the discursive use of time—and calls attention to the need to further investigate this topic. The present article takes an extra step in the study of this issue by examining the diffusion of a specific measure—that of state-municipal coordination—at the subnational level.

3 | Methodology and Research Design

This article analyses Brazil in order to discuss diffusion at the subnational level. The federative system provides subnational governments with the possibility of designing, funding, and implementing their own policies in several fields, notably that of education. This has led to experimentation and to the introduction of several innovations, which were then replicated in other states and/or municipalities. This article explores the diffusion of state-municipal coordination, a mechanism in the field of education policies that has captured the attention of several government levels, as well as non-governmental organisations, policy experts, and other actors. This case allows the understanding of how diffusion unfolds over time and if and how the sequence matters, as different state governments have adopted this policy at different moments in time. The historical analysis enables us to identify the factors that influenced the different stages of this diffusion process and enables a better comprehension of how policies and instruments have changed.

The 1988 Constitution altered Brazil's highly decentralised educational policy without coordination path, defining federal entities' responsibilities and a model that combined national coordination and a decentralised service provision with cooperation, reinforced by other national legislation. Under these provisions, the Union assumes the role of defining national guidelines and providing technical and financial assistance to subnational governments. States are responsible for elementary and secondary education, and since 2009 municipalities have shared the responsibility with the states for elementary education and early childhood.

Despite these constitutional changes and an increasing role of the federal government as a national coordinator, there was not a specific definition for how the cooperation should be implemented at the subnational level. Nevertheless, in recent years, 15 states have adopted some form of cooperation, following an innovative policy adopted by the state of Ceará. As this particular process of diffusion has spanned over time, this case study provides useful insights into the debate on time as a variable that must be taken into consideration in the study of subnational

diffusion processes. Through the analysis of this case, we aim to examine: (i) whether the diffusion process among Brazilian states follows an S-shaped pattern, characterised by initial limitations, rapid expansion, and eventual decline; (ii) whether the sequence of events, timing, and rhythms of policy adoption, and the lifetime of diffusion explain this process; (iii) whether variables such as actors and ideas are constrained by time; (iv) whether their influence varies over time; and (v) whether policy instruments become simplified as the diffusion process unfolds.

This study relies on a qualitative and historical analysis of data collected through an extensive review of academic publications on the topic and official documents, complemented by in-depth interviews. Academic publications that discussed education policies related to literacy implemented by the federal government and state governments in the last 20 years were systematised. Additional data was collected through official documents to identify and describe these state and national policies. Finally, the data collection strategy also involved in-depth interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Education, state and municipal governments, civil society, and specialists.

We conducted two interviews with the Ministry's representatives and one interview with a specialist to understand the evolution of the national policy, the identification of the main policies, and the factors that influenced their adoption. The interview guide included questions related to the policy path, focusing on literacy programmes, and the factors that influenced policy changes and continuity over time. We conducted 20 interviews with representatives from state departments, which provided insights into subnational policies, highlighting their main features, trajectories, policy changes, and diffusion processes. In this case, the objective was to collect data on the features of policies, on the moment of adoption, and on the factors that influenced the process. Additional interviews with representatives from municipal departments (10 interviews) were conducted to better understand policy content and changes, as well as with civil society representatives and specialists (seven interviews) to capture the relationship between state and non-state actors in the diffusion processes.

Interviewees included, initially, key individuals in the field of education policy who were contacted, and then a snowball sampling strategy was used to identify new respondents. This methodology is often applied in the study of (political) elites. Asking interviewees to name other people allows us to identify new potential interviews quickly and establishes a bond of trust between the researcher and these individuals (Atkinson and Flint 2001). Interviews were conducted both in person and via online platforms, with an average duration of 1 h and 30 min, and were transcribed. To maintain confidentiality, detailed information about the interviewees will not be disclosed.

The data collected from various sources and through different methods, such as academic publications, official documents, and in-depth interviews, was triangulated. This process enhances the validity and confidence of the research findings (Motta 2019; Rubin 2021). The analysis, following a qualitative, historical, and multilevel approach, led to a comprehensive understanding of policy diffusion processes at different points in time, involving various dynamics.

