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Educational justice in contemporary scholarship: a systematic literature review of principles, perspectives, and emerging directions (2009–2024)

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Over the past two decades, educational justice has become a prominent yet debated concept in global educational policy and theory. Despite its frequent use, the term lacks a widely accepted definition and is theorized through diverse—often conflicting—frameworks. This article presents a systematic review of 40 peer-reviewed publications in English and Spanish published between 2009 and 2024, retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Scielo. Using a structured screening process focused on conceptualization, we critically analyse how educational justice is framed, distinguishing foundational principles, emerging critical perspectives, and intersectional approaches. The findings show that while distributive logics such as equality of opportunity, luck egalitarianism, and educational adequacy remain dominant, critical approaches emphasizing recognition, respect, and multidimensionality challenge the dominance of resource-based paradigms. Although these perspectives provide valuable insights, they often develop in isolation, leading to parallel debates that obscure the multidimensional and context-dependent character of justice, underscoring the need for synthesis. Moving beyond these traditional conceptualizations is essential, as they overlook complex, intersecting factors—such as disability, migration, multispatiality, and post-human considerations—that influence educational experiences and outcomes and can perpetuate reductive views of fairness. We argue that improving the conceptual clarity of educational justice requires shifting from binary distributive/relational frameworks toward pluralistic, context-sensitive models that can address these complexities. This review maps out conceptual convergences and tensions, identifies underexplored areas, and suggests future directions for theorizing educational justice as a political, epistemic, and pedagogical endeavor.

KEYWORDS

educational justice, equality of opportunity, distributive justice, intersectionality, recognition, capabilities approach

1 Introduction

Educational justice is a universally recognized principle and a guiding focus within educational research, underscoring its significance as an area of study. Despite ongoing debate about how justice should be pursued within educational institutions, policies, and practices, its importance is widely acknowledged. However, confusion and vagueness

surrounding the term often hinder urgent, meaningful efforts to address unfair educational situations—efforts that should drive fundamental changes in policymaking, school practices, community involvement, and students' everyday experiences. Educational researchers already contend with issues such as adequacy, equality of access and outcomes, recognition, diversity, inclusion, and reducing prejudice, highlighting the concept's fundamental relevance. Yet much of this work has relied on justice frameworks borrowed from political philosophy, economics, or moral philosophy, which focus on the goals relevant to those fields rather than education's distinctive aims and conditions. This legacy is troubling because, although “justice” in educational settings draws on moral, economic, social, and political ideas, it ultimately prevents a clear definition of what individuals are educationally expected to become. For example, distributive justice theories like Rawls's “justice as fairness” mainly serve political aims, viewing education as a means of achieving broader societal goals rather than as an end in itself. To advance the field, educational research must articulate its own concept of justice, grounded in education's unique purposes, nature, and potential.

Over the past two decades, the concept of educational justice has gained increasing prominence in educational theory, policy, and practice debates worldwide. Initially a minor aspect of academic discourse, it gained prominence in the 1990s due to growing social inequalities and the externalization of national discourses (Aguilar Nery, 2016; Oplatka, 2014). It has been invoked to justify reforms in curriculum, school governance, and teacher education, as well as to critique structural inequalities embedded in educational systems. Yet, despite its normative appeal, the term remains conceptually fragmented, lacking a shared definition and often deployed interchangeably with, or in contrast to, related notions such as equality, equity, and social justice (Stojanov, 2018; Vieluf, 2016). This conceptual indeterminacy poses challenges for theoretical development and policy implementation, as the criteria for what counts as “just” in education vary significantly across contexts, disciplines, and ideological traditions.

Existing scholarship tends to emphasize either distributive dimensions—such as the allocation of resources and opportunities—or relational and recognitional aspects, including respect, participation, and cultural recognition (Fraser, 2009; Murillo and Hernández-Castilla, 2011). While these perspectives have generated valuable insights, they frequently evolve in isolation, resulting in parallel debates that obscure justice's multidimensional and context-contingent character in the educational context. In recent years, emerging critical approaches—drawing from disability studies, migration research, and post-humanist theories—have begun to interrogate the adequacy of traditional justice frameworks, calling for an expanded conceptualization capable of addressing the complexities of educational injustice in contemporary societies.

This article addresses these challenges by reporting the findings of a systematic literature review on conceptualizations of educational justice published between 2009 and 2024 in English and Spanish. The review pursues three interrelated objectives: first, to map the main theoretical principles and approaches that underpin current understandings of educational justice; second, to identify emerging perspectives and underexplored dimensions that expand or challenge dominant frameworks; and third, to propose

a synthesis that contributes to greater conceptual clarity while also outlining directions for future research. In doing so, we also provide a definition of educational justice intended to advance the conversation and support further scholarly engagement.

The article is organized into eight main sections. The introduction situates the problem and outlines the study's objectives. The methodology section details the scope, search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and data synthesis procedures applied to the 40 selected publications. The third section examines the conceptualization of educational justice, tracing its origins and connections to broader debates on inequality and social justice. The fourth analyses the main principles and approaches identified in the literature, particularly distributive, recognitional, participatory, and capability-based perspectives. The fifth expands the discussion by incorporating additional categories—such as multitemporality, multispatiality, disability, migration, and stereoscopic approaches—that extend or challenge dominant frameworks. The sixth section poses the question of what educational justice means, synthesizing commonalities and divergences across definitions. The seventh develops the discussion, identifying convergences, tensions, and the role of temporality in shaping the concept. The final section advances our proposal for a dynamic, plural, and context-sensitive reconceptualization.

2 Methods

This study systematically reviewed English- and Spanish-language literature on educational justice published between 2009 and 2024. The time frame was selected to capture theoretical and contextual changes: research has consolidated distributive and recognitional perspectives while introducing new approaches, such as intersectionality, capabilities, decolonial thought, and more-than-human concerns. Meanwhile, global events—including migration, the rise of far-right politics, AI technologies, diversity debates, and the COVID-19 pandemic—have reshaped discussions of equity and justice.

The review aimed to identify how educational justice is defined, the theoretical principles underlying its conceptualization, and the elements used across various contexts and disciplines.

2.1 Search strategy

This study systematically reviewed English- and Spanish-language literature on educational justice published between 2009 and 2024. Searches were conducted in three databases on the following dates: Scopus (May 8, 2024), SciELO (May 8, 2024), and Web of Science (May 16, 2024).

Across platforms, the core search terms were “educational justice” and “justicia edu”* (to capture variations such as *justicia educativa/educacional*). Search fields varied by database due to platform constraints. In Scopus, the final search was conducted in title, abstract, and keywords. In SciELO, the search was conducted across all indexes, as keyword-only filtering was unavailable. In Web of Science, the final selection prioritized Author Keywords

using the string `*{educational justice} OR {justicia edu}`**, limiting results to English and Spanish and the period 2009–2024.

