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	A Qualitative Focus Group Analysis about pupils' Perceptions of School Justice in Algeria	
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Abstract This study examines students' perceptions of school justice in the Algerian educational context through a qualitative focus group approach. Ten pupils, aged 12 to 15, enrolled in public middle schools in Constantine, participated in a semi structured group discussion. Thematic analysis revealed that students conceptualize justice across three main dimensions: distributive (fair allocation of grades, sanctions, and opportunities), procedural (clear rules, consistent application), and interactional (respect and recognition in relationships). Findings indicate that perceived justice directly affects pupils' self-esteem, academic motivation, performance, school climate, and sense of belonging. Conversely, perceived injustice is associated with disengagement, reduced motivation, and interpersonal tensions. The study highlights the importance of enhancing procedural transparency, training teachers in equitable practices, and increasing student participation in decision making to foster a more inclusive and motivating educational environment.		
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Introduction

In the contemporary educational field, justice stands as a cardinal dimension shaping pupils' motivation, engagement, and holistic well-being. Pupils perceptions of justice-articulated through its distributive (fairness of outcomes),

procedural (fairness of decision-making processes), and interactional (quality of interpersonal treatment) dimensions exert a decisive influence on academic success and social integration within schools (Colquitt, 2001; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). This subjective experience of justice shapes not only learners' cognitive and affective investment but also their identity construction and sense of institutional belonging (Tyler, 1990; Peretti & Arbona, 2011).

Empirical work demonstrates that perceived fairness in school policies, teaching practices, and administrative procedures significantly correlates with positive educational trajectories. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasizes that equity supports psychological needs for autonomy and competence, catalyzing intrinsic motivation. This perspective aligns with the Rawlsian philosophical framework of justice as fairness, which posits the imperative of equitable opportunities for all learners (Rawls, 1971). Conversely, manifestations of injustice-favoritism, discrimination, or arbitrary sanctions-frequently generate frustration, disengagement, and diminished performance (Lerner, 1980; Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996).

While cross-cultural studies reveal nuanced interactions between perceived justice and school climate-McFarlin and Sweeney's (1992) research establishing, for example, the decisive impact of procedural justice on trust in school authorities-Middle Eastern and North African contexts highlight the crucial role of culturally specific factors (Al-Zahrani, 2017; Benabid & Bouslama, 2019). Nevertheless, a gap persists regarding qualitative analyses of lived experiences among students themselves in Algerian schools, where sociopolitical and institutional specificities dynamically shape the educational ecosystem (Bekkouche, 2023).

The present research addresses this deficit through a focus group methodology exploring the phenomenology of justice among Algerian students. It examines how pupils interpret fairness in pedagogical interactions, rule enforcement, and administrative decisions, along with the repercussions on self-esteem, academic motivation, and school belonging. By giving voice to student experiences, this study enriches the understanding of justice as an embodied reality and informs the development of culturally sensitive educational policies aimed at equity and inclusion.

Three research questions follow

√ How do Algerian pupils subjectively articulate the three dimensions of justice (distributive, procedural, interactional) in their daily school experiences?

√ What specific effects do perceptions of in-justice generate on identity construction and academic engagement strategies within this cultural context?

√ To what extent do pupils' normative expectations regarding educational justice reflect tensions between formal institutional frameworks and Algerian social realities?

Literature Review

The study of justice in educational settings has expanded to analyze how students' perceptions of fairness influence their academic and social experiences. Building upon the multidimensional conceptualization of justice distributive, procedural and interactional dimensions researchers have explored its effects on motivation, learning outcomes, and psychological adjustment (Greenberg, 1990; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998).

Distributive justice

Referring to the fairness of outcome distributions such as grades or resource allocation, has been linked closely to students' satisfaction and motivation (Adams, 1965). However, procedural justice, which concerns the fairness and transparency of procedures used to arrive at decisions, is increasingly recognized as critical for fostering students' trust and compliance with school rules (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Interactional justice

Considers the interpersonal treatment students receive, including respect and dignity. This facet significantly shapes students' attitudes toward teachers and institutions and influences classroom climate (Greenberg, 1993; Moorman, 1991). Studies indicate that disrespectful or dismissive interactions can erode motivation and increase school disengagement (Simons & Roberson, 2003).

Self-concept and psychological adjustment

Research by Tyler and Blader (2003) shows that when students perceive fairness, their identification with the school community and intrinsic motivation increase. Conversely, feelings of injustice may provoke anxiety, frustration, and reduction in academic persistence (Krehbiel & Cropanzano, 2000).

Cross-cultural research reveals the role of context in justice perceptions. For example, studies in non-Western educational settings highlight the influence of cultural norms and power relations on how justice is understood and enacted (Hofstede, 2001; Kim & Bonk, 2002). In Algerian and similar contexts, institutional inequalities and sociopolitical histories complicate the implementation of fair practices and shape students' experiences (Benouaret & Hamadi, 2018).

