

# Unfolding Justice Research in the Realm of Education

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**Abstract** This introduction to the SJR current special issue on Justice and Education, attempts to further depict the realm of education as a field of justice research. Leaning on Walzer’s (1983) seminal book *Spheres of Justice*, we first provide a general mapping of education as a “sphere of justice” and then describe and exemplify some of the salient justice paradigms that have guided educational research. Finally, we shortly describe the contributions to the special issue and situate them within the existing research, concluding with some recommendations for future justice research in the realm of education.

**Keywords** Distributive justice · Inequality · Belief in a just world · The justice motive · Procedural justice · Education · Spheres of justice · Informative justice

## Introduction

In contemporary societies, formal education is a decisive mechanism mediating between family background, inborn traits (e.g., gender, race, and ethnic origin), and individual achievement, consequently determining his or her life chances (e.g., Collins, 2000; Hallinan, 2000; Parsons, 1959). According to the strong ethos of Equality of Educational Opportunity, schools that provide equal education to all evaluate student outcomes by merit, thus eliminate, or at least decrease, the crucial

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correlation between “origin and destination” (Halsey, Heath & Ridge, 1980), consequently decreasing social inequality. Considerable theoretical and empirical social sciences research has shown that this expected outcome is not necessarily achieved (e.g., Arum, Beattie & Ford, 2000; Bowles & Gintis, 2003; Hallinan, 2000; Karabel & Halsey, 1977; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1992). The pivotal question is whether, to what extent, and through which mechanisms, education causes or reproduces the social inequality structures of society.

This association between education and social inequality involves the distribution of valued resources such as “[t]eaching positions, student places, authority in the schools, grades and promotions, different sorts and levels of knowledge—all these have to be distributed...” (Walzer, 1983, p. 198). In other words, education, during which learning processes and pedagogical practices are carried out, comprises a long-term distributive system that is legitimized by the “just” allocation of educational resources (Hegtvædt, Johnson & Watson, 2016; Hurn, 1985). However, in psychological and sociological educational research, notions of justice are often hinted at but not directly examined by justice theory and research.

It is surprising that even though issues related to justice are central to the educational discourse, they have received inadequate scholarly attention. This is most likely related to the late development of empirically oriented justice research across the social sciences. Whereas the discussion of justice in political philosophy can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, the empirically oriented investigation of justice in the social sciences is relatively recent (Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016a). In the late 1950s, George Caspar Homans’ and James Adams’ pioneering research focused on the realm of work (Jasso, Törnblom & Sabbagh, 2016). Justice theory and research evolved into a distinct multidisciplinary field of research during the 1980s and 1990s (for an overview, see Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016b). Parallel to this development, particularly since the late 80s, research in the realm of education has become a new and growing field of justice research (e.g., Deutsch, 1979; Hochschild, 1981).

In this introduction to the special issue, we attempt to further portray the realm of education as a field of justice research. Based on Walzer (1983), we initially provide a general mapping of education as a “sphere of justice” and then describe and exemplify some of the salient justice paradigms that have guided research in the realm of education. We briefly describe the five contributions to this special issue and situate them within existing research, concluding with recommendations for future justice research in the realm of education.

## Education as a Sphere of Justice

In his seminal book, *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer (1983) suggests that as in other societal spheres (security and welfare, money, office, love, and kinship), education is a distinct sphere of justice. He argues that in order for education to be a “just” sphere, it is necessary to keep it autonomous by activating justice principles that are distinctive to this realm. Specifically, Walzer argues that a combination of the principles of simple equality and achievement (equity) ought to be applied in the sphere of education. The principle of simple equality applies to primary education

because the right to know (educational good) applies to those interested in learning. Moreover, children at this stage should reach a uniform level of achievement that includes proficiency in basic skills such as reading and writing which are required from every citizen in a democratic society. In contrast, the principle of achievement should apply at higher levels of education which prepares students to fill occupational roles and matches capacities and interests with study tracks. Thus, the demand to equalize the level of achievement of children during early education guarantees the attainment of justice at a collective level, whereas the matching of educational tracks to interests and capacities of children guarantees the attainment of justice at the individual level (Brickman, Folger, Goode & Shul, 1981).