4 | Brazil's Education Policy: The Diffusion of Innovations at the Subnational Level

The following subsections discuss the three phases of the process of horizontal and vertical diffusion of state–municipal coordination in Brazil. The first subsection analyses the state–municipal coordination experiment initiated by the municipality of Sobral and the dissemination of this mechanism in the state of Ceará. This is followed by a discussion of the first steps towards the implementation of state–municipal coordination by other states and at the federal level. The third part examines the recently organised movement to diffuse these practices across Brazil both horizontally and vertically.

4.1 | First Wave of Diffusion of State-Municipal Coordination: From Sobral to Ceará

The state of Ceará has pioneered cooperation between state and municipal entities in the field of education policy. This cooperative approach dates back to the 1970s when Sobral's case was appointed as best practice, paving the road to the adoption of state–municipal cooperation across the state. This led to the implementation of a pilot project sponsored by various stakeholders, including state and municipal education departments, universities, and international organisations, focused on improving literacy and numeracy in primary education in 56 municipalities.

Interviewees² stated that when Cid Gomes took office as governor of Ceará, he appointed Ivo Gomes as chief of staff and hired key personnel involved with the pilot programme and Sobral's education initiatives to work at the state education department, namely Izolda Cela and Maurício Holanda. The movement of bureaucrats from municipal to state education departments played a pivotal role in spreading the literacy programme through state–municipal cooperation between state and municipal governments. The firsthand experience of bureaucrats at the municipal level led them to recognise that enhancing the quality of state schools hinges upon improving municipal ones. According to these bureaucrats, students should be seen as 'Cearense' pupils, rather than perceived according to being from a particular state or municipal school. Moreover, the inclusion of this agenda in the state's priorities stemmed from a bottom-up process driven by the introduction of innovations at the municipal level and the influence of bureaucrats (Segatto 2018).

Subsequently, in 2007, the Program of Literacy and Numeracy at the Right Age (Programa de Alfabetização na Idade Certa, PAIC) was launched in Ceará, covering the entire state. PAIC aimed to enhance literacy and numeracy among primary students by offering technical and pedagogical support from the state education department to municipal education departments. This support included training, distribution of materials, evaluations, and resource redistribution. Additionally, there was coordination with federal programmes and the reallocation of resources based on municipal students' performance.

The consolidation of Sobral's programme and its adoption, initially, by 56 municipalities in Ceará with the pilot programme and then by the state government itself. Two factors seem to

explain the diffusion process at this stage: (1) the constitution of a committee involving different actors, which produced and disseminated knowledge about the Sobral case and created an interconnected network of stakeholders; and (2) the granting of positions in the state government to individuals directly linked to the Sobral experience.

4.2 | Second Wave of Diffusion of State-Municipal Coordination: Going Beyond Ceará's Frontiers

In the years that followed the first wave of diffusion, state and non-state actors contributed to the dissemination of Ceará's experience to other states. During this second phase, several states developed programmes in cooperation with municipalities: Acre, Alagoas, Amazonas, Bahia, Espírito Santo, Goiás, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, Paraíba, Paraná, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Sul, Sergipe, and Tocantins. Some states, particularly Espírito Santo and Minas Gerais, introduced different changes to the education policy, such as the adoption of planning tools and the professionalisation of bureaucracy. Others had municipal leaders who deemed state–municipal cooperation to be a key strategy. None of these states, however, had a prior trajectory of state–municipal cooperation in education policy (Segatto 2015).

Among these early adopters are both neighbouring states—that is, Piauí, but also states that are geographically distant—that is, Espírito Santo—, thus proximity is not relevant in explaining diffusion. Ideological alignment does not seem to be an important factor either—not only were none of the governors from the party in power in Ceará (Democratic Labour Party, PDT), but the state governments also had varied relationships with the PDT. The different states also displayed wide divergencies in their fiscal and administrative capacities.

The new state–municipal cooperation programmes had quite different features. Some states (such as Espírito Santo and Pernambuco) reorganised their secretariats and regional bodies, establishing coordination units responsible for the relationship with municipalities, and initiated literacy programmes, while others (such as Mato Grosso do Sul) provided technical and pedagogical assistance to municipalities to foster the adoption and implementation of federal programmes (Segatto 2018).

