



Educational justice from the perspective of postgraduate students in a medical school in Iran: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: One of the important indicators of development of human societies is justice, which also encompasses the notion of educational justice as one of its most important components. This study aimed to explore a new perspective of the concept of educational justice and its dimensions from the viewpoint of postgraduate students.

Methods: This qualitative investigation was conducted through conventional content analysis. Participants of the study, postgraduate students at a medical school, were selected from among male and female students using purposive sampling. Data collection was performed in focus groups based on the general question, "What is your understanding of the concept of educational justice and injustice?" Content analysis was used for data extraction and data analysis.

Results: A total of 20 PhD students participated in four focus groups in this research. The concepts that emerged were categorized into three major themes, nine categories, and four subcategories. "Just education" consisted of five categories: efficient curriculum, learner development, just behavior of instructors, fair assessment, and just environment. Four subcategories: competent instructor, efficient instructor recruitment, creating learning opportunities, and professionalism were included under the category of just behavior of instructors. Other categories including research supervision ability and student research funding, which fell under the main theme of fair research, and finally the theme of just management of resources included two categories, fair distribution of facilities and fair allocation of financial resources.

Conclusion: This study's findings depict the importance and necessity of efficient curriculum, learner development, justice of professor, justice of base research and fair management of resources.

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Introduction

Justice and its administration are conceived of as a fundamental and innate need of humankind¹ and a main indicator of the development of human societies.² Increased focus on this issue in the course of history shows that human beings have an innate desire for justice, and perhaps this is why efforts to implement it have always been in the forefront of many governmental policies across the globe.³ One of the most important aspects of justice is educational justice, which is an integral component of justice administration in any society.⁴

Justice has been defined as "viewing all the people equally and the possibility for all people to achieve their

rights."⁵ Justice also means providing equity in terms of equal capabilities and providing equal opportunities in accordance with the specific needs of each person.² In a modern understanding of the term, it has been defined as enjoying equal rights by all members of the society.⁶ Educational equity refers to equal opportunity for people with the same capacity to grow in the educational system.³ Universities' compliance with the principles of justice eliminates doubts and concerns regarding the violation of rights and freedom and as a results helps students feel valued in addition to encouraging them to pursue education and helping them engage in behaviors beyond the formal roles defined for them.^{5,6} On the other hand,

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injustice experienced in the educational environment results in a reduced tendency towards educational citizenship behaviors,⁶ which not only creates a sense of dissatisfaction in students but also leads to decreased educational motivation among students.⁵ Golparvar showed that educational injustice led primarily to weakened educational ethics and consequently resulted in poor adherence to the rules.⁷ In a study on justice in higher education, sub-disciplines obtained from interviews with academic deans included impact on students, quantity and quality of research publications, research funding, teaching quality and the quality of services,⁸ all of which reveal the effects of educational justice on the performance of students.

Some researchers interpret educational justice as providing equal educational opportunities for students, which may refer to the instructor's equal treatment towards students, especially in classes with considerable diversity and differences. This form of justice involves justice-based interactions and behaviors, non-discriminatory treatment, supervision tailored to students' competence, and equity in assessment.⁹ Marzoghi et al found a significant and negative correlation between educational justice and various aspects of academic burnout, including emotional exhaustion, academic disinterest, and educational inefficiency.⁹

Using the foregoing as a basis for discussion, justice is enhanced or achieved in educational settings when learners are enabled through inputs and ongoing processes in the educational environment to attain their scientific, educational, doctrinal, moral and social objectives.⁵ In line with this, research findings have demonstrated that from the perspective of university scholars, the extension of educational justice and provision of health services with universal validity should be the most important focus of educational activities.¹⁰

As for the importance and necessity of educational justice, the fundamental question of our study was, "How can educational justice be achieved according to postgraduate students' viewpoints?"

This paper introduces a new view into the issue of educational justice and exploration of postgraduate experiences of it by inquiring into the viewpoint of postgraduate students of an Iranian medical school concerning the extent to which educational justice is embodied and the strategies that can be used to administer educational justice in an educational setting.

Materials and Methods

This study was carried out based on conventional content analysis as qualitative research. As defined in the literature, the purpose of qualitative content analysis is to describe a phenomenon and is often used when existing theories or studies of an event are limited.^{11,12} The present study aimed to add to knowledge of educational justice, explore a new view of it¹³ and represent the concept of educational justice from the viewpoint of postgraduate students. Inclusion criteria included postgraduate students of the

medical school at a university (PhD in research) in either educational or research phases.

Using heterogeneous, purposive sampling,^{14,15} the participants were selected to provide the highest information level. Several focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to collect data.

