

• Vol. 3, No. 1 • 2026 • (pp. 282–302) •
<https://tidsskrift.dk/irtp/>

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7146/irtp.v3i1.167391>

Articulations of Inequality in Educational Psychology Practice

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Abstract

This article delves into the historical and theoretical dimensions of inequality within educational psychology (EP) practice. From its inception, EP practice has implicitly addressed inequality, initially focusing on malnutrition and poverty, which later transformed into concerns about innate and inherited IQ. The article identifies two dominant articulations of inequality in EP practice: clinical assessment and social justice. These articulations, while intertwined, highlight the evolving understanding and practices around inequality within the field. It is argued that the clinical-assessment articulation of inequality overlooks structural and social components of inequality in favor of individualized understandings. The social justice articulation emphasizes identity and representational issues related to inequality. However, our claim is, that this approach paradoxically also risks individualizing issues of inequality, thus across both articulations, inequality often becomes a methodological concern, either for developing evidence-based practices or for individual action by educational psychologists. This focus risks detaching inequality from its social and historical contexts. The article argues for theoretical development and engagement to highlight the normative, historical situatedness of EP practice and to address the risk of detaching inequality from its social and historical conditions.

Keywords: (in)equality, (in)justice, educational psychology practice, school psychology, articulation

Introduction

Within the field of educational psychology practice (EP practice)¹, it is evident that inequality has always (implicitly) been a central issue. Drawing on Fagen and Wise's (2007) historical introduction to school psychology in the US, Shriberg et al. (2008, p. 454) note that EP practice was originally grounded in 'a concern' for ensuring equal access to education for all students. However, this notion of equal access did not initially apply to every child. In the early days of the profession, 'all' students were primarily referred to as white and upper-class students (Merrell, Erwin & Gimbel, 2012). Furthermore, the early concern for students was not rooted in a humanistic perspective, as equal access to education historically has been linked to dominant economic and social changes in the 19th and beginning 20th centuries:

The process of industrialisation in Western societies during the early nineteenth century produced a complex technology and an elaborate division of labour. It became apparent in England that a socialised, 'educated' work force was required in order to fulfil the needs of industry and of the military machine required by a great power. (Dessent, 2022[1978], p. 24)².

Thus, with the birth of EP practice during a historical initiation of universal compulsory education in many Western countries in the 19th century, the assessment of 'appropriate' educational participation of students became a core task for educational psychologists (EP's). The primary role of EP's was to develop techniques to separate the 'suitable' from the 'unsuitable' within the new reality of mass education. This, in turn, placed educational inequality as a nested dilemma within the segregating practices of EP's, both historically and in contemporary times.

Through concepts such as e.g. 'disproportionality' or 'cultural biases', critical scholars have long critiqued the segregating practices of EP's for potentially reproducing patterns of inequality (see e.g. Corcoran & Vassallo, 2024). One dominant critique focuses on the limitations of traditional assessment and intervention approaches, which are often criticized for failing to adequately consider cultural, racial, social, economic, and gendered issues, thereby reinforcing patterns of educational inequality (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Thus, while addressing issues of inequality is

¹In this article we use the term educational psychology practice (EP practice) for the profession of educational psychology in both UK, US, as well as Scandinavia, despite different historical roots and practices connected to the profession of educational psychology and therefore also different terminologies (see the US tradition connected to 'school psychology' or 'school psychology practice' e.g. Fagan & Delugach, 1984; Merrell, Ervin & Gimpel, 2012, the 'profession of educational psychology' or 'educational psychology practice' within a UK tradition, see e.g. Arnold & Hardy, 2013; Gillham, 2022[1978]; Leadbetter & Arnold, 2013, and 'pedagogical psychological services' in Scandinavian traditions see e.g. Kirkegaard Jensen & Szulevicz, 2024; Køppe, 1983). Thus, despite important differences in history, in societal models, in political systems, in pedagogical traditions etc. between US, UK and Scandinavia, in relation to the question of interest in this article (inequality), we see common patterns in the ways that inequality has historically been articulated within EP practice with important consequences for the concrete practices (assessment, counseling etc.) around 'inequality' in EP practice.

² See e.g. Køppe (1983) for the same analysis in a Danish contexts and Merrell, Ervin and Gimbel (2012) in a US context.

presented as a core issue within EP practice, the field is also criticized for its biased assessment practices that lead to biased outcomes that disadvantage certain student groups (Dombrowski et al., 2022; Sabnis & Proctor, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2019).

