


# Equity, Equality, and Need: A Qualitative Study into Teachers' Professional Trade-Offs in Justifying Their Differentiation Practice

Marijke Van Vijfeijken<sup>1\*</sup> , Eddie Denessen<sup>2,3</sup>, Tamara Van Schilt-Mol<sup>1</sup>, Ron H. J. Scholte<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>HAN University of Applied Sciences, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Email: \*marijke.vanvijfeijken@han.nl, tamara.vanschiltmol@han.nl, e.denesen@pwo.ru.nl, r.scholte@pwo.ru.nl

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## Abstract

This article reports on the findings of a qualitative study of 15 primary school teachers' differentiation beliefs which were assessed against principles of distributive justice. The study was performed to examine which beliefs about justice teachers use to legitimize the choices they make regarding differentiation in the classroom. We used justice principles (equity, equality, and need) as themes to describe and analyze teachers' arguments. By doing so, we gained more insight into what teachers consider to be fair in the distribution of educational goods as outcomes and as resources. Consistent with our expectations, teachers simultaneously reason from different distributive justice principles to account for their beliefs. Findings demonstrate that the equity principle combined with the equality principle of equal distribution of educational resources dominated teachers' beliefs about differentiation. In their practice, however, teachers perceive an educational support dilemma with, on the one hand, a desire to distribute time and support equally among students and, on the other hand, the urge to provide more time and support for students who are in need. The principles of distributive justice as an embedded aspect of social ethics may be useful for teachers to systematically reflect on their choices about distributing educational goods and to discuss and align the distribution of resources with colleagues or other stakeholders.

## Keywords

Distributive Justice, Meritocracy, Education, Classroom Differentiation, Learning Opportunities

## 1. Introduction

In primary school classrooms, teachers have to instruct students who differ in various ways. For example, students may have different skills, understanding, particular knowledge, interests, and learning profiles. It is challenging to manage these differences. This is also complicated by the fact that it does not fulfill the needs of all students to instruct them in a way that is appropriate for *most* of them. If a teacher uses whole class instruction for all students, faster learners might not be challenged by the pace and difficulty, while slower learners might be unable to keep up (Condrón, 2008; Gamoran, 2011). A common method of responding to this challenge is called differentiation or differentiated instruction (Bosker, 2005; Deunk et al., 2015; Frerejean et al., 2021). The aim of differentiated instruction is to address the diverse needs of all students in order to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in the classroom (Tomlinson, 2014).

The learning outcomes students achieve as a result of instruction can be considered educational goods that are valuable because they enable individuals to flourish, to reach their potential, and to contribute to the growth of others (Brighthouse et al., 2018). Educational goods are the products of teaching: knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes (Brighthouse et al., 2018). Through differentiated instruction, these educational goods are distributed in response to differences among students. Differences in student outcomes can thus be seen as differences in the distribution of educational goods as outcomes.

In practice, differentiation means that a teacher adjusts educational resources and processes to individual students. Differentiation is defined as proactive adjustment of curricula, teaching methods, materials, and learning activities for each student according to their needs (Tomlinson, 2014). This refers to another kind of educational goods: educational goods as resources or processes (Sabbagh et al., 2006). Through differentiated instruction, teachers provide their students with diverse educational goods as resources. These address the diverse needs of students and can include different types (Sabbagh et al., 2006; Tomlinson, 2014) such as more challenging tasks for high achievers, repeating assignments for low achievers, additional instructional time, and support for students who need help. The distribution of educational goods as resources results in different learning opportunities for students (Rubie-Davies, 2015). As a result, through differentiation teachers not only make differences in distributing *educational goods as resources*, they also may cause differences in distributing *educational goods as outcomes*.

The differences in educational goods as outcomes are implicitly or explicitly connected to choices teachers make about the distribution of educational goods as resources (Deunk et al., 2015; Rubie-Davies, 2015). When students receive assignments that require lower levels of thinking skills, this is likely to result in lower-level academic achievements. The choices teachers make in distributing educational goods as resources matter because they affect the opportunities stu-

dents receive to learn and demonstrate their capacities (Rubie-Davies, 2015). In a meritocratic school system, demonstrated capacities are rewarded by access to higher level ability groups, higher tracks, higher education, professions, and status (Mijs, 2016). Consequently, demonstrated capacities affect fundamental moral concerns such as how successful a school career is, how well people's lives progress, and whose lives are better than others (Brighouse et al., 2018).