To calibrate sensitivity and refine the most appropriate strategy for each platform, multiple exploratory runs were conducted (Scopus: 12 runs; WoS: 7 runs; SciELO: one run). These runs tested variations in language (e.g., ENG; ENG–SPA; ENG–SPA–FRE), time windows (e.g., 2003–2024; 2010–2023; 2009–2024), and searchable fields (e.g., title, abstract, topic, keyword-plus where applicable). Based on a pre-agreed refinement rule—prioritizing keyword indexing when available—one final query per database was selected for export and screening. The combined exports yielded 95 records across the three databases.

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were included if they explicitly conceptualized educational justice, either by (a) providing a definition of educational justice or (b) developing a theoretical approach that substantively contributes to its conceptualization in educational contexts. Because abstract-only screening was considered insufficient, full texts were reviewed to determine whether educational justice was conceptualized beyond a cursory mention.

Screening was conducted by three reviewers, who discussed discrepancies and borderline cases to align decisions and clarify inclusion criteria. Of the 95 records, 43 met the inclusion criterion. Of these, six were excluded as duplicates (three pairs with highly similar titles/authorship and overlapping conceptual development), yielding a final sample of 40 articles.

2.3 Data extraction and synthesis

The 40 included articles were processed using standardized bibliographic cards (Appendix Y). Two extraction formats were used: complete cards ($n = 31$) and partial cards ($n = 9$). Complete cards included: APA reference, section-by-section summary (beyond the abstract), study type (theoretical/empirical), methodology, conclusions and gaps, explicit definitions, conceptual elements related to educational justice, and analytic notes. Partial cards were used when a text did not strictly meet the conceptualization criterion but still contained relevant material for framing the broader conceptual discussion; these cards included APA reference, abstract, study type, methodology, and extracted conceptual content relevant to educational justice.

2.4 Coding and synthesis

The extracted content was thematically synthesized to identify the principles, approaches, and conceptual categories used to define educational justice across various contexts and disciplines. Coding focused on how educational justice was defined (explicitly or implicitly), which theoretical traditions were invoked, and which dimensions (e.g., distributive, recognitional, representational, capabilities, intersectional, decolonial, and other emerging lenses) structured each conceptualization. Team discussions among

reviewers were used to resolve ambiguities and ensure consistent interpretation of coding decisions.

2.5 Descriptive characteristics of the included studies ($n = 40$)

To strengthen the systematic review component, we produced descriptive summaries of the corpus. Regarding study type, the sample comprised 21 theoretical articles (52.5%), 10 empirical articles (25.0%), and 9 mixed theoretical/empirical articles (22.5%).

Regarding geographic focus, nearly half of the studies were coded as international/non-context-specific ($n = 19$; 47.5%), reflecting conceptual papers without a single-country empirical setting. The remaining studies focused on specific contexts: Iran ($n = 4$; 10.0%), United States ($n = 4$; 10.0%), Chile ($n = 3$; 7.5%), Germany ($n = 3$; 7.5%), Mexico ($n = 2$; 5.0%), and single instances coded as China ($n = 1$; 2.5%), Nordic countries ($n = 1$; 2.5%), US/UK ($n = 1$; 2.5%), and multi-country foci such as Argentina/Spain/Mexico ($n = 1$; 2.5%) and Germany/Austria/Switzerland ($n = 1$; 2.5%).

Regarding methodological reporting, 25 studies (62.5%) did not explicitly declare a methodology (primarily theoretical papers). Among those that did, case studies were most common ($n = 9$; 22.5%), followed by focus groups with qualitative analysis ($n = 1$; 2.5%) and survey/questionnaire-based designs ($n = 1$; 2.5%), alongside conceptual synthesis approaches (e.g., conceptual analysis or combining literature traditions, each $n = 1$; 2.5%).

Finally, regarding educational level, most articles focused on school education ($n = 34$; 85.0%), while higher education was reported in 3 studies (7.5%), combined school and higher education in 2 studies (5.0%), and 1 study (2.5%) did not specify an educational level.

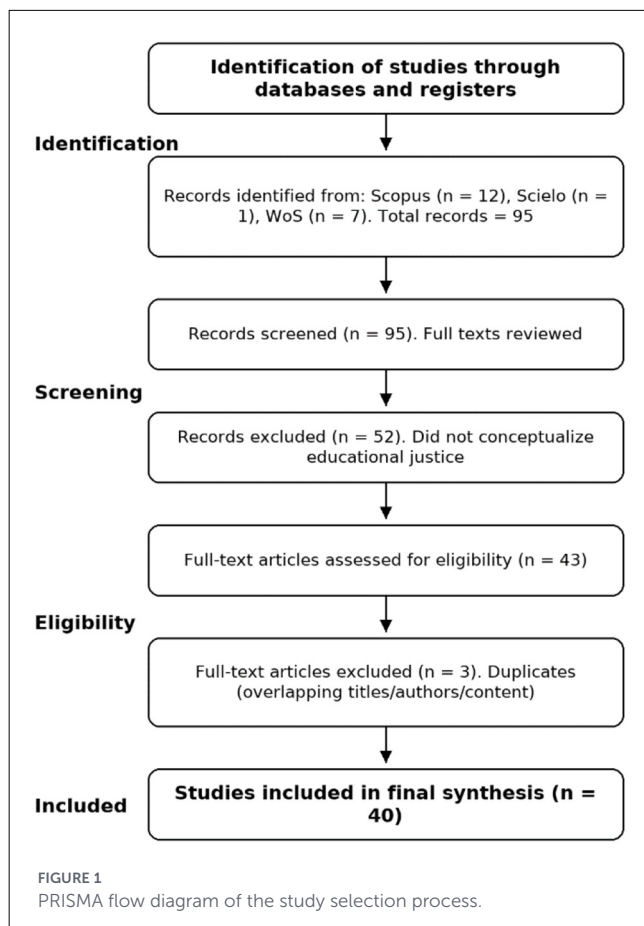
2.6 Summary of the selection process

A PRISMA-style flow diagram summarizing identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion is shown in [Figure 1](#). In brief: 95 records identified, 95 full texts screened, 52 excluded for not addressing educational justice, 43 retained, 6 excluded as duplicates, leaving 40 studies included in the final synthesis.

[Table 1](#) summarizes the characterization of the articles selected through the search.

3 Conceptualization of educational justice

Over the past two decades, educational justice has gained prominence in global education debates, though it still lacks a clear or widely accepted definition ([Stojanov, 2018](#); [Vieluf, 2016](#)). Its conceptualization has evolved through multiple paths, shaped by regional contexts, broader social justice debates, and persistent concerns with inequality ([Aguilar, 2016](#)). Early scholarship, especially in the Ibero-American region, positioned educational



justice as a descriptive tool to diagnose unjust realities and later as a framework for reform. Private institutions in Mexico and Argentina advanced the concept, while in Spain, it was developed within universities. Its emergence also reflected the erosion of terms such as equality and equity, which remain central to most discussions of educational justice.

The literature also highlights the close relationship between educational justice and social justice. Some authors describe educational justice as a dimension of social justice or even as its necessary foundation (Shahraki-Sanavi et al., 2019; Wei, 2011, as cited in Wang and He, 2014). Others stress that when reduced to distributive aspects, it is often equated with equal opportunities, serving as a pathway to social justice. At the same time, critical perspectives caution that social structures usually cause educational injustice, underscoring the interdependence of both areas of justice within broader macro systems (Heredia and Peniche, 2016).