Despite the (implicit) focus on (un)equal access to education, psychology as a discipline can, in many ways, be said to have delegated questions regarding inequality to other professions and disciplines. Educational research thus has a rich tradition—drawing, among others, on the theories of Marx and Bourdieu—of thematizing how inequality operates and is reproduced both implicitly and explicitly within the education system. Going back to psychology, psychologists have e.g. predominantly left the study of class to sociologists, primarily treating class or ‘socioeconomic status’ as a variable to be statistically controlled for, if considered at all (Holt & Griffin, 2005). Furthermore, as Højholt (2016; Højholt & Røn Larsen, 2021) describes, when psychologists, including educational psychologists, address issues of inequality, it is often understood within the model of ‘intergenerational transmission’, implying an “automatic process of transfer between children’s family backgrounds and their performance in school” (Højholt, 2016, p. 147). Despite highlighting ‘complexity, interplay and interrelated meanings’ (see e.g. Markward, Dozier, Hooks & Markward, 2000; Saltaris et al., 2004), Højholt (2016, p. 149) argues that “the very concepts of “transmission,” “prediction” and “mechanism” seem unchallenged and turn the interventions toward “these individuals” living in “a stressful environment with a lack of emotional and financial support” (p. 149). Consequently, this focus on specific (‘poor’ or ‘ethnic’ or ‘disadvantaged’) individuals becomes the center of the analysis, neglecting the historical and concrete conditions in which ‘these individuals’ are situated. As a result, psychologists have largely ignored the historical, structural aspects within societies that contribute to maladjustment, placing greater emphasis on individual responses to these ‘factors’.

However, this article engages with a current trend across the humanities and social sciences, including the broader field of educational psychology: a renewed interest in issues related to inequality, often connected to discussions around the category of class. The present article primarily adopts European—particularly Scandinavian—and Anglo-American perspectives. It should be noted that distinct social policy frameworks operate within these regions, which the article does not endeavor to examine in detail. After several years in the shadows of other categories – gender, sex, race, culture (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Reimers, 2007; Forest, Garrison & Kimmel, 2015) – class has reclaimed its central position in the historical discussion of inequality in income, affiliation, health, education, democratic participation, and so forth (e.g. within sociology see Aulenbacher & Dörre, 2019; Cheisi, 2022; Savage, 2015; within psychology, see e.g. Day, Rickett and Woolhouse, 2020; Kiebler & Steward, 2023; Manstead, 2018, and within education, see e.g. Noltemeyer, Mujic & Mcloughlin, 2012). More broadly, the reappearance of class in scientific analysis is linked to a re-orientation in theoretical and philosophical thinking arguing, that ‘the material’ and ‘the social’ are closely connected, and that the critical social theories of the 1960s and 1970s occupied with discourse and linguistics forgot or explained the material as either subordinated to the discursive or theorized as a consequence of the discursive (Jensen, 2021). In this reorientation towards the material in philosophical and theoretical thinking, Hastrup (2010) speaks, for example, of a topographical turn in anthropology, which (re)inscribes place, geography, and materiality in scientific analyses. Furthermore, inspired by Bruno Latour and Science and Technology Studies (STS) as well as Barad’s (2003) new materialism, the human and social sciences speak of an ‘ontological turn’ or as Trentmann (2009) puts it, a turn towards ‘things’. The return of class is linked to these philosophical discussions.

Among the dominant perspectives in this renewed focus on inequality is the work of economist Thomas Piketty (2014). Piketty's analyses underscore the escalating global inequality, emphasizing the enduring significance of accumulated wealth from the past over current income. In the realm of education, Piketty's analysis echoes longstanding sociological findings that educational achievements do not consistently lead to increased social mobility (Tarlau, 2016). Although more indirectly, several of these insights have also gradually influenced EP practice. Thus, despite inequality being a (implicit) perennial issue in EP, there is a growing acknowledgment that the focus on inequality is intensifying. This trend is emphasized by Schulze et al. (2017), who highlight the increasing momentum of the social justice agenda within psychology, particularly in EP practice. Furthermore, recent demographic shifts, such as the rising proportion of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the American education system (Weeks & Sullivan, 2024) and numerous European educational systems (Fine-Davis & Faas, 2014), alongside global increases in mental health issues (Höghberg, 2021; Jacobsen, 2024.), special class expenditures (Szulevicz et al., 2024), and school absenteeism (Kearney et al., 2022), have refocused attention on inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing school closures further accentuated existing disparities among students and families, illustrating how crises exacerbate existing inequalities (Szulevicz, 2023). These developments collectively underscore the multifaceted reasons for the renewed emphasis on inequality, both broadly and specifically within educational psychology and EP practice.