According to Walzer, the establishment of a just society depends upon the application of the principle of “complex equality,” which demands relative autonomy for each sphere of distribution. Each sphere should be activated by principles that are unique to it and avoid the “invasion” of principles that apply to other spheres. Complex equality is a procedural principle (see below), and its role is to prevent control of various classes of goods by a single group and facilitate the creation of relative equality in which individuals and groups hold higher positions in one sphere (e.g., the economy), but not necessarily in others (e.g., education). Therefore, tuition serving as a condition for obtaining education is unjust, as it entails “invasion” of a principle from the economic sphere (i.e., ability to pay) in the educational sphere, creating a situation in which only the wealthy are able to obtain education and have control over a wide range of social goods.

Based on Walzer’s notion of spheres of justice and educational research, we (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Sabbagh, Resh, Mor & Vanhuyse, 2006) identified five educational sub-spheres in which resources are being distributed and their justness evaluated by its main beneficiaries—students, teachers, and principals. We suggest that issues of justice in education are not limited to the macro-sphere, where the right to education itself and resources to ensure it are being distributed, but also take place *within* educational institutions. Specifically, from the macro- to the micro-level, we identified the following justice sub-spheres in education:

1. *Provision of equal (or unequal) access to school*, i.e., the right to education which determines whether and where a child will receive his/her educational “goods.” This type of distribution is dependent upon national policy decision (e.g., Levin, 1990).
2. *Allocation of learning places*, i.e., assignment of students to learning places, tracks, or ability groups in institutions (see Bottia et al. in this special issue and Conley, 1996). This sub-sphere is related to the organization of learning where differential curriculum is implemented in classrooms (Gamoran, 2001). This determines access to knowledge, required credentials, and other contextual classroom factors such as the quality of teachers and differential student compositions (e.g., integrated or segregated classrooms) (Cohen, 2000). Although dependent to some extent on national policy, this sub-sphere is primarily left to the decision of districts, individual educational institutions, and allocators such as principals, counselors, and teachers (e.g., Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Elster, 1992; Yogev, 1981).

3. *Pedagogical practices*, namely the interrelated aspects of teaching and learning that can be generally defined as the way teachers choose to encourage learning, promote knowledge acquisition, as well as intellectual and personal development, which are the basic preconditions for successful performance in society (Parsons, 1959). Since pedagogical practices affect students' opportunities to learn, questions arise as to their just distribution (Dougherty, 1996).
4. The *distribution of grades* Evaluating student performance is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. The most salient method of evaluation in schools is standardized grading within classrooms, placing students on a hierarchical scale according to their academic success. Grades have ample psychosocial effects (Deutsch, 1979; Jasso & Resh, 2002; Nisan, 1985) and are therefore considered a highly valued reward (Green, Johnson, Kim & Pope, 2007).
5. *Teacher–students relations* In the process of learning, teachers distribute a wide range of interpersonal rewards, including attention, help in response to students' needs, reactions to non-routine events (distractions, class fights), encouragement (or disapproval), respect, and affection. Just as teachers have the authority to define standards of learning and bestow grades in accordance with students' academic achievements, they also define appropriate behavior norms in the classroom. They have the authority to set up positive and negative interpersonal rewards accordingly (Weiner, 2003). This type of rewards is viewed by some researchers as a component of procedural justice (for a discussion, see Vermunt & Steensma, 2016). In the context of education, we tend to perceive it as a category of rewards allocated predominantly by teachers during the learning process.