The researchers first requested departments of basic medical sciences to identify possible participants and help recruit them. The research and its objectives were explained, including the facts that participation was voluntary, and participants were free to stop participating at any point during or after the FGD. Next, agreement was reached on the appropriate time and place for the FGDs. Twelve students did not participate for a variety of reasons (e.g., limited time) but no participants stopped participating. Each FGD was conducted with 4-7 participants for 60 to 90 minutes each. To obtain informed consent of the participants, explanations were provided and then permission was obtained to record the interview. The FGDs started with the general question, "What is your idea about justice and injustice in education?" and continued with questions such as, "How will educational justice be attained?" All FGDs were recorded and transcribed. A code was assigned to each FGD and each participant. Participants' selection and FGDs continued until data saturation, after which data analysis was conducted using content analysis.

Preparation of data started with the selection and definition of the unit of analysis.^{13,16,17} However, data analysis was performed along with data collection by the use of MAXQDA 10. In order for the researchers to immerse themselves in the data, entire interviews were read several times after transcription. Following this, units of meaning, sentence or paragraph were identified. Data organization included open coding, categorization and abstraction.^{13,16,17} During preliminary code extraction, key features and interesting points were extracted from the transcripts and peer checking was conducted to ensure trustworthiness of the obtained data. The number of codes extracted in this stage reached 525; these were reduced to 130 after removing similar codes and merging similar ones. It should be noted that this section of analysis was reviewed several times based on suggestions from other research fellows. In the next step, related codes were separated to be categorized. After classifying the obtained codes into subcategories, subcategories were included under larger categories. Some sub-categories and categories were revised, some were deleted, and others were transferred to adjacent categories. Finally, the themes were named and organized to answer the questions of the research.

In order to determine trustworthiness, four main criteria were used, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba.¹⁸

Data credibility was confirmed by sending the interview transcripts to other researchers who checked it before eliminating some ambiguities. Transferability was ensured

by choosing informed participants while dependability was determined based on similar answers of the participants to the same question given in different formats. In the same way, to obtain conformability, the researchers sought to avoid bias concerning the research problem before and after the interview.^{18,19}

Results

Participants of this study included 20 PhD students (nine women and eleven men) in basic medical sciences from five departments. Data interpretation revealed a diversity of views from participants concerning the concept of educational justice. In sum, the concepts were classified into three main themes, nine categories, and four subcategories (Figure 1, Table 1).

Just education was the main theme derived from the data. Other major themes included fair research and just management of resources. Just education was comprised of five categories: efficient curriculum, learner development, just behavior of instructors, fair assessment, and just environment. The subcategories of competent instructor, efficient instructor recruitment, creating learning opportunities and professionalism were subsumed under the main category of just behavior of instructors. Other categories of research supervision ability and student research funding fell under the main theme of fair research, and, finally, the general theme of just management of resources included two categories,

fair distribution of facilities and fair allocation of financial resources.

Just education

Efficient curriculum was the first and most extensive category of this theme. Here participants concentrated on subjects such as necessities, strengthening the position of basic sciences as the producer of science, students’ participation in planning based on their needs. Students also considered shortages of facilities in the department for the full execution of training programs as instances of injustice.

Focus group 3, participant 1: *“Moreover, if we do not see or experience a particular thing, even if we might have heard explanations about it a thousand times, we can never understand it full.”*

In the learner development category, the need to design varied and effective educational environments for learners using peer education, was regarded as a problem regarded as an instance of justice. As an example of injustice, students emphasized high expectations for students despite inadequate training.

Focus group 3, participant 2: *“Everyone should learn a technique; for example, I can be introduced to another person or organization to acquire a technique. After returning, I’ll be a master and can transfer my knowledge to others.”*

The category of just behavior of instructors had four subcategories, including competent instructor, efficient