Finally, much of the literature connects educational justice to the problem of educational inequalities, which can be understood in distributive, relational, or combined terms (De los Santos Menéndez, 2019). While these inequalities are often framed through distributive logics—focusing on the fair allocation of resources—some approaches emphasize recognition, respect, or participation as equally important. Dum (2017) critiques input-output models of justice for reducing the concept to causal pathways between resources and outcomes, arguing that they obscure the perspectives of educational actors and the structural

conditions that shape injustice. These debates provide the foundation for analyzing the principal theories and approaches to educational justice and the emerging perspectives that expand its conceptual scope.

4 Principles and approaches to educational justice

Several of the articles reviewed do not explicitly define educational justice. Instead, they focus on presenting, analyzing, or critiquing different theoretical approaches, traditions, or principles related to the concept. It is essential to highlight that the discussion in this subsection—and throughout the review—reflects only the findings of this systematic analysis; other relevant perspectives may exist beyond it. Within this scope, the following principles are the most frequently discussed in the literature.

4.1 Principles of equality or egalitarianism

The reviewed literature refers to various principles of egalitarianism or equality related to educational justice. The most frequently discussed is equality of opportunity, which is often connected to the distributive aspects of educational justice. Clayton (2018) argues that there are two main distributive questions concerning educational justice: (a) How large should the education budget be? and (b) What constitutes a fair distribution of educational resources?

According to the author, the first question has received relatively little attention from political philosophers, while the second has attracted significant focus, with the most widely supported answer advocating for equality of educational opportunity. The literature focusing on the distributive aspects of educational justice also emphasizes this second question, which is linked to the ideal of equality of opportunity. This principle is discussed below.

4.1.1 Equal opportunity

Equality refers to a condition or state where everyone has the same amount of something, such as equal rights, resources, or treatment. It is often about sameness—ensuring no one has less or more than another in a particular respect. Equality of opportunity has become a central concern within debates on educational justice. This idea, rooted in the work of Nielsen (2019), highlights the importance of life chances. The right to education, when grounded in justice, can improve an individual's life chances; however, there is a crucial difference between having the formal right to education and equal treatment, and being able to effectively exercise that right (Buchholtz et al., 2020). Rawls's fair equality of opportunity concept has been a key reference in these discussions. He distinguishes between two interpretations: a merit-based view, where inequality in educational achievement is fair only if it does not reflect differences in class background; and a more expansive view, where educational inequalities are acceptable only if they

TABLE 1 General characterization of the studies included in the systematic review.

No.	Authors	Title (original language)	Year	Country	Methodology	Study Type	Educational Level	Database	Language	Type of Publication
1	Rojas Abarca, Camila, López Cruz, Mauricio, Echeita Sarrionandia, Gerardo	Significados de las prácticas escolares que buscan responder a la diversidad desde la perspectiva de niñas y niños: una aproximación a la justicia educacional	2019	Chile	Case study	Empirical	School education	Scielo & WoS	Spanish	Journal
2	Shahraki-Sanavi F.; Nasser N.; Shahraki-Sanavi F.; Salehiniya H.	Investigating the observance of educational justice in Iranian universities: From students' viewpoints	2019	Irán	Case study	Empirical	Higher education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
3	Ahmadi A.; Pordesari M.N.I.G.; Karimzadeh S.	Studying equal educational opportunities in education systems in order to provide a model for establishment of educational justice	2014	Irán	Questionnaire	Empirical	School & higher education	Scopus	English	Journal
4	Heredia, N; Peniche, R.	Meanings and senses of school management around to educational justice; [Significados y sentidos de la gestión escolar en torno a la justicia educativa]	2016	México	Case study	Empirical	School education	Scopus	Spanish	Journal
5	Nouri A.; Karimi Y.	A phenomenological study on the meaning of educational justice for street children	2019	Irán	Case study	Empirical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
6	Babanejad, F; Esfandabad, HS; Namvar, H	Investigating the Mediating role of Academic Motivation in the Relationship between Basic Psychological Needs, Educational justice, and Cheating Behavior	2021	Irán	Case study	Empirical	School education	Web of Science	English	Journal
7	Aguilar Nery, Jesús	Hacia una historia conceptual de la justicia educativa en Iberoamérica	2016	Argentina, España y México	Conceptual analysis	Theoretical	School education	Scielo	Spanish	Journal
8	Waltenberg, Fábio D	Essential Educational Achievements as the Currency of Educational Justice	2010	International	Combination	Theoretical	School education	Scielo	English	Journal
9	Stojanov K.	Educational justice and transnational migration	2018	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
10	Clayton M.	Education	2018	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Book chapter
11	de los Santos Menéndez F.	Educational adequacy and educational equality: a merging proposal	2019	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Authors	Title (original language)	Year	Country	Methodology	Study Type	Educational Level	Database	Language	Type of Publication
12	Macleod C.M.	Freedom as non-domination and educational justice	2015	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
13	Culp J.	Discourse ethics, epistemology, and educational justice: A reply to Harvey Siegel	2020	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
14	Dum J.	Ends, principles, and causal explanation in educational justice	2017	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
15	Grümme B.	Educational justice due to more education? Requests for a solution strategy	2017	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
16	Ball A.	Calling Social Work to the Movement for Educational Justice	2020	EEUU	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
17	Colella L.	Education as a “fragment” of politics. Equality and emancipation through the philosophies of badiou and rancière; [La educación como “fragmento” de la política. Igualdad y emancipación a través de las filosofías de Badiou y Rancière]	2015	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	Spanish	Journal
18	Giesinger J.	Against selection: Educational justice and the ascription of talent	2021	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
19	Nielsen L.	Teach Them to Play! Educational Justice and the Capability for Childhood Play	2020	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
20	Ben Shahr, TH	Redefining Ability, Saving Educational Meritocracy	2023	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
21	Benner D.	On Justice in Pedagogical Contexts	2021	International	Injustice analysis	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
22	Schumann C.	Justice as rhythm, rhythms of injustice: reorienting the discourse on educational justice. A response	2022	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
23	Moyano, C.; Oyarzún J.D.	Multi-dimensional (in)justice and socially just pedagogies: the case of a father with a child with disability	2022	Chile	Case study	Theoretical/ Empirical	School education	Scielo, Scopus, WoS	English	Journal
24	Vieluf S.	Ethnicity and Migration	2016	International	Unstated	Theoretical/ Empirical	School education	Scopus	English	Book chapter
25	Bremm N.; Racherbäumer K.	Intersectionality and social space: Educational justice in deprived schools	2018	Alemania	Unstated	Theoretical/ Empirical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Authors	Title (original language)	Year	Country	Methodology	Study Type	Educational Level	Database	Language	Type of Publication
26	Sanderson C.D.; Hollinger-Smith L.M.; Cox K.	Developing a Social Determinants of Learning Framework: A Case Study	2021	EEUU	Theoretical development	Theoretical/Empirical	Higher education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
27	Merry M.S.	Do Inclusion Policies Deliver Educational Justice for Children with Autism? An Ethical Analysis	2020	EEUU	Unstated	Theoretical/Empirical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
28	Joyce K.E.; Cartwright N.	Meeting our standards for educational justice: Doing our best with the evidence	2018	EEUU	Unstated	Theoretical/Empirical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
29	Buchholtz N.; Stuart A.; Frønes T.S.	Equity, equality and diversity-putting educational justice in the Nordic model to a test	2021	Países nórdicos	Unstated	Theoretical/Empirical	School education	Scopus	English	Book chapter
30	Brighouse H.	Educational Justice and Socio-Economic Segregation in Schools	2008	EEUU y RU	Unstated	Theoretical/Empirical	School education	Scopus	English	Book chapter
31	Wang, JY; He, P	Ways of Mass Media to Promote Educational Justice on Children from Migrant Worker Families	2014	China	Unstated	Theoretical/Empirical	School education	Web of Science	English	Conference
32	Salazar Jiménez, Rodrigo, Orellana-Fonseca, Cristian, Muñoz Labraña, Carlos, Cárcamo Vásquez, Héctor	Escuela y participación: La implementación de un plan de formación ciudadana en establecimientos educacionales de Chile	2021	Chile	Qualitative	Empirical	School education	Scielo	Spanish	Journal
33	Heredia Soberanis, Norma Graciella	Significados del bachillerato en jóvenes de colonias periurbanas marginadas en Yucatán, México	2020	México	Case study	Empirical	School education	Scielo	Spanish	Journal
34	Thiele K.; Klagge B.	Third places and educational justice: Public libraries in the context of covid-19	2021	Alemania	Case study	Empirical	No indica	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
35	Ehrhardt-Madapathi N.; Pretsch J.; Schmitt M.	Effects of injustice in primary schools on students' behavior and joy of learning	2018	Alemania	Case study	Empirical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No.	Authors	Title (original language)	Year	Country	Methodology	Study Type	Educational Level	Database	Language	Type of Publication
36	Sánchez Lara, Ricardo Antonio, Moya Aguilar, Trinidad	Escritura argumentativa y justicia educativa en contextos formativos del área de la salud	2021	International	Unstated	Theoretical	Higher education	Scielo	Spanish	Journal
37	Culp J.	A vindication of transnational democratic education—replies to Michael Festl, Martin Beckstein and Michael Geiss	2020	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School & higher education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
38	Nikolaidis A.C.	A Third Conception of Epistemic Injustice	2021	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus & WoS	English	Journal
39	Giesinger J.	Educational justice, segregated schooling and vocational education	2017	Alemania, Austria y Suiza	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal
40	Brando N.	Distributing Educational Opportunities: Positionality, Equality and Responsibility	2016	International	Unstated	Theoretical	School education	Scopus	English	Journal