## The Facets of Justice in Education

In examining the sub-spheres of justice in education, existent research specifies two classic facets of justice theory and research: distributive and procedural justice (for a comprehensive overview, see Törnblom & Kazemi, 2015; Vermunt & Steensma, 2016). In this regard, researchers have attempted to address the following three distinct, though interrelated, basic questions (Jasso et al., 2016; Törnblom & Kazemi, 2015; Törnblom & Vermunt, 1999; Vermunt & Steensma, 2016):

1. *Principles/Procedures* What distribution principles and/or procedures are perceived as “just” in regulation of resource distribution in different contexts?
2. *Magnitude* What is the perceived magnitude of (in)justice? It is assumed that people strive to get what they think they deserve. Therefore, they develop a sense of justice where they compare “what is” (i.e., the actual distribution) to their normative expectations derived from “just” distribution principles and procedures.
3. *Consequences* What are the psychological and social (positive and negative) consequences of perceived distributive and/or procedural (in)justice? It is assumed that the sense of distributive and procedural justice involves powerful forces that shape people's emotions, motivations, beliefs, cognitions, values, and behaviors in different areas.

In the following section, we describe the meaning of distributive and procedural justice and provide selected examples of pertinent educational research across the justice sub-spheres (for an extensive overview of these sub-spheres, see Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Sabbagh et al., 2006). It is worth noting that some studies adopted a multifaceted approach, simultaneously examining both distributive and procedural aspects of justice. In order to emphasize the salient characteristics of each facet, we present them in two separate sections. Finally, we describe the justice motive and its concomitant belief in a just world (BJW) which is an important pillar of general justice research.

## Distributive Justice

To the best of our knowledge, educational research guided by the distributive justice framework is the most extensive, covering the above five sub-spheres of educational justice (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). *Distributive justice* refers to *principles* that guide resource distribution (e.g., effort and talent) and the *outcomes* that result from these distributions (e.g., a grade in an examination). Individuals then compare their actual outcomes with their perceived entitlement according to the distribution principles (Berger, 1972; Jasso, 1989). Three archetypical distribution principles determine the values underlying resource distribution (Deutsch 1985; Lerner & Lerner, 1981; Leventhal, Karuza & Fry, 1980; Sabbagh, Dar & Resh, 1994): Equality (to each according to arithmetic equality, equal opportunities, or equality of outcomes); need (to each according to their needs); and equity (to each according to their effort, contribution, and ability) (for recent developments, see Törnblom & Kazemi, 2015).

In the case of the “access to education” and “allocation of learning places” sub-spheres, distributive justice research has mainly focused on question 1 (Principles/Procedures) (Coleman, 1968, 1973). The principle of *equality of educational opportunities*, which has been salient in this regard, has been questioned because it limits equality to the conditions and procedures of the “social game,” and overlooks the “natural” inequality of pregame and innate individual assets (see also a critique of this principle by Jonathan Mijis in this special issue). In order to guarantee a just access to education and learning placement, educational policy makers have alternatively adopted a principle of *equality of outcomes* and applied a policy of affirmative action which is intended to ensure that, irrespective of their socioeconomic background or other inborn traits, students will receive similar life chances. Focusing on the outcomes of the distributive process, this distribution principle implies differential rewarding, so that the disadvantaged students and social groups could be compensated (Blanchard & Crosby, 1989; Crosby, 2004; Kellough, 2005; Walton, Spencer & Erman, 2013). Though not always framed in terms of justice, these distribution principles have guided educational policy makers in different educational sub-spheres such as admission policies, organization of learning (e.g., ability grouping), and track placement (see Bottia et al. in this special issue and Gamoran, 1987; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016).