However, what is and has been captured in the conceptualization(s) of and practices around *inequality* within the field of EP practice? And what characterizes the understandings and practices of EPs when engaging with the issue and the modern ideal of creating equal access to education for all children?

To our knowledge, a historical and theoretical analysis of how inequality is understood and addressed within EP practice has not been conducted. And although several similarities can be identified within EP practice, the field is also characterized by significant differences in both the understanding of inequality and in how EPs should address the dynamics of inequality. Based on a historical and theoretical analysis of the field of EP practice, we have identified two dominant 'articulations' (Hall, 2019[1986]) of inequality that have characterized educational psychology practice since the field was established in the 1890s-1930s in many Western countries until now: 1) a *clinical assessment articulation of inequality* and 2) a *social justice articulation of inequality*. These two articulations are not at all entirely detached from each other (in fact, often they intertwine), nor are the two articulations intended to be exhaustive. Rather they serve as an analytical division aimed at illustrating how the ideas and practices around (in)equality have been produced and transformed within the field of EP practice and what consequences these articulations have for the ways in which EP's work with and around inequality within the field of education.

Articulation as an analytical tool

The British cultural sociologist Stuart Hall uses the concept of articulation as a conceptual tool to understand and describe how social formations are historically and socially produced (Hall, 1985, 1986, 1996). Thus, issues like inequality understood as an articulation is a way of grasping how inequality is continuously transformed in praxis.

In Hall's (2019 [1986], pp. 234-235) definition,

'articulate' means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an 'articulated' lorry [truck]: a lorry where the front [cab] and back [trailer] can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another (...). An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions (...). You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made?

Hall (2019[1980], p. 197) elaborates that an articulation is a "structure" – not a "random association". In this, he points out an essential feature of the concept of articulation: the relationship between different parts that together form such an articulated combination is a power relationship – "relations of dominance and subordination" (Hall, 2019[1980], p. 197). This power relation clarifies the conflictual tension inherent in articulations. Consequently, articulations of inequality are both practical and normative formations. Between the lines lies Hall's confrontation with what he terms a 'vulgar materialism' (Hall, 2019[1980], 1986) – a teleological reading of Marxism as a notion of historical laws that lead society in a particular, determined direction (Jensen, 2012). Hall (1986) subsequently refers to this critique as "Marxism without guarantees". Through the concept of articulation and the discussion between "structure and practice" (with reference to Althusser in Hall, 1985, pp. 95-96), Hall is concerned with social practice neither as a predetermined or fixed 'structure' nor a random 'structure'. Thus, our lives are practiced under specific, social and material conditions, and our experiences and conceptions of the world therefore cannot be separated from these conditions. Therefore, the study of articulations must necessarily relate to practice. Articulations are historical, material productions, and their structure (and the inherent conflict) cannot be predetermined (in accordance with Hall's fight with the concept of ideology), but must be demonstrated concretely and empirically:

The principal theoretical reversal accomplished by 'no necessary correspondence' is that determination is transferred from the genetic origins of class or other social forces in a structure to the effects or results of a practice (Hall, 1985, p. 95).

If we are then to understand how EPs understand and address inequality within EP practice, we need to examine how the issue of inequality has continuously been produced and transformed within this field, and what these production and transformation processes are and have been connected to. Thus, articulations are not merely products of theoretical developments³. The articulations of inequality within EP practice are transformed in close connection with the birth of

³ There is a tendency within especially the US tradition of school psychology research to write the history of the field through – first and foremost – isolated, theoretical thoughts often encapsulated in individual, white men ("Father[s] of American Psychology" as put by Florell (2018, p. 22: e.g. Stanley Hall, Lightner Witmer, Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman in US School Psychology). However, as put bud Merrell, Ervin and Gimbel (2012, p. 19) "school psychology did not develop in a social or cultural vacuum". Nielsen (2008, p. 121) describes the same tendency to write the story of educational psychology through theories of thought distanced from the broader societal developments. Danziger's authorship (e.g. 1997) extends this analysis and criticism to the entire discipline of (Western) psychology.

and historical developments of EP practice. As put by Popkewitz (2017, p. 245), such an understanding emphasizes the ‘materiality of knowledge’.