WoS, web of sciences; Scielo, scientific electronic library online. Databases are listed as reported by the original studies.

ultimately improve the prospects of the less advantaged (Clayton, 2018).

Building on this, Brando (2016) further explains equal opportunity. The first principle, formal equality of opportunity, is based on meritocracy. It indicates that a person’s educational prospects should depend on talent and effort, not gender, race, or socioeconomic status. In this view, it is seen as unfair for equally capable children who invest similar effort to face different educational expectations. Meritocracy has been a highly influential educational justice idea (Ben Shahr, 2023). However, Brando highlights a key limitation: as long as socioeconomic factors influence life outcomes like employment more than talent and effort, the meritocratic principle cannot become fully functional. In other words, meritocracy mainly applies to final opportunities, such as securing a job, and not to the educational process itself, where much of what is considered “merit” is determined by family background rather than the child’s effort.

Brando (2016) also introduces a second principle that expands Rawls’s concept of fair equality of opportunity to include both outcomes and processes. Here, educational expectations should be based on talent and effort rather than socioeconomic background. In this sense, education is a mechanism that levels the social playing field (Nielsen, 2019). Harry Brighouse is a prominent figure associated with this approach. Brighouse (2008) defines educational equality as a distributive principle requiring all children to access equally good education, though what qualifies as “equally good” remains subject to debate. His framework has two main implications: first, children with similar abilities and willingness to strive should have similar educational expectations, regardless of social background, race, ethnicity, or gender; and second, children with lower ability levels should receive at least as many educational resources as those with higher ability. In this way, educational justice aligns with an egalitarian theory that emphasizes improving the condition of the less advantaged over strict equality. As Brighouse explains, when choosing between an equal distribution of a smaller pie or an unequal distribution of a larger pie where everyone benefits more, justice favors the latter—even if it results in inequality.

Despite their influence, these principles have also faced criticism. Bremm and Racherbäumer (2018) argue that equal opportunity, as commonly defined, does not provide a sufficient foundation for socially just education. They identify two problematic aspects. The first is talent-based fairness, which assumes that participation and achievement gaps are justified if they reflect innate talent rather than unequal access to resources (Giesinger, 2011, as cited in Bremm and Racherbäumer, 2018). However, leading philosophers of justice reject this view. Rawls, for example, maintains that a just society should allocate more resources to those with less talent. Additionally, whether talent is fixed or can be developed remains unresolved (Stojanov, 2013). If talent is seen as potential, policies and institutions must address the unequal distribution of entry-level skills, rather than treating talent as a fixed limit. Furthermore, talent assessments can only be provisional, context-dependent predictions rather than definitive judgments of a student’s abilities.

The second problematic dimension is achievement-based fairness, which considers it just to reward students with the best results and development opportunities (Stojanov, 2013).

Such a view assumes standardized, accurate, and culturally neutral assessments of performance—conditions that are rarely met. Students' social backgrounds influence teachers' judgements, and differences between home and school cultures complicate evaluations. As Bremm and Racherbäumer caution, this approach risks shifting responsibility away from institutions and onto individual students, thereby naturalizing systemic inequalities. In light of this, Ben Shahar (2023) argues that only strict equality of achievement could be fair, since any inequality risks disadvantaging those already worse off. This perspective further emphasizes that education's value is positional: the benefits of education depend on how well others are educated.

4.1.2 Egalitarianism of luck

Egalitarianism is a principle or philosophy that argues society should be organized so that people are treated as equals. Beyond the descriptive notion of equality, it takes on a normative stance: inequalities must be justified, and where they cannot be justified, they should be reduced or eliminated.

One prominent expression of this principle in the literature is *luck egalitarianism* (e.g., Ben Shahar, 2023; Giesinger, 2021; Nielsen, 2019; Stojanov, 2018; Vieluf, 2016). This approach, which traces back to authors such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin (Stojanov, 2018), as well as Richard Arneson and Gerald Cohen (Giesinger, 2021), distinguishes between inequalities that stem from individual choices and those that result from brute luck—circumstances outside an individual's control, such as disability, race, or class background. Its core idea is that access to social and economic positions should depend on achievements and decisions for which individuals can reasonably be held responsible, not on circumstances beyond their control, such as genetic predispositions, family background, or socioeconomic origin. From this perspective, educational inequalities rooted in brute luck—such as natural talent or class background—cannot be justified, whereas inequalities arising from responsible choices, such as personal effort, may be acceptable (Ben Shahar, 2023; Giesinger, 2021).