Similarly, the “pedagogical practices” sub-sphere is extensively examined within the education sciences, but its framing in terms of distributive justice is uncommon. In this regard, Thorkildsen (1989, 1993; Thorkildsen, Nolen & Fournier, 1994) conducted a series of pioneering studies from the perspective of developmental

psychology which focused on question 1 (Principles/Procedures) and question 2 (Magnitude). Her first study in 1989 revealed that both slow and fast learners across age groups judged the practice of “peer-tutoring” (i.e., after fast learners finish a given task, they help slow learners), which satisfies both equality and need principles, as most just. However, the majority of students claimed that teachers used most frequently the practice of “enrichment” (i.e., after fast learners finish their task, they enrich themselves) which underlies the equity principle. Similarly to other realms (e.g., work), this gap between the “actual” and the “just” may lead to a sense of injustice in schools (question 2, Magnitude).

The examination of the sub-spheres of “grading” and “teacher–student relations” in terms of distributive justice is the most comprehensive, as it includes the three questions in justice research (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). Research based on psychological and sociological perspectives has shown that performance is favored more strongly than invested effort, behavior in class or students’ needs (Berti, Molinari & Speltini, 2010; Bidwell, 1965; Hurn, 1985; Resh, 2009), and that this choice of principles is more salient among teachers (as compared to students) (Resh, 2009). It is worth noting, however, that principles underlying grade distributions may vary in different cultural contexts (Sabbagh, Faher-Aladeen & Resh, 2004), by student type (“strong,” “weak”) (Resh, 2010), or by subject matter (Biberman-Shalev, Sabbagh, Resh & Kramarski, 2011).

Prevailing educational research has shown that grade allocation and teacher–student relations are also important sources of a sense of perceived injustice in students (question 2, Magnitude) (Dalbert, 2004; Dar & Resh, 2001). For instance, a sense of injustice about grades by SES or ethnic origin has been found to be equally spread among students from each social and ethnic background (Gorard, 2012, 2011; Resh, 2010). In the case of gender, findings suggest that girls receive better grades than boys, and that boys perceive a greater magnitude of injustice (Dalbert & Maes, 2002; Jasso & Resh, 2002; Resh & Dalbert, 2007).

Finally, in these sub-spheres, a positive sense of distributive justice evokes manifold benefits (question 3, Consequences): Identification with the school and class as well as dialogue with teachers (Berti, Molinari & Speltini, 2010), a readiness to support special attention and help for weaker students (Gorard, 2011), democratic attitudes (especially with regard to human rights) (Resh & Sabbagh, 2014a), sense of trust and belonging to school (Resh & Sabbagh, 2013), positive emotions (see Pretsch et al. in this special issue), and learning motivation (see Kazemi in this special issue).

## Procedural Justice

Research on procedural justice in education is less common. Procedural justice refers to the justness evaluation of resource distribution procedures. It focuses on the processes by which the outcomes are allocated, independent of the outcomes justness or favorability. Therefore, the emphasis is on “processes” rather than “outcomes” of resource distribution (Vermunt & Steensma, 2016). Procedural criteria have recently been further developed within the three noticeable frameworks (Vermunt & Steensma, 2016) (question 1, Principle/Procedures): Initially, Thibaut and Walker (1975) identified two important procedures referring to forms of

control: “process control” (or voice) refers to the possibility of having a say in decision making, and “decision control” where individuals are involved in actual decisions. Furthermore, Leventhal et al. (1980) identified six procedural criteria in decision making: “consistency” in the application of procedures, “bias suppression” (decisions are neutral and disinterested); “accuracy” (decisions are based on accurate information), “correctability” (possibility to appeal against wrong decisions), “representativeness” (of different groups), and “ethicality” (acting according to ethical standards). Finally, procedural justice is conceived as involving not only formal criteria, as indicated above, but also informal interpersonal criteria such as trust, standing (being positively evaluated), and neutrality (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992). In summary, procedures of resource distribution may become a source of a sense of justice, which may affect the legitimacy of distribution outcomes and the consequent level of satisfaction with them (Tyler, Rasinski & Spodick 1985; Tyler & Tom, 1990).