Many of these programmes did not continue over time; some of them were terminated due to changes in government at the state level, while others took restricted formats, such as transferring revenue for municipalities to manage student transportation. The only cases in which the programmes prevailed and were even expanded were Alagoas, Espírito Santo, Pernambuco, and Piauí. Interviewees³ pointed out that the state of Espírito Santo was particularly important as, in 2017, a programme strongly inspired by the Ceará experience was created. They explained that this decision was the result of conducting visits to the state of Ceará and of information and knowledge exchanges between state bureaucrats. Interviewees⁴ said they were convinced that student learning should be understood as a responsibility of both state and municipal governments, and cooperation was fundamental to ensure this.

Against this backdrop, a broad policy network was starting to form. There was sharing of ideas related to the case of Ceará, including the recognition of the centrality of the literacy programme and supporting revenue redistribution and state–municipal cooperation. One of the interviewees⁵ said that, before then, there was no agreement on the definition of state–municipal cooperation in education policy. National legislation determined it but did not provide a definition. The concept was developed over time by this emerging policy network, referencing Ceará's experience and the diffusion of its success.

This policy network consisted of non-governmental organisations that worked in the field of education, particularly philanthropic organisations, specialists who studied the subject, and hybrid actors who circulated within and outside governments—that is, non-governmental organisations and universities—including bureaucrats involved with the government of Ceará. The philanthropic organisations produced studies about Ceará, identifying key features and establishing a causal relationship between state innovations and improved educational outcomes. These views were widely disseminated in reports and through the organisation of events. A social movement responsible for promoting the agenda of state–municipal cooperation arose from the actions of this network.

Hybrid actors also played a role as they moved inside, outside, and across governments, promoting this policy. Furthermore, policy entrepreneurs contributed to enhancing, promoting, and legitimising this policy, while brokers connected different networks—that is, academics and nongovernmental organisations (such as Natura Institute and Collaboration Movement). Interviewees⁶ mentioned that Ceará's state bureaucrats constituted an important group of actors since they were able to move in different spaces. Actors from other states were also pivotal—that is, the former state education secretary of Espírito Santo worked in different nongovernmental organisations and disseminated knowledge about state–municipal cooperation based on the experience of both Ceará and Espírito Santo. These strategies enabled these actors to garner support for this policy, endorsing the importance of particular instruments as they increased educational outcomes, that is, student performance in assessments. This process led Ceará's policy to acquire the label of best practice and to be connected to the improvement of educational outcomes.

Ideas also spread horizontally through the National Council of Education State Secretaries (CONSED). In the absence of an intergovernmental arena, CONSED was crucial in fostering relations between states and in bridging them with other state actors (such as members of the National Education Council), specific non-state actors linked to philanthropic organisations, and consultants linked to international organisations. The participation of key political actors helped strengthen CONSED as a key arena for information and knowledge exchange. One of the interviewees⁷ argued that a change took place within CONSED when the former leader created work groups to discuss specific topics, including state–municipal cooperation, which held a lot of support from third sector organisations⁸.

In parallel to the adoption of this policy by numerous states, a vertical diffusion was also taking place as Ceará's model was

introduced into the national education agenda. Cesar Callegari, a former education secretary of São Paulo and member of the National Council of Education, became the Secretary of Basic Education of the Ministry of Education and was responsible for creating the National Pact of Literacy and Numeracy at the Right Age (Pacto Nacional pela Alfabetização na Idade Certa, PNAIC) in 2012, which was inspired by the Ceará experience. However, the programme was discontinued a few years later due to political changes. Furthermore, interviewees⁸ mentioned an overlap between PNAIC and state policies, as some states had already adopted similar policies and kept them in place.

Over time, the network of actors interested in the subject and in the experiences of Ceará and of other states, such as Espírito Santo, grew, as did the appreciation of these measures, which were considered best practice. With this new label, an ever-increasing amount of information and a wide promotion network, state–municipality coordination practices and literacy programmes are no longer restricted to Ceará and are now present in other states and the federal government. This means that there was a process of increasing return on the positive outcomes of Ceará's model, which was diffused as a result of cooperation—that is, horizontal information and knowledge exchanges—as well as competitive dynamics—that is, other states wanted to improve their education outcomes. While some states ended up discontinuing state–municipal cooperation, these ideas were legitimised and gained centrality in education policy.