Despite its appeal, several criticisms have been raised about applying luck egalitarianism in educational contexts. A significant concern is that it can lead to a “leveling down” effect (Stojanov, 2018). By seeking to neutralize all inequalities caused by talent, the principle risks assuming that every student, regardless of innate ability, should have the same educational expectations.

Consequently, students who invest the same effort are expected to achieve the same outcomes, even if their capacities differ. This would prevent more talented students from fully developing their potential, reducing overall educational attainment (Giesinger, 2021). In practice, equality is achieved by lowering the achievements of high-ability students to match the limitations of their peers, a flaw identified in several critiques of egalitarian theories of justice (Ben Shahar, 2023).

The contrasts between luck egalitarianism and Rawlsian justice as fairness further illuminate these debates. Luck egalitarianism (Arneson, 1989; Cohen, 1989; Dworkin, 1981) views inequalities as unjust when caused by brute luck but acceptable when they stem from “option luck”: the foreseeable consequences of informed

choices. In education, disadvantaged students should receive compensatory resources, while those who underperform due to lack of effort cannot claim injustice. Rawls, by contrast, evaluates inequalities based on their effects on society's least advantaged members. His *difference principle* allows educational disparities—for example, access to elite schools—only if they ultimately improve the life prospects of the worst off, often through redistributive policies that strengthen public education. The key distinction lies in emphasis: luck egalitarianism focuses on the *sources* of inequality (luck vs. choice), whereas Rawls emphasizes the *outcomes* of inequality and their broader role in ensuring fairness within society's basic structure.

4.2 Adequacy or educational sufficiency

The adequacy, or educational sufficiency, approach has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Clayton, 2018; De los Santos Menéndez, 2019; Nielsen, 2019; Stojanov, 2018) and is associated with authors such as John White, Elizabeth Anderson, and Debra Satz. This perspective argues that educational justice should be grounded not in equality of opportunity, as in Rawlsian or luck-egalitarian accounts, but in providing a sufficient standard of education for all. Adequacy thus calls for enough—though not necessarily equal—education for every child, to enable individuals to act as equal citizens (Stojanov, 2018). In this sense, justice in education is satisfied when everyone has an adequate education, even if inequalities persist above that threshold (Clayton, 2018).

De los Santos Menéndez (2019) identifies two key perspectives within adequacy. The first is priority thresholds for proper education, which defines essential skills that all children must acquire.

Adequate education should guarantee competencies such as the ability to make autonomous decisions (White, 1994; De los Santos Menéndez, 2019) and deliberate on public issues (Gutmann, 1987, as cited in De los Santos Menéndez, 2019). The second is relational equality and dynamic standards, where adequacy is defined in relation to the requirements of democratic and civic equality. Justice does not demand equal educational outcomes for all, but rather a sufficient standard that allows students to participate as equals in society (citealpxbib3; Satz, 2007, as cited in De los Santos Menéndez, 2019). From this perspective, the focus is ensuring egalitarian relationships among students during schooling, so they can relate to one another later in adulthood as equals (Nielsen, 2019).

While De los Santos Menéndez (2019) views the relational perspective as more comprehensive, Clayton (2018) cautions that justice cannot be confined to a limited subset of educational goods, such as democratic citizenship or personal autonomy. Instead, principles of justice must regulate educational institutions as a whole, mediating between competing demands—for example, preparing individuals for democratic participation and providing access to occupational opportunities.

The adequacy approach offers a distinct perspective on justice in education compared to equality and luck egalitarianism. Whereas equality-based accounts focus on reducing relative gaps in resources or outcomes, and luck egalitarianism seeks to

compensate for unchosen disadvantages while accepting those linked to individual choices, adequacy emphasizes ensuring that every individual reaches a minimum threshold necessary for citizenship and social participation (Anderson, 2010; Satz, 2007). Adequacy focuses less on whether some students have more than others and more on ensuring that every student has enough. For example, in literacy, the adequacy approach would prioritize universal functional reading skills, while still offering enrichment opportunities for wealthier students. By contrast, equality approaches focus on narrowing achievement gaps, and luck egalitarians seek to offset disadvantages rooted in family background, disability, or race. The adequacy approach thus highlights the moral importance of raising all students above a critical threshold, even if inequalities remain beyond it.

4.3 Capabilities approach

The capabilities approach, developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, is also worth mentioning in this context. While primarily associated with social justice, the capabilities approach shares some aspects with the adequacy perspective. According to Ball (2020), it offers a critical and non-traditional framework of educational justice. In this view, justice is reflected in equal capabilities, not merely in resources or outcomes. Nussbaum (2000, as cited in Ball, 2020) identified a set of interconnected capabilities essential to human wellbeing. If a person does not attain a minimum level of opportunity within each of these capabilities, they will be unable to thrive in society (similar to the educational sufficiency approach).

The capabilities approach is a framework for assessing justice and human development beyond just resources or utility. Instead, it emphasizes individuals' core freedoms to live lives they value. Developed by Amartya Sen (1979, 1999, 2009) and later expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011), the approach distinguishes between functionings—beings and doings, such as being educated, staying healthy, or participating in civic life—and capabilities, which are the real opportunities or freedoms to achieve those functionings. This perspective recognizes that equal resources or chances do not automatically lead to equal capabilities because people use resources differently based on their personal, social, and environmental contexts. For example, two students might attend the same school with equal access to teachers and textbooks; however, a student with a disability or facing linguistic or cultural discrimination may be less able to turn those resources into meaningful educational success.

Unlike equality, which seeks sameness in distribution, or adequacy, which guarantees a minimum standard, the capabilities approach focuses on expanding each individual's fundamental freedoms to pursue valued life outcomes, including but not limited to education. Nussbaum has also proposed a core set of human capabilities—such as bodily health, practical reasoning, social connection, and control over one's environment—that serve as a normative standard for justice. In education, this means creating institutions and policies that provide equal inputs or ensure basic skills and actively support every learner in developing the abilities needed for full participation in social, political, and

economic life. By emphasizing what people can truly be and do, the capabilities approach offers a broader view of educational justice that recognizes diversity, difference, and the structural barriers shaping opportunities.

4.4. Dimensions of recognition and respect

Other approaches to educational justice emphasize the values of recognition and respect, shifting from viewing them as mere principles or ideals to considering them essential aspects of fairness in education. Recognition can involve social and cultural respect for each other and equitable relations within society (Aguilar, 2016). For Forst (2014, as cited in Stojanov, 2018), the key issue is not what one receives in the distribution of goods but how one is treated in relationships and structures. However, recognizing and respecting students' rational autonomy is complex, and their development requires support. Axel Honneth's theory of recognition helps explain what precedes autonomy, describing three types of recognition—love or empathy, cognitive respect, and social esteem—whose denial leads to experiences of disrespect and social exclusion. Ignoring these forms of recognition undermines educational justice (Stojanov, 2018).

Recognition-based educational justice also enhances “disadvantage-reflective” teaching, which is rooted in a communicative culture of respect and recognition. Teachers should consider each student's specific circumstances and their own role (Diezemann, 2012, as cited in Bremm and Racherbäumer, 2018). Recognition theories developed by scholars such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Young highlight the importance of considering other dimensions of justice, such as culture and politics, to better understand different sources of injustice (Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022) and expand the focus beyond distributive frameworks.