The next part of the article provides an analytical outline of two dominant articulations of inequality within EP practice: 1) A clinical-assessment articulation and 2) a social justice articulation. The chronology of the articulations is historical, beginning with the birth and early days of the profession, moving through societal changes in the 1940s-1970s, and concluding in the 2020s. This epochal presentation aims to ‘link’ the analysis of inequality within EP practice to the specific societal conditions in which these articulations are situated (Danziger, 1997). However, this analytical presentation has the risk of being misunderstood as an understanding of inequality and EP history, as a progressively advancing process, where the end of one epoch is marked by the complete replacement of a new epoch. This could imply that practices related to inequality were one thing in the first epoch, became something entirely different (and slightly better) in the second epoch, and again something completely new (and even better) in the last epoch. Drawing on Leaheys (1992) concept of ‘whig histories’, Martin and Mclelland (2013, p. 8) describe this as a dominant tendency within psychology to

portray historical events as having direct relevance to contemporary concerns and research questions (what is called “presentism”), a rational and ameliorative evolution (“progressivism”), and an independence from social, political, and other contextual influences (“internalism”).

Thus, a ‘whig’ version of history “sees history as a series of progressive steps leading up to our current state of enlightenment (...) and tells the story of science in terms of how brilliant scientists discovered the truth known to us today” (Leahey, 1992, p. 35)

Thus, the chronological historicity connected to the outline of articulations of inequality below is an *analytical* approach – and as it will be demonstrated, the two articulations are to be found in current EP practice, sometimes separate, sometimes intertwined.

Articulations of inequality within EP practice

A clinical-assessment articulation of inequality

In many ways, the historical roots of this articulation of inequality trace back to the origin of the profession, where EP practice involved identifying and assessing which students should be segregated into a special education setting (see also Szulevicz, 2025). As put by the American historian Fagan (2003, p. 449) within the field of school psychology – “its [EP practice] dominant role was assessment to meet public education’s need for diagnoses for special class placement”. The EPs almost exclusively had (and still have today, if connected to this assessment tradition) “test-and-place assessment roles” (Merrell, Ervin & Gimbel, 2012, p. 14). However, the segregation and placement had a racial and class related pattern from the beginning. Baker and Benjamin (2013) describe how both immigration and migration brought a variety of cultures, ethnicities, languages e.g. in the rapidly growing population in the beginning of the 20s century in the US, and that “the public school emerged as the social institution most likely to achieve unity within the diversity that was America” (Baker & Benjamin, 2013, p. 97). In a gloomier tone

Merrell, Ervin and Gimbel (2012) describe how the colonial period of US colored the understanding of ‘public education’, including the practice of segregating those students who did not ‘fit in’ in the early days of EP practice in the US:

Native Americans were essentially left out, Asians and individuals of Hispanic descent did not yet exist in large enough numbers to develop critical mass for advocacy, and laws throughout the southern states prohibited educating African American slaves, who existed in large numbers. There were relatively few exceptions to this state of affairs. By the advent of the Reconstruction era in the late 1800s, African American children began to be offered formal opportunities for public schooling in increasingly greater numbers, but for the most part and for many years these opportunities existed in separate systems that were operated at a severe disadvantage, with far fewer resources than other public schools (Merrell, Ervin & Gimbel, 2012, p. 25; see also Baker & Benjamin, 2013, p. 97).

Moreover, as described by Rury (2016), especially economic conditions made it nearly impossible for children working in mines, factories, etc. to attend school (see also Andersen (2007) and Coninck-Smith (2000) for a similar analysis within a Danish context at that time). And if they managed to enter school, Florell (2018, pp. 23-24) characterizes the challenges of this new group of ‘problematic’ students as

including malnutrition, economic hardship, learning problems, and chronic disease. Whereas such problems previously had deterred these students from enrolling in public schools, compulsory schooling laws paved the way for their attendance. In response, schools developed special programs to address the needs of students who were experiencing learning problems.