Positive school climate

Fair treatment fosters cooperation, reduces conflict, and supports student engagement both academically and socially (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Freiberg, 1999). Conversely, perceptions of injustice contribute to alienation and can increase dropout rates (Skiba et al., 2006).

Despite these insights, qualitative explorations that capture students' own voices and nuanced understanding of justice remain comparatively scarce but are essential for tailored interventions (Yukl, 2013). This study thus aims to fill this gap within the Algerian educational context.

Actuality

This research topic holds critical contemporary relevance for two key reasons:

✓ **Research Gap:** While quantitative evidence exists, qualitative insights into students' lived experiences-particularly in understudied contexts like Algeria-remain limited.

✓ **Study's Role:** It addresses this gap by centering Algerian students' voices to uncover how justice operates in their daily schooling.

The goal is to inform context-sensitive interventions that promote equity, inclusion, and positive educational outcomes.

Methodology of research

The study methodology integrates a qualitative method, which employed a focus group approach to explore Algerian students' lived experiences and perceptions of justice in their schools. The method was chosen for its ability to generate rich, interactive data revealing collective understandings, nuanced feelings, and shared meanings related to school justice.

Research Design

Participants

The focus group consisted of 10 pupils (five girls and five boys) aged between 12 and 15 years, representing cycles (middle education) and attending various public schools in Constantine, (Algeria). This sampling aimed to capture diverse perspectives shaped by gender, age, educational level, and school context.

Data Collection

The discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in Arabic, the participants' native language, to facilitate natural expression. The facilitator used a semi-structured interview guide developed based on prior quantitative findings and theoretical constructs, covering:

- ♦ General perceptions of justice in school.
- ♦ Examples of fair or unfair treatment.
- ♦ Qualities of a just person.
- ♦ Effects of perceived justice/injustice on self-esteem and academic performance.
- ♦ Impact on school climate and interpersonal relationships.
- ♦ Influence on school belonging and motivation.

The full set of questions was used flexibly, allowing participants to deepen or expand on topics depending on the discussion flow.

Data Management and Analysis

The session was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed through a thematic coding process, guided by the three main justice dimensions (distributive, procedural, interactional) and emergent themes related to psychological and educational outcomes.

Coding was conducted manually, with iterative reading and categorization to identify recurrent patterns, contradictions, and noteworthy illustrative quotations. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and rich representation of student voices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants and their guardians were briefed about the study aims, confidentiality, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. All names and identifying information were anonymized in transcripts and reports to protect privacy.

Results

The thematic analysis of the focus group revealed five primary interconnected domains reflecting pupils' perceptions and experiences of justice at school

♦ **Perception of Justice in School:** Pupils consistently defined justice as equal and respectful treatment for all pupils without favoritism or discrimination. Justice was closely associated with fairness in the application of rules, transparent grading, and balanced opportunities to participate.

"Justice Means everyone is treated the same and the rules are clear." (S1)

"Sometimes teachers prefer certain students because of who they know." (S8)

Several participants described experiences of favoritism or unequal treatment, noting that teachers sometimes showed partiality linked to students' behavior, gender, or parental connections.

"I noticed some students get better grades even if they don't deserve it." (S4)

“Boys and girls are treated differently by some teachers.” (S3)

♦**Impact of Justice on Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-being:** Perceptions of fairness appeared to be strongly linked with students’ confidence and self-image. Participants explained feeling valued and motivated when treated justly, contrasting with feelings of doubt or discouragement after experiences perceived as unjust.

“When I am treated fairly, I feel proud and more confident.” (S3)

“Being treated unfairly made me question my abilities.” (S7)

Instances of injustice, such as perceived arbitrary sanctions or biased grading, were described as negatively affecting self-esteem and contributing to withdrawal.

“Feeling unfairly punished made me want to avoid class.” (S6)

♦**Relationship Between Justice Perceptions and Academic Outcomes:** Most pupils believed that equitable treatment in distributing opportunities, such as chances to answer or participate in activities, directly enhanced their academic engagement and results.

“If everyone has the same chance to answer, I try harder.” (S4)

“Fairness motivates me to do better.” (S1)

Conversely, a few participants reported that perceived injustice lowered their motivation, sometimes leading to absenteeism or decreased effort.

“When I feel I won’t get a fair grade, I don’t care about studying as much.” (S2)

♦**Influence on School Climate and Interpersonal Relations:** Pupils emphasized that justice fostered a calmer and safer school atmosphere, reducing conflicts and encouraging cooperation. Injustice, particularly favoritism and discrimination, was associated with tension and even violence among students.

“Justice makes the school environment peaceful.” (S5)

“Unfairness leads to fights and arguments.” (S8)

Respectful and consistent treatment by teachers and administrators was highlighted as key to building mutual trust.

“When teachers are fair, we respect them more.” (S10)

♦**Justice and Sense of School Belonging:**

Justice perceptions strongly influenced feelings of pride in belonging to the school and willingness to remain and participate fully in school life.

“I feel like this school is my home when they treat me fairly.” (S1)

“Unfair treatment makes me want to leave or avoid activities.” (S9)

Participants linked justice with stronger peer relationships and more positive teacher interactions, reinforcing their engagement.