4.3 | Third Wave of Diffusion of State-Municipal Coordination: 'Organised' Horizontal and Vertical Diffusion

The policy network related to the experience of Ceará changed over time. It became part of a broader policy community acting in the field of education and involving philanthropic organisations, specialists, national, state, and municipal managers, and hybrid actors. Ceará's bureaucrats played a pivotal role in this policy community. Later, in 2018, an organisation was created by them to implement Ceará's model in other states. As a result of the work of this organisation, in 2023, the number of states enacting state–municipal coordination policies had increased significantly. Some of them had previously held state–municipal cooperation programmes that had been terminated and were reintroducing this measure—that is, Amazonas, Sergipe, Goiás, Mato Grosso do Sul, Mato Grosso, Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná, Paraíba, Bahia, and Tocantins—, while others had no experience in this area—that is, Amapá, Maranhão, Pará, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Norte, and São Paulo. A third group of states had ongoing programmes and was aiming to expand them—that is, Alagoas, Espírito Santo, Pernambuco, and Piauí.

The strategies implemented at this moment had very similar features to those of Ceará's literacy programmes, which involve state–municipal cooperation, including teachers' education and training, pedagogical assistance, monitoring students' assessment, and monitoring curriculum implementation, organisational changes, and incentives, including revenue redistribution through changes to the Tax on the Circulation of Goods and Services (Imposto sobre Circulação de Mercadorias e Serviços, ICMS), funding to pay bureaucrats' salaries (bureaucrats who

were responsible for the implementation of the literacy programme), and awarding prizes to schools. Even though states replicated Ceará's policy instruments, their relevance in each state varied. For example, Pernambuco has had policies involving state–municipal cooperation in place since 2003, which were implemented in partnership with non-governmental organisations and aimed to extend school hours for vulnerable students to improve their proficiency. In 2016, a new policy focused on teacher training and pedagogical assistance was implemented and, in 2019, the Literate Child Programme (Programa Criança Alfabetizada) mirrored Ceará's programme and introduced technical and pedagogical assistance, evaluations, and resource redistribution. Maranhão, on the other hand, had no previous policies in place when a newly elected government came into office and a programme fostering state–municipal cooperation was adopted in 2015. It sought to improve school infrastructure and provide technical and pedagogical assistance to municipal departments. In 2019, in partnership with non-governmental organisations, the programme was altered to converge with Ceará's experience.

Local actors, who were embedded in institutional contexts featured by different legacies and capacities, gave new interpretations to policy instruments, influencing the programmes' formulation and implementation processes, including the governance model, the role of municipalities in strategic decisions, and the role of external stakeholders—that is universities—in policy design and implementation. Interviewees⁹ argued that these new approaches privileged student assessment and educational outcomes and reduced the centrality of pedagogical assistance.

During the third phase of diffusion, Jair Bolsonaro's government (2019–2022) enacted a series of measures that weakened national coordination, eliminated several federal programmes, and decreased the approval of national standards in the field of education. One interviewee¹⁰ said that it introduced a new national literacy policy that uses phonics-based techniques, moving away from previous policies. However, the lack of debate and consensus about this policy, coupled with the conflictive relationship between the Ministry of Education and state and municipal governments, forced the Ministry of Education to revise the policy and increase subnational autonomy in its implementation. As a result, subnational governments were awarded funds to adopt specific instructional methods that were not implemented, as highlighted by interviewees.¹¹ Although the new programme was not fully implemented, one interviewee¹² said that this context fostered state–municipal cooperation:

There is also the question of the context in which we realised back then that we needed cooperation because some kind of coordination between states and municipalities is necessary, as some municipalities are doing something, but what about the ones that cannot? And they do not have the federal government... so we need to handle it here at the state level.

Despite the weakening of national coordination, in 2020, the National Congress approved Constitutional Amendment no.

108 that enabled continuous revenue redistribution to states and municipalities through a fund called the New Fundeb (Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorization of Education Professionals). Under the New Fundeb, revenue redistribution continues to be based on student enrolment, but equalisation mechanisms to direct the funds towards subnational governments with less fiscal capacity and more vulnerable students were introduced. One of its new instruments, the education ICMS, replicates the experience of Ceará, and links the redistribution of state revenue for municipalities to education outcomes.