Thus, from the beginning of EP practice, patterns of poverty (malnutrition, economic hardship, chronic disease) were transformed into ‘learning problems’ within the new public school system. Within an English context, Lowe (2021) likewise describes how these societal changes resulting in compulsory education for all children *produced* educational inequality in the UK, and importantly, that the birth of EP practice transformed these inequalities in wealth and power into inherited, innate intelligence and skills that EPs through the techniques of IQ test batteries were expected to help schools to trace and solve. The ongoing development of the intelligence test thus stands as a central pillar in the development of the function and professionalism of EPs in many Western countries (see e.g. Brown, 1992; Kaufmann, 2000; Ydesen, 2011; Ørskov & Ydesen, 2018). Importantly, the understanding of those students now characterized as having ‘learning problems’, understood as problems related to IQ, is interwoven in the biological determinism ingrained in many of the prominent psychological thinkers described as ‘Fathers of American Psychology’ (following Florell, 2018), especially within EP practice – “Scholars such as Goddard, Terman and Gessel (...) adopted the biological determinism in relation to the inheritance of intelligence” (Baker & Benjamin, 2013, p. 100). Thus, there is an ingrained pattern of inequality (and race) in the introduction of IQ testing in the educational system by EPs.

Of course, this was not a direct or desired understanding of EPs in the early days of the profession. Many of the first EPs were trained to function “primarily as psychometricians” (Merrell, Ervin & Gimbel, 2012, p. 30). As put by Fagen and Wise (2000, p. 112) – the first generation of EP’s based

their work and practice on “available methodologies of child study and clinical psychology”. However, this interpretation of the segregation processes connected to (neutral) ‘available methodologies’ of EP practice, obscures the fact that inequality has been embedded in these methodologies and practices from the beginning of the profession of EP.

The scope of this article does not allow for a longer and more comprehensive account of the role of inequality throughout the development of EP history. However, the psychometric tradition has always been a strong influence – and it continues to play a significant role in the field.

Connected to this dominant psychometric history of EP practice, the clinical-assessment articulation of inequality is currently a prominent feature in discussions about the research and evidence base of EP practice. In this context, the field is for example criticized for being pseudoscientific and for employing so-called ‘low-value assessment practices’ (Dombrowski et al., 2022). The rationale behind this criticism is that such a lack of evidence base within the profession perpetuates inequality by leaving too many decisions at the local level to individual EP practitioners. According to this perspective, this is problematic because assessment practices become too arbitrary and at greater risk of being subject to cognitive or other biases:

In fact, the empirical literature suggests that actuarial models consistently outperform professional judgment in most classification decisions (Canivez, 2013). It can also be argued that too much preference for intuitive decision-making may be a contributory factor to the disproportionate representation of youth from diverse backgrounds in special education given what is known about the phenomenon of implicit bias (Dombrowski, 2020a; Sullivan, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Consequently, school psychologists are encouraged to question whether preferred assessment methods afford adequate protection against the types of errors that are commonly encountered in these decision-making contexts (Dombrowski et al., 2022, p. 778).

The overarching rationale is thus addressing inequality within EP practice as a primarily *methodological* concern. In this context, it is important that EPs consistently employ evidence-based methods and data that can systematically predict patterns of inequality. Traditionally, the clinical-assessment-based articulation of inequality has been criticized for its predominant psychometrical and individual-oriented focus. However, in recent decades, significant inspiration has been drawn from, among others, community, social, and organizational psychology. These approaches advocate for ‘whole-system-support’ approaches, where the role of EP practice in addressing inequality takes on a more organizational and contextual character. Despite this shift, a significant methodological focus is maintained, emphasizing that the right assessment and systematic data collection are necessary prerequisites for effective EP practice:

Universal mental health screening that prioritizes early, appropriate identification of mental health concerns and individual and community strengths can reduce inequities and promote mental health equity. Equitable mental health screening practice requires intentional planning, critical reflection, and a shift from individual- and deficit-focused approaches to identifying individual risk toward a system-focused approach that can identify disparities and disrupt school-specific contributions to inequity. Collaboration, relationship building, and partnerships across school and community contributors, as well

as a focus toward building sustainable mental health screening practices, are equally necessary for pursuit of this goal. (Moore et al., 2023, p. x).

However, as previously noted, within the clinical-assessment articulation of inequality, there has been a significant tendency to reframe social conditions and categories, such as poverty, as inherent or psychiatric issues. Hence, equality within this articulation is achieved by EPs conducting systematic and unbiased assessments of students' disabilities, as well as by implementing robust mental health screening programs that ensure systematic and unbiased prevention and intervention for mental health issues.