Procedural research has assumed that legitimizing a social order is a precondition for developing committed democratic citizens (Tyler, 1984; Tyler, Rasinski & Spodick, 1985). In the context of schools, a sense of procedural injustice may result in students challenging teachers’ authority, the school system, and even formal authorities in the wider society (question 2, Magnitude; question 3; Consequences) (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Resh and Sabbagh (2013, 2014a, b) examined in a series of related studies the extent to which students’ sense of procedural justice affects the student’s civic attitudes (liberal democratic orientation, belonging, and trust) and behavior (bullying and academic dishonesty) (question 2, Magnitude; question 3; Consequences).

### **The Belief in a Just World (BJW)**

The theory and research referring to the belief in a just world (BJW) deviates from the arguments elaborated above but was included in this current introduction because it constitutes a pillar of justice research (e.g., Lerner & Clayton, 2011) and has guided justice research in education.

BJW is a major psychological force of human behavior that often plays down other salient human motives such as self-interest. Specifically, BJW is based on the premise that human beings have a need for justice that emerges as part of normal cognitive development (Ellard, Harvey & Callan, 2016, p. 127). Moreover, people are guided by a basic urge to believe that the world is just and that people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Clayton, 2011). BJW research has led to a large extensive accumulated body of knowledge referring to the antecedents and consequences of BJW (Ellard et al. 2016) and to the measurement of different BJW sub-domains (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). In the realm of education, a series of studies have examined the association between BJW and psychological outcomes such as distress in schools (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005), school bullying (Correia & Dalbert, 2008), violence against teachers (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; Peter & Dalbert, 2010), and positive and negative well-being (see Donat et al. in this special issue).

## Contribution of the Special Issue to the Research on Justice in Education

The articles in the current SJR special issue add to the multidisciplinary and multifaceted justice research in the realm of education. Moreover, they reiterate the importance of education as a field of justice research. In the following section, we describe the articles in this special issue and situate them within the existent research of sub-spheres and facets of justice.

The first article “The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education” by Jonathan Mijs is a philosophical critique of the notion of meritocracy which is related to the consensual principle of Equality of Opportunity in Education (question 1, Principles/Procedures in access to education). The author argues that meritocracy is an unfulfillable promise because (a) in practice, educational institutions distort the meritocratic process in various ways, (b) opportunities for merit are themselves determined by non-meritocratic factors, and (c) the mere definition of merits is “unjust” because it provides an advantage to the defining social group while it disadvantages others.

The second article “Distributive justice antecedents of race, socioeconomic, and gender disparities in first year college grades” was written by a group of sociologists—Martha Cecilia Bottia, Jason Giersch, Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Elizabeth Stearns, and Stephanie Moller. The study is an empirical longitudinal investigation based on a large dataset (15,000 students in North Carolina) that focuses on a plentifully discussed and studied issue in the sociology of education which is the practice of tracking and allocating students (especially in high school) to classes whose curriculum is adjusted to suit their interests, abilities, and specific talents (i.e., the allocation of learning places sub-sphere). The authors suggest a measurable definition of “just” placement in academic high school tracks based on a strict meritocratic egalitarian perspective (question 1, Principles/Procedures; question 2, Magnitude). The impact of this “just” placement (or deviation from it) and the “just” access to quality teachers on college freshman achievements is examined empirically (question 3, Consequences). Special attention is given to the possible moderation effects of gender and race.

The third article “The meaning of students’ personal belief in a just world for positive and negative aspects of school-specific well-being” is authored by a group of psychologists—Matthias Donat, Felix Peter, Claudia Dalbert, and Shanmukh Kamble. This article is an extension of the thoroughly examined belief in a just world (BJW). The authors examine the association between personal BJW and the positive and negative aspects of the reported students’ well-being. This relationship appears to be partly mediated by the experience of teacher justice (i.e., the sense that teachers are fair) (question 3, Consequences). The study was carried out in a semi-comparative design among German and Indian high school students showing similar findings.