In 2023, the newly elected leftist government headed by Lula da Silva adopted the National Commitment to Literate Children (Compromisso Nacional Criança Alfabetizada). This programme is entirely inspired by Ceará's case, but, unlike PNAIC, it was created by political actors and bureaucrats involved in the elaboration of the original measure, including the Ministry of Education, Camilo Santana, and Izolda Cela. The legitimacy of Ceará's bureaucracy and the experience of several years of implementing policies that involve state–local cooperation seem to positively affect the implementation of this programme at the state level.

State–municipal cooperation is now present in all Brazilian states either because they have introduced their own programmes or because they have adhered to the federal one. The sequence of events was fundamental in organising the network of actors—which now includes a growing number of actors and has led to the constitution of a formal organisation that promotes education policies based on Ceará's experience—and legitimises not only state–municipal cooperation as a crucial strategy to ensure the improvement of education outcomes but also Ceará's model specifically. Moreover, the circulation of individuals within different spheres of the government, including the Ministry of Education, and inside and outside governmental arenas seems to be a fundamental aspect in explaining the diffusion of state–municipal cooperation. Thus, the intersection between time, policy networks, and the trajectories of some individuals acting as promoters of a specific model is the key factor in understanding the third wave of diffusion. Time was also important to (re)shape state policies, as previous legacies influenced them. Over time, it becomes evident that while some policy instruments have faded away, others have gained relevance.

5 | When Time Intersects With Actors and Ideas in Diffusion Processes

The analysis of Brazil's education policy diffusion at the subnational level reveals that variables such as geographic proximity and shared political ideology are irrelevant in this process. However, the intersection between time and other explanatory factors, including the relationships between individual and collective actors, who share specific views on education and are located within and outside the government and in different governmental venues, explains policy diffusion over time.

The diffusion of state–local cooperation in Brazil came in three stages, which are synthesised in Table 1. Initially, it resulted from the production and sharing of knowledge about the Sobral case

TABLE 1 | The three stages of the process of diffusion of state–municipal cooperation in Brazil.

Waves	Explanatory variables	Policy instruments
First	Producing and sharing knowledge about the Sobral case among actors within a local network Circulation of political actors and bureaucrats between municipal and state levels	Ceará's state expanded Sobral's literacy policy with the development of state and municipal coordination mechanisms, including revenue redistribution and technical and pedagogical support
Second	Producing and sharing knowledge about PAIC, considered a best practice, among key actors within a national network Circulation of political actors and bureaucrats between municipal, state, and federal levels and governmental and non-governmental organisations Horizontal relationships among political actors and bureaucrats from states	The Ministry of Education simplified PAIC with PNAIC (teacher training) Some states adopted policies similar to PAIC, focusing on four dimensions (technical and pedagogical support, training, distribution of materials, evaluations, and resource redistribution)
Third	Policy community acting in the field of education and involving non-governmental organisations, specialists, national, state, and municipal managers, and hybrid actors Circulation of political actors and bureaucrats between municipal, state, and federal levels and governmental and non-governmental organisations	National change with the approval of the New Fundeb that reinforces revenue redistribution Almost all states adopted policies similar to PAIC, focusing on four dimensions (technical and pedagogical support, training, distribution of materials, evaluations, and resource redistribution) The Ministry of Education reinforced specific dimensions of PAIC in the National Commitment to Literate Children (teacher training, technical and pedagogical support and scholarships for state and municipal bureaucrats)

among actors within a local network coupled with the movement of political actors and bureaucrats from municipalities to the state level within the state of Ceará. The second moment involved a horizontal diffusion of Ceará's model to other states as a result of the production and sharing of knowledge about the Sobral case among actors within a national network, which included different actors, such as individuals who moved within and outside governments—municipal, state, and federal levels—and governmental and non-governmental organisations, connecting governmental and non-governmental organisations and promoting this policy; policy entrepreneurs, who advocated and legitimised this policy; and brokers, who connected different networks, especially policy experts and non-governmental organisations, and promoted and legitimised policy instruments. These actors gradually agreed and legitimised the main features of Ceará's model through their participation in policy networks and discussion arenas, such as the CONSED. The third phase of diffusion corresponds to a moment of considerable articulation between actors and the transformation of the initial network into a broad policy community working in the field of education policy. Eventually, this led to the creation of a non-governmental organisation that has been playing a pivotal role in the promotion of state–municipal cooperation. Within this context, there were movements of political actors and bureaucrats occupying key positions at governmental (state and federal) and non-governmental organisations.