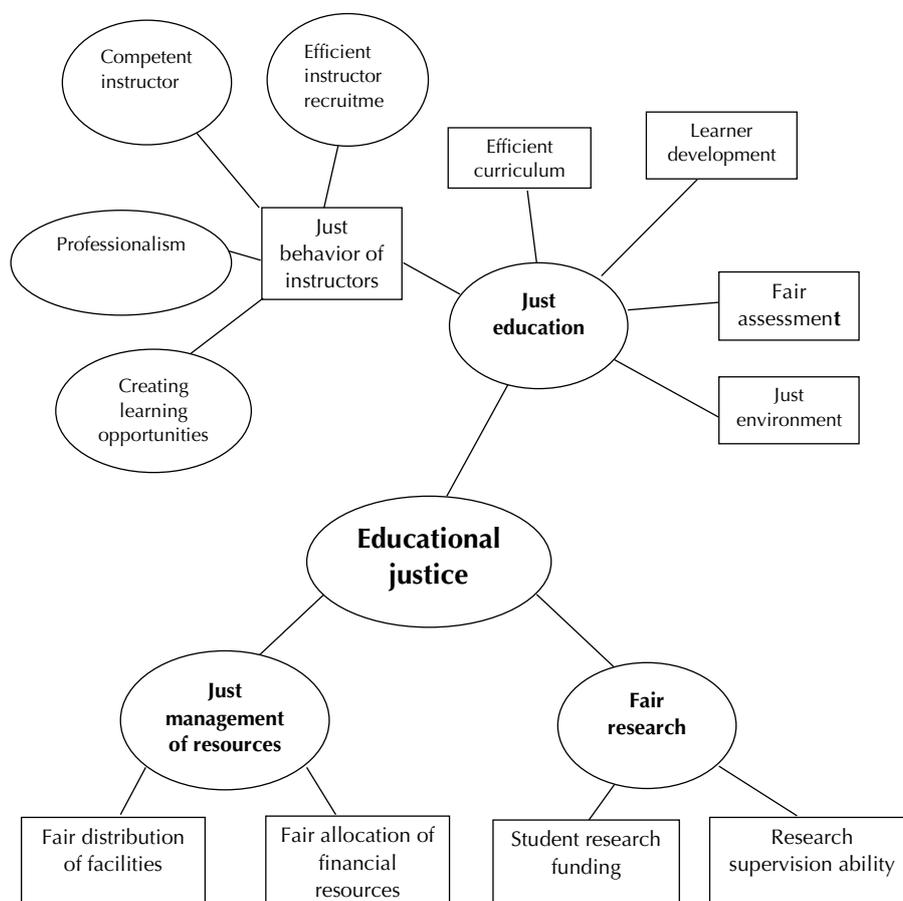


Figure 1. The categories of 3 main themes.

Table 1. Themes, categories, and subcategories

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	
Just education	Efficient curriculum	-	
	Learner development	-	
	Just behavior of instructors	Competent instructor	
		Efficient instructor recruitment	
		Creating learning opportunities	
Professionalism			
Fair research	Fair assessment	-	
	Just environment	-	
	Research supervision ability	-	
Just management of resources	Student research funding	-	
	Fair distribution of facilities	-	
	Fair allocation of financial resources	-	

instructor recruitment, learning opportunities, and professionalism.

Regarding the competent instructor subcategory, participants considered the presence of qualified professors in some departments as examples of justice. However, instructors who present inadequate and outdated scientific information was counted as an example of injustice.

The next subcategory of just behavior of instructors was efficient instructor recruitment. Participants considered the necessity to apply appropriate criteria in hiring faculty members as instances of justice.

Focus group 2, participant 1: *“Ninety percent of recruitment of faculty members, I can swear, is not based on qualifications.”*

The third subcategory for just behavior of instructors was learning opportunities. Planning for progress of low-experience and high-experience students were viewed as cases of justice by the participants. However, as cases of injustice, the following examples were outlined: outdated teaching methods, lack of transference of instructor experience, and lack of appropriate feedback to the students.

Focus group 4, participant 2: *“they did not transfer their experience to us as we expected.”*

Professionalism was the last sub-category of just behavior of instructors. In this subclass, the participants stressed the need for interaction and mutual understanding between instructors and students, and also concentrated on the principles of interpersonal relationships as examples of justice. Examples of injustice cited were some instructors overlooking students' equality and lack of commitment of some instructors to implement the curriculum.

Focus group 2, participants 7: *“I am being mentally harassed here, because the instructor claims to be a polymath and rejects whatever idea I offer.”*

The fourth category of just education was fair assessment. As examples of justice, the students referred to the necessity of orienting students on assessment criteria during the PhD program. On the other hand, the lack of proper assessment based on students' activities was cited as an instance of injustice.

Focus group 2, participant 5: *“During the semester some students try very hard, but at the end all of them are viewed*

equally.”

The last category of just education was just environment. The necessity for equal treatment of all students and the need to create a positive atmosphere for discussion were among the issues that, from the perspective of the participants, could guarantee the administration of justice. However, students' fear of pursuing their educational rights and lack of existence of a scientific environment for exchanging ideas were indicators of injustice in the educational setting as cited by the students.

Focus group 1, participants 6: *“The atmosphere does not always allow us to make our demands, for example, they do not let you defend yourself”*

Fair research

Two categories emerged for fair research. While in research supervision ability, participants stressed the need to guide students without applying pressure as an example of justice, in this case, they regarded the following problems as examples of injustice: unscientific attitude to the proposals, conflict among supervisors.

Student research funding also belonged to this theme. Obtaining a research grant as the reason for selecting a particular supervisor, shortage of funds for thesis despite its high cost were cited as examples of injustice from the perspective of the participants.