The fourth article “Examining the interplay of justice perceptions, motivation and school achievement among secondary school students” is authored by a social psychologist—Ali Kazemi. The study, conducted among Swedish middle school



students, focuses on teacher–student relations. It covers procedural justice and two additional facets of relational justice which were not described previously—interactional and informational justice. Developing a reliable measure for the relatively neglected facet of informational justice (IJ), the study delves into the interplay between IJ, learning motivation, and achievement (question 2, Magnitude, and question 3, Consequences). Its findings suggest that the relationship between IJ and achievement (grades) is fully mediated by motivation, and that there are no significant gender differences in these relationships.

The last article “Injustice in school and students’ emotions, well-being, and behavior: a longitudinal study” is authored by a group of social psychologists—Joana Pretsch, Natalie Ehrhardt, Lisa Engl, Bjorn Risch, Jurgan Roth, Stephan Schumacher, and Manfred Schmitt. The authors applied a longitudinal experimental design in a study carried out among elementary school students that examined the impact of justice experiences on student emotions, well-being, and behavior. Unlike similar studies, in this study the experimental group was manipulated to sense injustice from a beneficiary perspective, whereby respondents got more benefits than they deserved. As expected, findings suggest that respondents expressed guilty conscience and growing anger as they became aware of their privilege.

In summary, the five articles approach justice issues in education from a multidisciplinary perspective—philosophy, sociology, and psychology in different educational settings. Moreover, they give a flavor of the justice domains that await further elaboration in future research.

## Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Our introduction to the current SJR special issue suggests that education is a “sphere of justice” where distinct educational resources are being distributed (e.g., the right to education, learning places, and grades) according to their distribution principles (Walzer, 1983). In line with existent justice research, we indicate that the type of resource that is being distributed affects distribution preferences, the sense of justice, and its consequences (e.g., Mueller, Iverson & Dongi-Gi, 1999; Sabbagh & Malka, 2012; Törnblom & Kazemi, 2012). Therefore, we specifically maintain that the uniqueness of the education sphere is related both to the distinctive meanings of educational resources and to the application of different combinations of the equality, needs, and equity principles across educational sub-spheres.

Even though the investigation of issues related to justice in education is a growing field of research, there are areas of research that were relatively neglected and deserve future scholarly consideration:

As mentioned before, there is relative paucity of research that relates to procedural justice and its measurement in educational settings. Future research should first consider the unique features of educational organizations (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Weick, 1976) and how these features affect the procedures perceived as “just” by education agents. Moreover, as shown in the article by Ali Kazemi in this special issue, facets of procedural justice should be further elaborated to answer

the question of whether interactional and informational justice are sub-facets of procedural justice or distinct facets of justice.

Second, while the facet of retribution (i.e., the just distribution of punishments) has received growing scholarly attention across the social sciences (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016), it is relatively neglected in education in spite of its relevance and importance in everyday educational life.

Third, educational justice research has mainly focused on students, but “justice is in the eye of the beholder.” In order to develop a more holistic view of justice in education, future research should examine other educational agents such as teachers, school principals, policy makers, and parents. Juxtaposing their perspectives may reveal to what extent conflict among agents is a dynamic force that elicits different forms of behavior.

Fourth, the justice educational research presented in this introduction and special issue is predominantly “blind” in terms of culture. However, justice research has indicated that the different facets of justice and their concomitant questions are sensitive to cultural context (Fischer, 2016). Therefore, future cross-cultural justice educational research should identify “cultural mechanisms” that could affect justice preferences and the sense of (in)justice across the different educational sub-spheres.

In conclusion, education systems are dynamic and are being affected not only by local and national forces but also by global ones (Apple, Kenway & Singh, 2007; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Meyer, Bromley & Ramirez, 2010). Therefore, it would be thrilling to investigate whether the increasing globalization of educational institutions affects the different educational sub-spheres and educational agent preferences of justice principles, sense of injustice, and their consequences in a wide range of attitudes and behaviors.

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