Fraser (1997), Fraser (2000) further develops this line of thought by arguing that recognition must be addressed alongside redistribution: economic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition are interrelated forms of injustice that require material and symbolic remedies. For instance, racism is not only a matter of unequal access to resources but also of being devalued and stigmatized within cultural hierarchies. Young (1990) complements these accounts by theorizing oppression as the structural denial of recognition and respect, articulated through five “faces of oppression”: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

These insights underscore that justice involves securing adequate resources and opportunities and affirming students' identities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds in education. A distributive framework might ensure equal access to schools, but a recognition-based approach insists that curricula, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures must also respect diversity and counteract stigmatization, enabling students to participate as valued and dignified educational community members.

Finally, emphasizing the “egalitarianism of respect” is essential. This perspective refers to students' recognition in schools and society and the systemic disadvantages they face when it is absent. It considers any form of disregard or discrimination within the school system unfair, regardless of whether it results in unequal

educational outcomes (Vieluf, 2016). The egalitarianism of respect perspective shifts the focus of educational justice from merely distributing resources or outcomes toward the quality of social relationships within schools.

According to Vieluf (2016), egalitarianism of respect describes “a situation in which all students experience the same positive quality of social relations and in which they are equally respected and recognized by their teachers and schoolmates, regardless of their socio-cultural background” (p. 150). This approach emphasizes that justice requires adequate learning opportunities and equal recognition of students’ dignity and identities within educational settings. In this sense, egalitarianism of respect aligns with relational theories of justice (Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 1995; Young, 1990), highlighting that misrecognition, exclusion, or stigmatization are forms of injustice that can weaken students’ ability to fully participate in education. For example, even when students have access to the same curriculum or resources, justice is compromised if minority or marginalized students experience disrespect, stereotyping, or invisibility in classroom interactions. Therefore, an egalitarianism of respect framework emphasizes recognition, dignity, and inclusive social relations as essential to educational justice.

4.5 Pluralistic and multidimensional views

Finally, we explore perspectives described as pluralistic or multidimensional, which do not concentrate on a single value or aspect of educational justice but may encompass several of the elements discussed above as well as others. It is worth noting that these perspectives are less frequently mentioned in the literature studied. Brighouse and Swift (2014, as cited in Dum, 2017) argue for a pluralistic view of educational justice where educational equality does not overshadow all other important values of education besides equality. This perspective emphasizes that educational justice cannot be reduced to a single value. Therefore, different principles of educational justice, alongside the principle of educational equality, may more effectively address other forms of unfair disadvantage that the principle of educational equality overlooks.

Consequently, educational justice is multidimensional and extends beyond distribution alone. Gewirtz (2006, as cited in Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022) asks how to tell if a policy, practice, or educational system is fair. The answer must consider the specific context of its implementation. He suggests three categories of justice: (a) distribution, as an economic view of justice, as well as the sharing of cultural and social resources; (b) recognition, related to identity, cultural dominance, lack of recognition, disrespect, or the label of “other” that does not participate in “our” dominant culture; and (c) associativity—the ability for an individual to take part in decisions that directly affect them, as much as they can engage socially. These three dimensions can be connected to the earlier principles: equality of opportunity, recognition relations, and relational equality.

5 “Other” categories and elements of educational justice

Beyond the primary approaches, the review identified additional perspectives relevant to defining educational justice, including multitemporality and multispatiality (Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022), ability (Ben Shahr, 2023), disability (Merry, 2020; Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022), migration (Stojanov, 2018; Vieluf, 2016), and stereoscopic (Schumann, 2022). These perspectives expand the discussion by introducing new elements that challenge or complement traditional principles, demonstrating that specific justice applications may fall short if such dimensions are ignored. It should be noted, however, that these findings reflect only the scope of this systematic review, and other perspectives may also be relevant.

5.1 Multitemporality and multispatiality

Much of the debate on educational justice has been dominated by unidimensional accounts, especially distributive approaches that emphasize allocating resources and benefits. While important, these perspectives remain limited, reducing justice to compensatory redistribution or measurable outcomes such as academic achievement. Such frameworks risk neglecting the complex, lived experiences of injustice in educational and social life (e.g., the Chilean Inclusion Law).

To move beyond these limits, Gewirtz’s (2006) multidimensional model highlights three interrelated dimensions: distributive (allocation of economic, cultural, and social resources), recognitional (addressing cultural domination and misrecognition), and associative (ensuring participation in decisions that affect individuals). This model shows that justice cannot be achieved through distribution alone but must also address recognition and involvement.

These insights align with the framework of socially just pedagogies (SJP), which reject narrow redistributive logics and emphasize education as an intrinsic good rather than solely a means for future economic success. SJP emphasize care, respect, and recognizing difference as resources to be cultivated, while challenging outcome-driven paradigms by affirming multiple educational futures (Gale and Mills, 2013; Lingard and Gale, 2010; Youdell, 2011).

Building on this, Moyano and Oyarzún (2022) propose two additional dimensions for analyzing justice: multispatiality and multitemporality. Multispatiality extends the analysis beyond schools, recognizing that injustices are produced in labor markets, health systems, and public spaces.

Multitemporality challenges the future-oriented bias of policy, underscoring that justice must also address present conditions of care and participation, not only distant outcomes.

The case of Oscar and his son Tomás illustrates these dynamics. Within Chile’s stratified educational system, distributive injustices appeared in scarce public resources, recognition injustices in stigmatizing “special needs”, and associative injustices in the lack of meaningful participation. At the same time, Oscar

faced multispatial injustices in labor and health systems, and multitemporal injustices as immediate care needs were sidelined by future-oriented policies.

Overall, this framework underscores that justice in education must be understood in multidimensional, multispatial, and multitemporal terms. Such an approach illuminates injustices that exceed outcome-based frameworks and challenges the assumption that schooling alone can redress inequality, offering a richer and more holistic conception of educational justice.

5.2 Ability/disability

Ben Shahar (2023) redefines ability or capacity in terms of students' potential limits. Recognizing that the term "student ability" is a vital part of any theory of educational justice, she proposes an alternative understanding that makes meritocracy workable in this context. Her approach evaluates both a student's capacity and potential, recognizing that these can change over time. She argues that to avoid self-fulfilling predictions of limited potential, such limits should only be assessed after the duty of justice in teaching has been fulfilled—that is, after genuine efforts have been made to teach all students, regardless of their ability. If this duty is not met, then inequality cannot be blamed on students' potential and is considered unfair. However, if the education system has done everything possible to enhance students' abilities, it cannot be deemed unfair. While some categories enjoy broad academic and social recognition, they are not always examined in the context of educational justice—either in theory or in practice. Ben Shahar argues that unequal outcomes in this context are often rooted in educational injustice. She concludes by suggesting future directions for research on ability and educational justice, such as broadening the definition of ability beyond traditional academic measures to include the full range of abilities, including disabilities.