A social justice articulation of inequality

As presented above, in the early years of EP practice, inequality was transformed from articulations of economic hardship, malnutrition, etc., to articulations of innate and inherited IQ. But around the 1970s, this focus shifted to an emphasis on diversity, disability, and multiculturalism, closely connected to human rights developments following World War II⁴. Following Thrift and Sugerman (2019), this take on social justice is closely connected to the development of liberalism in Western Countries post World War II:

Guided by Keynesian economics, states regulated the market and industry, played an active role in the management and dissemination of social goods through the welfare state, and promised citizens equality, social security, and a certain level of material provision. In this period, social justice was conceived primarily as an issue of fair distribution, with a focus on the redistribution of basic goods and opportunities to correct for the excesses, and reduce the risks, of capitalism (Thrift & Sugerman, 2019, p. 7).

These transformations are closely linked to the emergence of the social justice articulation of inequality within EP practice today. Hence, over the last 20 years, discussions of broader inclusive ideals in the field of EP practice, and especially school psychology in the US, have been contextualized within the framework of 'social justice'. According to Shriberg and Clinton (2016), social justice could even be framed as 'a model for a global school psychology practice' (p. 334).

Yet, the interest in 'justice' is obviously not new. Since ancient Greece, philosophers have been occupied with the concept and ideal of justice. When we in this article focus on the social justice movement, we specifically pay attention to the changes in recent history that paved the way for the social justice articulation of inequality within EP practice. Accordingly, the roots of these developments' trace back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the practices and understandings of social inequality were significantly transformed in society:

⁴ Many psychologists characterizing the history of EP practice differentiates between two major periods: 'the hybrid years' (from 1890-1969) and 'the thoroughbred years' (from 1970 and onwards) (see e.g. Fagan, 2003; Florell, 2018) or characterizes these two periods as the 'traditional and test-based EP practice' and 'the consultative EP practice' (starting from the 1970s and onwards) (see e.g. Szulevicz & Tanggaard, 2017). The shift between these two major periods is closely tied to dominant changes from 1940-1970.

In the 18th century, social inequality that previously would have been considered unproblematic or, if a problem, one that was best addressed by acts of charity, came to be seen as an intolerable state of affairs requiring drastic action, even revolution. Numerous Enlightenment figures (...) promoted this shift. (...) Together, these thinkers laid the groundwork for considering inequality as an egregious form of injustice that was at least partly the fault of social and political structures. In so doing, they linked economic and social inequality to the morally laden discourse of justice” (Thrift & Sugerman, 2019, p. 5).

Furthermore, approximately 100 years ago (and in the early days of the profession of EP practice), around the 1920s, the political ideal of *equality* emerged in Western Europe, reflecting a view that

Society cannot be fair or just if it has different categories or types of citizenship, such as nobility and the rest of the population, whites as first class citizens and blacks as second class, dominant and subordinate (or oppressed) groups, etc. (Ornstein, 2017, p. 545).

Yet, educational scholars point to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as a focal point in the social justice movement in the US. Thus, as mentioned above, for educational and social psychologists, the social justice articulation is closely connected to the post-war period in the early to mid-20th century: the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s, the dismantling of colonial empires (Grant & Gibson, 2013), and the insistence on defeating fascism in Europe and elsewhere (Jost & Kay, 2010) confronted the world with a fundamental injustice (Grant & Gibson, 2013). As formulated by Gilliam and Gulløv (2012), the brutality of World War II created a ‘civilization anxiety’; the idea that the suppression of rationality, humanity and individual freedom led to a desire for societal formations “brought forward by new generations raised to freedom, democracy, and independent thinking” (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012, pp. 47-48).

Thus, the call for ‘a universal moral code’ “that included social justice at its core” (Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 82) was a focal point in this period. The adoption of the UNHR in 1948 serves as a social manifesto of these ‘justice’ movements in the post-war period. Furthermore, education was identified as a primary force in the promotion of human rights:

it is the education of young people and even of adults that constitutes the primary and real guarantee for minority groups faced with racial hatred that leads so easily to violence and murder (Cassin, cited in Osler & Starkey, 2000, p. 94).

