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*Special Collection: Limitations and Possibilities of Justice
in Education and the Implications for Sustainable Futures*

EDITORIAL

Limitations and possibilities of justice in education and the implications for sustainable futures

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Global agendas for sustainable futures rely heavily on the role played by education in
promoting justice and changing young people's attitudes and behaviours. The articles
in this special collection jointly demonstrate the challenges, as well as messages of hope,
for the ambitious and transformative vision of education that is being increasingly
promoted in academic and policy debates (United Nations, 2015; Tikly et al, 2020;
Kwauk and Casey, 2021; UNESCO, 2022; Mbembe, 2023; Sobe, 2023).

The articles have been organised into three sections and include empirical and
theoretical contributions. Articles in Section 1 illuminate how unjust experiences
of schooling disrupt expectations about the universally positive contribution that
education is making to global development; while those in Section 2 reflect on
alternative and innovative approaches to education that are grounded in the place
where young people live and connect with their everyday experiences to enable critical
thinking. Section 3 closes the special collection with two theoretical contributions
that consider how education could be reimagined to enable more socially and
environmentally just futures for young people.

The articles have been developed from two large-scale international comparative
projects that were funded through the ambitious and sadly discontinued Global
Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). The fund sought to enable equitable research
partnerships between researchers in the Global North and South – see Nwako
et al (2023) for a discussion of the fund and the impact of UK aid cuts on its

collaborative aims. One of the projects, JustEd,[1] brought together theories of social, environmental, epistemic and transitional (in)justice to examine how secondary school systems in Nepal, Peru and Uganda are addressing justice and sustainability concerns. The Transformative Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF[2]) Project, on the other hand, was a network of research and practice hubs in India, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland and South Africa that brought together researchers and local communities to co-construct innovative and transformative educational solutions to locally relevant problems. Together these projects address two sides of the same problem: the limitations and possibilities of justice in education and the implications for sustainable futures.

While the collection is mainly focused on education, we join other authors in seeking to move away from the dominant tendency to think in disciplinary silos in relation to key global development challenges (Bengtsson et al, 2018; Unterhalter, 2021). The complexity and urgency of many of these challenges – from environmental crises and growing inequalities to polarisation of knowledges – require us to bring different conceptual lenses and place-based perspectives and think together across disciplines to enable systemic reform. What is clear from the articles is that the kinds of transformations that are necessary cannot be achieved by focusing only on specific aspects of education or solely on education without attending to broader social and environmental justice issues. The articles also emphasise the importance of listening closely to lived experiences of those in situations of injustice when considering how to promote change.

The four research articles in Section 1 are from the JustEd study. These include qualitative explorations of learners' lived experiences of (in)justice in education in Nepal, Peru and Uganda, alongside one article that provides a quantitative analysis of young people's experiences, attitudes, knowledge and actions related to justice across the three countries. Despite significant political, socio-economic and cultural differences, all three countries are affected by the global climate crisis and have histories of cultural and historical contestations of land rights, social inequalities, exploitation, and hierarchies of class and identity. The articles also reveal significant similarities in the ways that justice plays out in secondary education. This includes the ways that justice-related issues are often presented in curricula and textbooks in normative and superficial ways, and the prescriptive and rigid teaching methods that prevent young people from connecting their learning to their own identities and experiences. These uncritical and reductive pedagogies also often fail to support young people to understand complexity and the ways their lives and opportunities are influenced by broader social, political and cultural dynamics. Crucially, the evidence presented in the articles shows how these pedagogies and curricula limit young people's expected future actions related to justice and sustainability.

The first article by Paudel et al (2024) traces the trajectories of environmental education from policy and curricula through to the ways that such issues are taught in secondary school classrooms in three different regions of Nepal. They highlight several disconnections between different aspects of the education system, most prominently in the ways that learners are preventing from connecting their learning to their own identities and experiences. The examples provide powerful evidence of the intersection of environmental and epistemic injustices in the teaching and learning of environmental issues. Their conclusions advocate for place-based pedagogies that connect to young people's experiences

and 'nurturing a sense of responsibility, fairness, inclusivity and equity – all of which are essential for education as a tool for environmental justice and education for sustainable development'.

The intersection of multiple injustice concerns is also a central focus of the article by Milligan et al (2024). The authors present rich, and often harrowing, accounts of how the strict enforcement of English–only school language policies in Northern Uganda are responsible for persistent corporal punishment, fear and shame. They argue that such physical violence comes together with systemic and cultural forms of violence to govern young people's everyday experiences of schooling, with clear implications for how they participate in the classroom.