Regarding disability—specifically autism—and within the context of inclusion policies, Merry (2020) highlights the injustice that occurs when schools fail to recognize that equity must also include individuals with abilities that differ from the norm. The author emphasizes that educational justice within inclusion policies should support diverse approaches and learning environments. Regular schools cannot be the only places capable of providing educational justice, as each context, individual, and need is unique. In the context of inclusion, educational justice must extend beyond legal rights or formal access: it must provide meaningful access, hold real value for the individual, and foster a sense of belonging.

Moyano and Oyarzún (2022) discuss the different types of injustice faced by students with disabilities. For example, educational goals focused on independence and participation in the workforce and civic life can be problematic for children with disabilities, who may need assistance throughout their lives (Goodley, 2007, as cited in Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022).

Additionally, how disability is constructed in educational settings conflicts with the invisibility of learning differences, which both marginalizes students with disabilities and reinforces ideas of impairment or difference.

5.3 Migration

Following Stojanov (2018), discussions about migration can help clarify educational justice's content and normative implications, as educational participation and the pedagogical treatment of immigrant students highlight questions of exclusion and discrimination within debates on educational justice. Ensuring fair educational treatment for immigrant students involves not only resource allocation but also improving their ability to participate politically and socially, as well as protecting them from discrimination and disrespect. In this way, three dimensions of educational justice—distributive, relational political equality, and recognition and respect—can be examined in the context of migration.

Vieluf (2016) examines how school systems address student diversity, especially concerning migration and ethnicity. The author proposes indicators to assess institutional structures and processes, providing insights into how injustice occurs and allowing for the assessment of educational justice within specific contexts. At the system level, this includes immigration and integration policies and other broad educational policies concerning individual, institutional, and structural discrimination. At the school level, it pertains to multicultural school cultures and climates. Concerning school climate, students may experience discrimination, and experiences that fall short of an "egalitarianism of respect" can signal deficiencies in educational justice within a school system.

5.4 Stereoscopic views on educational justice

Debates on justice in education have traditionally centered on equality of educational opportunities and the redistribution of resources. While most theories agree that formal equality of opportunity is necessary, they also acknowledge its insufficiency. Schumann (2022) argues that such approaches risk narrowing the discussion, reducing justice to questions of redistribution or procedural fairness, and overlooking deeper dimensions of how injustice is lived and experienced.

Schumann (2022) proposes a *stereoscopic perspective* for analyzing educational justice. Rather than focusing on a single angle, this approach examines what we see and how we see it, thereby exposing aspects that conventional paradigms have ignored. Stereoscopic perspectives encourage engagement with neglected issues such as affect and "unhappy" feelings, plasticity, whiteness, the more-than-human world, and rhythms. Rhythm, in particular, is highlighted as a crucial lens: bodily patterns of repetition across different social contexts that connect directly to questions of educational justice and disability—areas historically marginalized within frameworks of equality, merit, and adequacy.

The dominant distributive and meritocratic approaches remain valuable, but they are also limited. By focusing on redistribution or merit-based outcomes, they remain at what Stojanov and Papastephanou call the "surface" of justice. For instance, formal equality or meritocratic achievement may appear fair, but they have already been shaped by structural advantages, intergenerational transfers, and unequal opportunities. As such, distributive models

fail to address the relational, embodied, and material aspects of injustice.

In response, the stereoscopic view anchors justice in lived conflicts, bodily experiences, and material conditions rather than abstract principles. It pushes philosophy of education to critically interrogate its traditions, compare Anglo-American and Continental perspectives, and reveal blind spots. Several contributions illustrate this approach. Torill Strand (2017), drawing on Badiou (2005), situates justice in “truths-in-worlds”, emphasizing its emergence within concrete struggles. Lie (2019), inspired by Ahmed’s (2004) affect theory, highlights the power of “unhappy” feelings to reveal injustices and open pathways to more just practices. Hogstad (2020), building on Catherine Malabou (2008) notion of plasticity, critiques rigid educational selection systems whose rejection of plasticity exposes injustice in material and embodied ways. Beck (2016) frames whiteness not as an abstract idea but as an embodied space of privilege and exclusion, while Kvamme (2021) critiques the human-centered bias of educational philosophy by foregrounding the needs of the more-than-human world, especially amidst the climate crisis.

At the core of these interventions is a critique of philosophy’s complacency. They reveal how inherited metaphors and academic positionalities can inadvertently reproduce injustice. Inga Bostad’s concept of *justice as rhythm* represents perhaps the most radical departure: shifting from the dominant metaphor of vision to that of listening and attunement. Rhythm underscores bodily temporality, relationships, and power dynamics, showing how justice is negotiated through the imposition or synchronization of rhythms—whether between parent and child, in the temporalities of care work, or in debates over pandemic measures such as masking. This lens makes visible forms of injustice that have long been obscured within mainstream theories, especially those connected to disability.

These critiques challenge the sufficiency of distributive and meritocratic models, advancing a richer, more embodied, and relational account of educational justice. Rather than viewing justice as an externally imposed principle, stereoscopic perspectives highlight it as a rhythm, an affect, a materiality, and a relational practice. In doing so, they call for a significant shift in how educational justice is theorized and studied—toward more comprehensive, context-sensitive approaches capable of addressing the systemic issues of recognition, participation, and lived experience.

Finally, besides these categories related to educational justice, it is essential to note that this concept is often defined through the lens of “educational injustice” (e.g., Benner, 2021; Dum, 2017; Schumann, 2022; Vieluf, 2016). To understand what fairness is, much of the reviewed literature starts by identifying what is not fair. Similarly, some studies evaluate educational justice considering various inclusion policies (e.g., Buchholtz et al., 2020; Merry, 2020; Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022). One article examines educational justice as a predictor of academic cheating (Babanejad et al., 2021).

All these approaches and elements add complexity to the debate on educational justice. Therefore, after considering a variety of perspectives, we can move forward to answer the question of what educational justice means.

6 So, what exactly is educational justice?

While the existing literature rarely provides a single, clear definition of educational justice, our systematic review suggests that the concept is not purely theoretical. Instead, it aligns with different normative traditions rather than a unified model. To compare these groups, we use a classic question from egalitarian theory about the metric to evaluate justice—what Amartya Sen called “equality of what?”—and what G. A. Cohen identified as the “currency” of egalitarian justice, referring to the fundamental domain in which equality is sought, such as resources, opportunities, wellbeing, capabilities, or status (Sen, 1979; Cohen, 1989). In the literature, common “currencies” of educational justice include: (a) fair educational opportunity and distributive justice (often discussed through Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian debates and responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism), (b) adequacy or sufficiency thresholds for equal citizenship, (c) capabilities as substantive freedoms to be and do, and (d) relational and recognitional goods such as status, respect, and non-dominating relations—often paired with participatory claims regarding voice and decision-making (Rawls, 1971; Dworkin, 1981; Arneson, 1989; Satz, 2007; Sen, 1999, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000, 2009; Young, 1990; Gewirtz, 2006). These traditions coexist because they address different questions about what constitutes the relevant currency of justice and where educational harm occurs; however, they also conflict when their fundamental assumptions about equality, agency, and injustice diverge.