Within psychology, the ‘civilization anxiety’ paved the way for developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Rogers to highlight the child’s inherent goodness and unspoiled nature⁵. Additionally, the reform pedagogy movement in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th

⁵ These developments in thought were also connected to other concrete consequences of WW II e.g. the growth in clinical psychologists due to the developing need for diagnostic and therapeutic services in the US (Florell, 2018).

centuries (e.g. Dewey) advocated for changes in an unjust school system. Similar trends were observed simultaneously across most European countries. For example, in a Danish context, the period from the 1958 Primary School Act and the 1960 ‘Blue Report’⁶ represents a significant shift in Danish school history, influencing the following decades, when:

the school changed from something that corresponded to the older structure with differences between city, country and between social groups, to a school that in many ways resembles the current school system, where the ideal is that all children receive the same type of schooling without division or difference in the number of school years. (Gjerløff, 2019, p. 1).

Yet, the school’s ideals of equality during this period generated new challenges. The 1958 Primary School Act in Denmark resulted in students who had not yet attended secondary school being offered education in the 8th and 9th grades. Consequently, 50% of a cohort dropped out after the 7th grade in 1959-1960, while the corresponding figure was only 6% in 1970 (Bendixen, 2009). Thus, there was a significant increase in the number of dropouts from primary school in the 1960s, who had previously been excluded due to a lack of academic qualifications. Similarly, in the US the post-war ‘baby boom’ initiated a period of massive growth in children and youngsters in American society (Merrell, Erwin & Gimbel, 2012). The same pattern was seen in many Western countries, leading to an expansion of the student population until the 1970s along with an increase in students with different kinds of ‘learning problems’ (Leadbetter & Arnold, 2013; Kirkegaard Jensen & Szulevicz, 2024). Consequently, there was a growing need for EPs to address these new challenges.

Parallel to these changes in educational systems, the Civil Rights Movement in the US (hereunder the Civil Rights Act of 1964) as well as the political climate leading up to the Race Relations Act in the UK in 1965, marked a growing critique of societal inequality. Within education this period highlighted race, ethnicity, culture, and skin color as dominant challenges of educational inequality:

During the first half of the 20th century, U.S. public schools operated in accordance with the doctrine “separate but equal,” which emerged in 1896 from the infamous court case known as Plessy v. Ferguson. This landmark ruling upheld state laws requiring the racial segregation of public facilities (including schools) under the premise that “separate but equal” facilities would be provided to individuals from White and non-White backgrounds. As a result of this ruling, African American and other non-White students frequently were educated in schools with fewer resources and less qualified teachers than White students (Benjamin, Henry, & McMahon, 2005). When such schools were not accessible, many non-White students were excluded from the public school system all together. (Florell, 2018, p. 28)

Until now, the social justice articulation of inequality has first and foremost been connected to unequal distribution of material goods (economy). Following Thrift and Sugerman (2019, p. 8), “[c]onceived in this fashion, social justice was invoked to elucidate injustices experienced by members of some groups. However, there were entire segments of the population whose injustices remained invisible”.

⁶ ‘Den blå betænkning’ in Danish.

Thus, in these years the social justice articulation of inequality transforms from a predominant focus on unequal distribution of material goods to ‘recognition of difference’ (Fraser, 2000, 2009).

Due to different societal formations and histories, the politics and practices in countries such as Denmark during these years did not yet address race or ethnicity in discussions about educational inequity⁷. Similarly, educational research in the UK and US did not address ethnicity and race in the same way and scope, due to very different colonial histories and societal structures. However, despite these important geographic, historical, and social differences, the changes and practices of EPs in both US, UK, and Denmark from the 1970’s and onwards were closely connected to the societal Human Rights developments and the entrenched focus on *differences* and *inclusion*⁸. During these years, inclusion emerged as one of the foremost priorities in many Western educational policies. This was largely spurred by a dramatic increase in the proportion of segregated students throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In this context, EPs were assigned a central role. Almost overnight, their role shifted from identifying special educational support needs to now becoming ‘agents of inclusion’ (Farrell, 2004).