Balarin and Rodríguez (2024) discuss the shallow pedagogies and equally shallow forms of learning that dominate many classrooms in countries in the Global South. While making broader connections to the other JustEd country studies, this article focuses on findings from the Peruvian case. Here the emergence of such pedagogies is linked to the establishment of a narrowly defined outcomes–based model of education in a context marked by policy discontinuities and limited support for teachers. The authors show how these pedagogies can reproduce epistemic injustices as they promote little to no critical thinking, are disconnected from students' experiences and do not encourage them to problematise reality nor to grasp complexity. This, in turn, limits students' possibilities of participating as equals in the consumption and production of knowledge.

The final article in Section 1 helps to make connections across the first three individual country cases. Shields et al (2024) show that it is positive experiences of justice, in and out of school, that are most likely to lead to learners taking action to contribute to justice. The survey results, thus, demonstrate how the epistemic injustices highlighted in the other articles limit students' potential actions. This has clear implications for the ways that education is currently understood to contribute to the broader justice agenda.

Section 2 of the special collection includes one research article and two policy interventions that discuss alternative approaches to education for justice and sustainability. All three articles include data and analysis gathered through TESF–related projects in different parts of the Global South. The research article, written by Copsey et al (2024) discusses the use of a knowledge co-creation methodology that was used to understand and address education and climate challenges in Rwandan schools, especially in the context of a Competence-Based Curriculum. Speaking directly to many of the problems identified by authors in Section 1, this article shows practical ways in which connections to place and experience can effectively be made and how these can enrich school practices and generate more significant forms of learning. In highlighting the potent role of knowledge co-creation to address what UNESCO (2022) has described as the triple crisis of inclusion, quality and relevance, the article – without explicitly making use of the term – also contributes to highlight the fundamental role of epistemic justice for reimagining education and its contribution to just and sustainable futures.

The two shorter intervention articles also discuss practical and concrete ways of making positive changes. Jayakumar et al (2024) focus on the long-standing work of the Vishwa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust in the education of Indigenous communities in Gudalur, India, in particular their approach to 'the village as a site of learning'. The intervention highlights the essential role of community ownership in educational

initiatives and provides practical examples of how education can be situated within the place where learners live. Letty et al (2024) present a practical intervention that sought to address limitations faced by rural schools in South Africa, where teachers receive little support, families often struggle to support their children's schooling and language barriers inhibit students' learning. The intervention introduced a novel form of food gardens in selected schools and developed a series of activities around them. The gardens themselves were collaboratively built with students, engaging and extending their prior knowledge of agricultural practices; they served to grow food, but more importantly they demonstrated a different way of engaging students in learning, showing local educators how to draw from contextual knowledges and the role of collective learning and information sharing.

Together the three articles make a case for connecting school practice to students' experiences and to the specific problems and issues that are present in the places where they live. The articles highlight the importance of knowledge co-production in developing educational solutions to ensure local relevance. They also show how alternative curricula and pedagogic approaches exist and offer promising – albeit small scale – examples of how education could be done differently to enable more just futures.

Section 3 concludes the special collection with two articles that look across the themes, arguments and evidence presented in the preceding contributions. Our article (Balarin and Milligan, 2024) provides a conceptual elaboration that teases out how epistemic injustice manifests in different aspects of schooling and how, in turn, this limits education's contribution to justice and sustainability. We propose the need to refocus educational actions around the idea of an epistemic core that grounds educational practices on the relationship between rich pedagogies, openness to students' experiences, and a broad range of epistemic resources. This notion, which borrows from Elmore's (2008) *instructional core*, places epistemic justice at the heart of educational transformations needed for more just and sustainable futures. Leon Tikly's (2024) provocation pulls together ideas from the different articles in the special collection to support his argument about the need for system-wide responses if more just education systems are to be possible. Specifically, the author highlights how justice aims can only be realised if education engages with political struggles for justice.

Collectively, the nine articles foreground the importance of education as justice to enable the transformations often called for in current global sustainability agendas. The articles support a shift in education from seeking to change individual behaviours to changing education systems. They also highlight the ways that experiences of injustice outside of school place a clear limit on what education systems can do to promote change. There is an urgency, therefore, to consider educational goals in the context of other necessary structural transformations. While all forms of (in)justice are connected, the articles also clearly show the transversal and grounding role of epistemic (in)justice when thinking about education for justice and sustainability. Finally, the articles emphasise the need to bring together community-led change alongside broader structural shifts. For this, and as demonstrated by the many powerful examples in the special collection, it is fundamental to listen closely to people living with different forms of injustice. Many of the articles explore limitations to the justice and sustainability agenda in education. However, they also strive to articulate positive visions for change and, through this, harness the possibilities of a transformative education for all.

Notes

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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