This conceptual map clarifies why the most common themes in the review appear layered rather than listed. At the broadest level, debates on fair shares and life chances, including critiques of meritocracy and the nature of educational goods, articulate equality of opportunity and distribution (Rawls, 1971; Dworkin, 1981; Arneson, 1989; Brando, 2016; Brighouse, 2008; Clayton, 2018; Ben Shahr, 2023). The focus shifts from relative disparities to the thresholds necessary for democratic participation and citizenship, emphasizing adequacy/sufficiency (Satz, 2007; De los Santos Menéndez, 2019). Meanwhile, the capabilities approach locates justice in substantive freedoms, highlighting that equal resources or formal rights can still lead to unequal real opportunities due to factors like disability, discrimination, and institutional context (Sen, 1999, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Nielsen, 2019). Intermediate levels feature recognitional and relational perspectives emphasizing the moral and political importance of status, respect, and non-dominating relations, suggesting injustice can persist even with formal equality (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000, 2009; Young, 1990; Vieluf, 2016). Multidimensional and pluralist views integrate distributive, recognitional, and participatory (associative) aspects, often as a critique of limitations in purely input-output or distributive models (Gewirtz, 2006; Dum, 2017; Moyano and Oyarzún, 2022). Finally, some work broadens the discussion through perspectives considering temporality, space, lived experience, emotions, embodiment, disability, whiteness, and more-than-human elements (Gale and Mills, 2013; Lingard and Gale, 2010; Goodley, 2007; Merry, 2020; Beck, 2016; Kvamme, 2021; Lie, 2019; Hogstad, 2020; Schumann, 2022; Ahmed, 2004).

We recognize that the scope of this systematic review—encompassing databases, languages, keywords, and inclusion criteria—may underrepresent important critical traditions that explore educational injustice through lenses such as racialization, coloniality, and epistemic dominance. These traditions often challenge and redefine what educational justice entails and who qualifies as a subject of justice. For example, research on racialization and intersectional power demonstrates how schooling can perpetuate injustice through seemingly neutral principles, such as merit, property rights, and institutional norms. Similarly, decolonial, postcolonial, and Indigenous frameworks highlight the ongoing impact of colonial power and epistemic violence, viewing education and knowledge production as ongoing sites of colonial contestation rather than inherited issues. Since all review methodologies do not fully capture these perspectives, future work could intentionally examine how integrating them influences the conceptual map and possibly introduces new notions of justice or shifts the importance of existing ones.

7 Discussion

This review shows that definitions of educational justice remain fragmented and context-dependent. While most articles do not provide a precise definition, three recurring dimensions are consistently identified: distribution, recognition, and participation. At the broadest level, access to education and fair distribution of resources are central concerns (Aguilar, 2016; Ahmadi et al., 2014; Sanderson et al., 2021; Wang and He, 2014). Yet scholars also emphasize the relational dimension of justice, highlighting fairness in classroom interactions, teachers' guidance, and the avoidance of discriminatory practices (MacLeod, 2015; Shahraki-Sanavi et al., 2019). More expansive accounts stress recognition, belonging, and wellbeing (Merry, 2020; Vieluf, 2016), linking justice to students' dignity, social participation, and autonomy (Grümme, 2017).

An expanded conceptualization of educational justice must therefore integrate material and relational conditions. Access and resources alone are insufficient without recognizing students' identities and opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making. This implies that justice should be assessed by what is distributed and how students are treated and involved in educational processes. In practice, this means ensuring that categories such as race, gender, class, disability, and migration status neither restrict access nor undermine students' dignity and belonging.

A further theoretical contribution of this review concerns the relationship between educational justice and social justice. Some approaches treat education instrumentally, as a means of preparing children for citizenship and future autonomy. Others insist that justice must also be enacted within education, here and now. This tension reveals the unique philosophical challenge of applying justice to children, who often lack control over their circumstances and whose futures are framed as "projects of adulthood". Importantly, considering temporality illuminates these debates: distributive approaches usually focus on compensating for past disadvantages to enable future success, while relational perspectives emphasize justice in the present. Intersectional and

SJP further challenge linear views of time, proposing flexible and overlapping temporalities that better reflect the lived complexity of injustice.

These insights underscore that a single definition or theory cannot fully capture the concept of educational justice. It is best understood as a multidimensional, context-sensitive, and temporally situated concept that brings together distributive concerns, recognition, participation, and temporal perspectives. For researchers and policymakers, this requires frameworks responsive to diversity and complexity. This ensures that educational justice is not treated as a fixed formula but as a dynamic principle enacted in concrete educational realities.

8 Conceptual contribution: educational justice as assemblage

Building on the theoretical paths already explored in the literature, we do not aim to provide a fixed or exhaustive definition of educational justice. Instead, we propose conceptualizing it as an assemblage: an open, evolving, and contested set of relationships emerging from the intersections of institutions, policies, norms, territories, philosophical frameworks, and research practices. In this view, educational justice is not a static category, but a fluid configuration shaped through dynamic interactions among knowledge, politics, and lived experience.

This proposal is grounded in recent empirical debates across multiple fields of educational research, which indicate that questions once narrowly focused on equity, inclusion, or access to quality education have progressively expanded to encompass a wider set of issues. These include territorial inequalities in highly centralized political systems, environmental injustices that affect schools and communities, and the persistence of discriminatory practices—such as racism, sexism, classism, or ableism—within educational institutions and, at times, within research itself. By foregrounding these dimensions, educational justice becomes a critical lens for examining systemic inequities and interrogating how research practices may inadvertently reproduce the injustices they seek to challenge.

From this perspective, educational justice operates as an ethical and political framework. It is continually reshaped by the diverse and often conflicting encounters among disciplinary knowledge, institutional settings, and research methodologies. Discursive, material, and affective forces converge in these encounters, determining how justice is defined and enacted within educational contexts. Accordingly, educational justice should not be understood solely as a theoretical abstraction, but as a methodological and political commitment that requires ongoing vigilance regarding how scholarship can sustain or contest structures of inequality.

Reconceived in this way, educational justice demands active engagement with the power structures that sustain injustices such as sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, xenophobia, ableism, colonialism, or extractivist logics. It also requires attentiveness to how perceptions of justice and injustice shift across scales, territories, and temporalities, thereby questioning universalist or one-size-fits-all explanations.

This reconceptualization resonates with recent efforts to articulate a distinctly educational account of justice (McClintock, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Rather than borrow wholesale from political philosophy, economics, or sociology, educational research should cultivate its normative foundations. By framing educational justice as a fluid assemblage, we advance this endeavor by showing how the concept is continually reshaped at the intersections of theory, practice, and context.

In conclusion, educational justice involves more than simply applying social justice principles to education. It constitutes a vital space where ideas of justice are debated, challenged, and reshaped. What defines educational justice depends on philosophical reasoning and how research remains accountable to lived experiences, interrogates assumptions, and responds to the diverse communities and territories it serves. Crucially, advancing justice requires formulating research questions and employing methodologies that not only describe inequities but also actively expose, contest, and transform them. Pursuing educational justice, therefore, is inseparable from designing, conducting, and interpreting research.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

CM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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