Connected to these societal changes situated in the social justice articulation of inequality – from unjust distribution to unjust representation and therefore misrecognition – today the dominant focus of this articulation of inequality relates to discussions of *proportionality* and *representation* within the field of EP practice (Schanding Jr. et al., 2023). Recently, leading journal editors and researchers within the field of school psychology in the US have united under the motto ‘Be the Change’, addressing inequality as a question of biases that researchers, psychologists and other professionals need to confront:

The declaration Be the Change is widely attributed to Gandhi (1913), as a paraphrased version of his reflections highlighting the importance of our individual attitudes, efforts, and actions necessary to influence change in ourselves, those with whom we work alongside, and the world. Perhaps most salient is Gandhi’s (1913, p. 241) emphasis on *individual responsibility* to take action and initiative, declaring that “we need not wait to see what others do” before acting ourselves. (Jimerson et al., 2021, p. 1, our emphasis)

Thus, following the formulation of Jenkins et al. (2018, p. 74) we can think of this as a ‘social justice-infused training or mindset’. However, in these formulations, the normative aspects of inequality are close to disappear:

social justice becomes an individual virtue enacted through choice and facilitated by a market that proliferates the choices one can make. In this view, social justice is “responsible” action by individuals

⁷ It is first from the late 1980s/start 1990s that ethnicity becomes an issue in Danish educational policy and research (Jensen, 2019).

⁸ In both UK and US, we see educational laws being passed that focus explicitly on human rights and ideals of inclusive educational practices, e.g. the 1970 Education Act in UK (see e.g. Arnold & Leadbetter, 2013) and the Public Law 94-142 (‘Education for All Handicapped Children Act’) (see e.g. Merrell, Ervin and Gimbel, 2012).

in caring for themselves and their families and private acts of charity to address the consequences of poverty. (Thrift & Sugerman, 2019, p. 9).

Trough the recognition of a fundamental problem of disproportionality within the educational system in both the US and UK, inequality in the social justice articulation was initially connected to unequal distribution. However, through the focus of the 60s and 70s on inclusion and recognition, it transformed into an articulation of racial, ethnic, cultural, etc. unjust representation. Thus, despite paying attention to structural and contextual conditions when referring to historical patterns of disproportionality, the social justice articulation risks ending up *individualizing inequality* in the ‘mind or heart’ of the EP – “Essentially, school psychologists should access their hearts as well as their brains” (Schriberg & Clinton, 2016, p. 335). Consequently, solving issues of inequality primarily becomes a responsibility for the individual educational psychologist.

Concluding reflections

In the early days of the profession of EP, inequality articulated as malnutrition, poverty, etc. transformed to innate and inherited IQ, thus making inequality an *implicit* focus of EP practice from its inception. When transformed to general learning problems through the IQ test batteries, the clinical-assessment articulation uses a psychological technology that “claims to be able to uncover truths that lie hidden within the individual” (Nielsen, 2008, p. 122). Consequently, within the clinical-assessment articulation of inequality, there is no longer any structural, historical nor social component in inequality – it is now a congenital disability. Furthermore, in the social justice articulation of inequality, the transformation from unjust distribution to unjust recognition transformed inequality to a dominant focus of identity and representation within EP practice with the risk of individualizing the issue of inequality:

when psychological theories frame social justice primarily as an issue of identity, the inherent inequities of a capitalist economic order are obscured. (...) Psychological explanations often have diverted attention from social, political, and cultural injustices and, in so doing, at least deflected, if not prevented, individuals from political participation. (Thrift & Sugerman, 2019, p. 10).

Across the two articulations, inequality mainly becomes **a methodological** concern for *either* the broader scientific field of educational psychology (thus, researchers must focus on developing evidence-based practices in order to avoid “intuitive decision-making” (Dombrowski et al., 2022)), *or* a methodological concern for the individual educational psychologist (educational psychologists need to take individual action).

Yet, it is our claim that the issue of inequality risks becoming detached from the social and historical practices in which it is situated. According to Danziger (1997), our conceptualizations are ‘historical and human products’, and therefore “methodology is no more free of the influence of social contextual factors than is the formation of theoretical concepts” (Danziger, 1985, p. 138). Thus, turning inequality into primarily a question of methods with the aim of escaping biases calls for theoretical development and engagement in order to 1) highlight the normative, historical situatedness of educational psychology practice and ways of understanding (un)equal access and

participation in education, 2) and furthermore, to point out the risk of detaching inequality from its social and historical conditions.

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Note

The article is a part of the research project Participation and Situated Inequality in Children's Institutional Everyday Lives (2023–2026), a nationwide project in partnership with municipalities from rural, metropolitan, and provincial areas (See Højholt & Røn-Larsen (In Prep)).

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