Focus group 1, participant 5: *“Production is costly; however, they cannot accept to pay several million for a plan ... they do not see that the project is ultimately going to be a diagnostic kit in the future”.*

Just management of resources

This major theme has the fair distribution of facilities as its primary category. Under this category, participants considered attempts for provision of facilities and allocation of facilities based on criteria which are in line with the requirements of a given field of study as instances of justice. However, cases of injustice relevant to this category, as articulated by the students, were monotonous routines of instructors due to the lack of up-to-date facilities and lack of students' self-actualization because of outdated resources.

Focus group 4, participant 1: *“We needed to know technical*

skills for the lab..., but surprisingly, none of the PhD students who had graduated from this university mastered these techniques."

The second category of just management of resources was fair allocation of financial resources. Here, applying wrong criteria for prioritizing clinical residents over the basic sciences residents in terms of financial resources and the economic problems of basic sciences faculty members were seen as manifestations of injustice from the perspective of participants.

Focus group 1, participant 3: *"One of our professors says that he has not even enough money to leave for a sabbatical, I mean, not by governmental fund, but by his own money, to go to see the technologies, to see what the others are doing."*

Discussion

Justice is an important topic that has significant effects on political, social, economic and cultural issues, as has been discussed widely by past and present scholars. Although educational justice has been in the focus of research in recent years and has been approached from different views, it has been addressed less frequently in the medical sciences.² This gap was the impetus behind the current study: to depict the concept of justice and injustice from the perspective of postgraduate medical students of basic sciences.

Analysis of participants' statements revealed the necessity for and importance of just education as the broadest theme of this study. As for the category of efficient curriculum, participants referred to planning that was not tailored to their level of experience and hence was not effective in establishing justice. A study on undergraduate students of nursing has shown that they thought the average effectiveness of curriculum content and educational effectiveness were at a relatively good level.²⁰

According to the participants' view, effective teaching opportunities for students and meticulous planning consonant with their level of knowledge for the development of all students were examples of justice. Studies have also demonstrated that academic growth of students, first and foremost, is linked to the effectiveness of the learning environment and teachers.²¹

Instructors are the cornerstone of education across all educational settings. The importance of their role, position and influence on students has led scholars of education to consider the following characteristics as essential. These are knowledgeability in the field, familiarity with educational skills such as teaching strategies, and awareness of and commitment to professional ethics.²² Abedini et al²³ found, similar to this study, that factors such as mastery over scientific concepts and curricular content, as well as up-to-date knowledge on the part of the instructor, had a noticeable impact on the relationship between instructors and students. In the subcategory noted as efficient instructor recruitment, in a similar way, Yousefi Maghsoudbeiki and Karimiyar Jahromy identified experienced, motivated and highly educated human resources as the most important factor in improving the

quantity and quality of education.⁴

The final subcategory of just behavior of instructors included professionalism. Compatible with our finding, the results of a study also demonstrated that from the viewpoint of the students, lack of justice-based performance in the conduct of instructors and biased behavior were indicators of the unfavorable side of educational justice: educational injustice.⁶

As for fair assessment, in another study, nursing students believed that instructors' scoring systems were based on their personal ideas as an example of injustice in evaluation and assessment.²⁴

Such a result is compatible with our findings in terms of just environment. An investigation about educational environment in India found that they also considered lack of good support from the instructor, being ridiculed, authoritarian teachers, teacher-centered classes and bad manners of instructors as examples of injustice.²⁵

Similarly, in the subcategory referred to as research supervision ability, a study on the problems encountered during thesis approval process showed that more than 40% of supervisors experienced problems regarding project budget and thesis draft approval in the research council of the department and faculty.²⁶ In contrast, results of other research on the factors increasing the quality of graduate students' dissertations revealed that factors such as financial resources of student, administrative work experience and facilities did not affect the quality of the thesis. However, factors such as the tasks of the dissertation committee influenced the quality of theses.²⁷ These differences between the two studies may originate from differences in the type of research or expectations of the system.

Fair distribution of facilities and fair allocation of financial resources were two categories of just management of resources. Similarly, Ezzati and Naderi, in an evaluation of the effects of the mechanisms of allocation of financial resources on the educational performance of students, demonstrated a significant relationship between the two variables.²⁸

Conclusion

The findings of this study depict the importance and necessity of an efficient curriculum, learner development, justice from the professor, justice in base research and fair management of resources. The experience postgraduate students have obtained from attendance in academic setting and higher education centers can help educational policy makers to administer responsive justice. One recommendation is to investigate the views of faculty members and administrators with an aim to evaluating the concept of educational justice in a more comprehensive manner. Given the challenging nature of the educational justice concept, potential hardly participant in the study.

Ethical approval

To obtain the informed consent of the participants, explanations were provided regarding confidentiality of their personal

information; following this, written permission was obtained to record the interview.

Competing interests

There is no conflict of interest.

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