“Fairness helps us get along better with classmates and teachers.” (S7)

Table 1: Summary of Key Themes

Theme	Summary of Findings	Representative Quote
Perception of justice	Justice = equal, respectful treatment; concerns about favoritism & unequal rules application	“Justice means all treated the same.” (S1)
Impact on self-esteem	Fairness boosts confidence; injustice causes doubt, withdrawal	“Fair treatment makes me proud.” (S3)
Influence on academic outcomes	Equity motivates study and effort; injustice diminishes engagement	“If fair, I try harder.” (S4)
Effects on school climate	Justice fosters peace and cooperation; injustice leads to conflict and disrespect	“Unfairness causes fights.” (S8)
Links to school belonging and motivation	Justice strengthens pride and belonging; injustice provokes disengagement and desire to leave	“Fairness makes me feel at home.” (S1)

Source: prepared by authors.

This analysis demonstrates that Algerian pupils experience justice in schools as a multidimensional construct directly affecting their emotional, cognitive, and social school experiences. These qualitative insights complement quantitative findings by revealing processes through which justice perceptions concretely shape motivation, achievement, and school connectedness.

Discussion

The qualitative findings from the focus group provide rich insights into how Algerian pupils perceive and experience justice within their schools, confirming and expanding existing theoretical and empirical knowledge on educational justice through:

♦ **Multidimensional Perception of Justice:** Participants consistently articulated justice in terms resonant with the three widely recognized dimensions: distributive (fair distribution of grades, rewards, and opportunities), procedural (transparency and consistency in applying rules), and interactional justice (respect and dignity in interpersonal treatment). This aligns with Colquitt’s (2001) integrative framework and supports studies emphasizing that justice perception is not unidimensional but encompasses multiple facets that collectively shape student experiences.

♦ **Justice as a Foundation for Motivation and Well-being:** Consistent with Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory, pupils linked fair treatment to increased motivation, self-esteem, and engagement. When justice was perceived as lacking, participants reported demotivation, decreased effort, and feelings of exclusion, which echoes prior findings that perceived unfairness adversely affects student adjustment and achievement (Lerner, 1980; Peretti & Arbona, 2011).

♦ **Impact on School Climate and Belonging:** Pupils’ reports that justice fosters a peaceful, respectful atmosphere with better peer and teacher relationships support research showing positive school climates depend on perceived fairness (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). Conversely, injustice contributed to conflicts and alienation, underscoring how justice perceptions influence the social dynamics critical for learning and participation (Tyler & Blader, 2003).

♦ **Contextual Specificities and Cultural Considerations:** The expression of justice-related concerns through experiences of favoritism based on social connections, gender differences, and disciplinary inconsistencies reflects

broader structural and cultural factors in Algerian education, as noted by Bekkouche (2023) and Benouaret and Hamadi (2018). This emphasizes the need for culturally and contextually grounded interventions that address systemic inequities while promoting justice at interpersonal and procedural levels.

Contributions and Practical Implications

By amplifying pupil voices, this study contributes qualitative depth to largely quantitative literature, revealing how justice functions as a lived, relational process shaping motivation, achievement, and school belonging. The findings suggest practical steps for educational stakeholders: enhancing transparency, training teachers in equitable practices, fostering student participation in decision-making, and developing conflict resolution mechanisms.

Future Research

The study's qualitative scope and sample size limit generalizability. Conducting longitudinal or multi-informant studies-including teachers and administrators-would enrich understanding of justice dynamics over time and from multiple perspectives. Exploring the impact of justice perceptions on actual academic outcomes quantitatively would also strengthen the evidence base.

Conclusion

This focus group study offers a nuanced qualitative perspective on how Algerian pupils in middle and secondary public schools experience and interpret justice within the school environment. The results underscore that justice is a multidimensional construct-encompassing distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions-which directly influences pupils' motivation, self-esteem, academic outcomes, school climate, and sense of belonging.

By amplifying pupil voices, our findings go beyond statistical correlations to reveal the mechanisms through which perceptions of fairness or unfairness manifest in daily school life: transparent grading and rule enforcement, equitable opportunities, and respectful interpersonal treatment are recurrent demands from pupils. Conversely, perceptions of favoritism, gender-based treatment differences, or arbitrary sanctions generate frustration, disengagement, and erosion of trust.

The implications are significant for educational practice and policy. Strengthening procedural transparency, training educators in equitable relational skills, and fostering avenues for pupil participation in decision-making represent concrete, culturally relevant strategies to promote fairness. Given the documented links between justice perception and positive academic and social outcomes, justice should be recognized as a core pillar of school quality and student well-being.

While the study's qualitative and localized nature limits generalization, it provides a solid foundation for further research, including longitudinal and comparative designs across different Algerian regions, and incorporating multiple perspectives (teachers, administrators, parents). Ultimately, placing justice at the heart of school governance and pedagogy is essential for building more inclusive, motivating, and cohesive educational environments.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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