Time was relevant in these three waves in different ways. Even though there is a process of progressive adoption of the policy by states, the S-shaped process does not fully explain this case. The sequence of events matters. The recognition of Ceará's policy as a successful best practice, enhancing students' educational outcomes, contributed to its legitimation and diffusion

to other states. This resulted in a process of increasing return that influenced not only the continuity of this policy in Ceará, but also led to the adoption of similar programmes by other states. Moreover, timing and rhythm were important as well, as the process of knowledge production and sharing and legitimisation of Ceará's policy built the favourable moment for the diffusion. Timing was also important since political changes allowed the adoption of new policies in all three waves. Finally, the 'life-cycle' of policy diffusion can also be observed in this case. First, the three waves involved the intersection of different explanatory factors. Even though there are some similarities across the different phases of the process—that is, circulation of political actors and bureaucrats—the articulation of different actors in the educational field grew stronger and there was an increased participation of non-governmental organisations in this process. Second, this process was marked by the introduction of several incremental changes to the policy instruments, reflecting different contexts, policy legacies, and the involvement of diverse actors. Besides, the importance attributed to different policy instruments shifted over time. At the national level, PNAIC only focused on teacher training and, more recently, the New Fundeb and the National Commitment to Literate Children reinforced revenue redistribution, teacher training, technical and pedagogical support and scholarships for state and municipal bureaucrats. At the state level, the four dimensions of PAIC gained centrality and, in some cases, there was a downplay of specific policy instruments that were central in Ceará's case—that is, technical and pedagogical assistance—, while boosting others—that is, assessment. This reinforces the scholarship's argument that diffusion processes might lead to the reconfiguration of the policy model (Peck and Theodore 2015; Silva and Porto de Oliveira 2023). In this case, policy instruments were replicated, but actors gave them new

interpretations, emphasising some features and reducing the importance of others, which, combined with previous legacies, reshaped the policies.

6 | Final Remarks

This article demonstrates that time is a key variable when examining long-lasting policy diffusion processes. Indeed, the analysis of this case shows that the diffusion of education policies at the sub-national level in Brazil can be divided into three distinct moments. This study shows that time matters in different ways—sequence of events, timing, and rhythm. It also posits that time produces increasing returns to the continuity of PAIC and its adoption by other states. Furthermore, knowledge production and sharing and the gradual legitimisation of Ceará's experience were also important in creating a favourable moment for policy diffusion.

This diffusion process involved different policy venues (intra-state, national), directions (horizontal or vertical), and actors (individuals or policy networks and communities). Time intersects with all of these variables—the circulation of actors, coordination among education stakeholders, and growing involvement of non-governmental organisations.

The diffusion processes at both the national and state levels also show that incremental adaptations were made to the original model. However, this was not a linear process, since processes of fading specific policy instruments and reinforcing others happened, but changed over time, as these processes were shaped by local contexts, policy legacies, and actors.

Future research could assess whether similar temporal patterns are present in diffusion processes related to other policy sectors within the Brazilian federation or address the issue of time regarding subnational diffusion in other settings.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ For an account of the debate on time and public policy analysis, see Howlett and Goetz (2014) and Howlett and Rayner (2006).

² Interviewees from Ceará's education department.

³ Interviewees from a non-governmental organisation and an interviewee from the National Council of Education State Secretaries (CONSED).

⁴ Interviewees from the Espírito Santo's education department.

⁵ An interviewee from a non-governmental organisation.

⁶ Interviewees from a non-governmental organisation.

⁷ An interviewee from the National Council of Education State Secretaries (CONSED).

⁸ An interviewee from Ceará's education department and an interviewee from the Ministry of Education.

⁹ Interviewees from state education departments.

¹⁰ An interviewee from the Ministry of Education.

¹¹ Interviewees from state education departments.

¹² An interviewee from a non-governmental organisation.

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