Therefore, teachers should be aware of the moral significance of their decisions around distributing educational goods. It is important that teachers are capable of consciously making morally responsible decisions (Brighouse et al., 2018) in order to achieve a just distribution of educational goods. This is all the more important given the fact that there is much debate about just distribution of educational goods and its contribution to educational goods as outcomes: for all students, for students with disadvantaged backgrounds, and for students with high academic achievements (Brighouse et al., 2018; Merry, 2008; Mijs, 2016; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016).

Up to now, there has been little systematic attention paid to the significant role of justice in educational settings. Furthermore, there is little known about teachers' beliefs about the just distribution of educational goods (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). More attention to this is essential because decisions about distribution of educational goods have a morally significant impact.

To gain more insight into teachers' beliefs about the just distribution of educational goods, we studied teachers' beliefs about differentiation and reflect on these beliefs in the context of distributive justice values. Distributive values or principles are key principles in social justice (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Deutsch, 1975; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Wright & Boese, 2015). People can use these principles to evaluate the fairness of the allocation of desirable outcomes across groups of people (Wright & Boese, 2015). In other words, they can decide whether or not a practice or outcome is fair. Generally, distributive justice distinguishes between three principles or rules to evaluate just distribution: equality, need, and equity. These principles will be described in the following sections.

## **1.1. Distributive Justice Principles in Differentiated Instruction**

### **1.1.1. The Principle of Equity**

The principle of equity stands for the rule that each individual should receive resources in proportion to their relative merit such as effort, contribution, ability, and outcomes (Arrow et al., 2000; Wright & Boese, 2015). This means that this principle calls for an unequal distribution of resources because people differ in their abilities. If this unequal distribution of resources occurs according to one's individual merit and not giving anyone preferential treatment, it is considered the fairest thing to do. In terms of education, it implies that each student must have access to educational goods as resources according to their demonstrated achievements or capacity to make use of them (Mijs, 2016). Based on the equity principle, education is a practice in which students with different talents work to acquire educational goods such as the capacity for economic productiv-

ity (Brighouse et al., 2018) that they can carry forward into the labor market (Mijs, 2016). On the labor market, their academic achievements will be rewarded by final distribution of occupational rewards and status. Therefore, the principle of equity is widely accepted as the favored distributive justice principle in economic and competitive contexts (Tyler, 2015; Wright & Boese, 2015), and it is applied in a wide range of domains including education (Wright & Boese, 2015).

Teachers whose beliefs about differentiation are in line with equity may believe that ability-appropriate performance goals must be set for each student or group of students, and students may learn at their own pace. Furthermore, to adjust teaching to each student's ability level, teachers can assign students to homogeneous groups based on their ability or skills. In other words, the equity principle is often used when arguing that tracking helps teachers tailor instruction to the ability level of their students (Hallinan, 1994). That implies that the equity principle supports the structure of homogeneous grouping in schools (Mijs, 2016).

### 1.1.2. The Principle of Equality

The principle of equality calls for equal distribution of educational goods as resources or outcomes (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). The equality principle is mostly seen as fair with respect to cooperation and maintaining or fostering good personal relationships (Deutsch, 1975; Wright & Boese, 2015). There are two perspectives on the principle of equality: equalizing outcomes and the equal distribution of resources.

#### *Equalizing outcomes*

The first interpretation of the principle of equality is equalizing outcomes. This refers to the idea that unequal learning outcomes may be acceptable when they arise from equal opportunities, but they are difficult to accept when they arise from inequalities in students' backgrounds, such as less parental financial or culturally based parental support of disadvantaged students (Brighouse et al., 2018; Mijs, 2016). In order to prevent unequal outcomes based on different family backgrounds, education can strive to offer more equality in terms of more equal outcomes. The focus is then on equalizing the output instead of equalizing the distribution of educational goods as resources. Supporting a principle of equalizing outcomes does not imply an advocacy for egalitarianism; instead, it is about providing equal opportunities (Brighouse et al., 2018). Walzer (1983) pleads for a minimum or basic level of education for all people because they need to be able to function as citizens of their society. Education then plays a vital role in ensuring that *all* people can reach that basic level. It implies that a compensatory mechanism like conscious unequal distribution of educational goods as resources is needed to approximate equality in order to increase equality of opportunity (Mijs, 2016).

Teachers whose beliefs about differentiation are in line with the principle of equalizing outcomes may want to strive for more equal learning outcomes with respect to the unequal starting points of students caused by differences in family

backgrounds (Mijs, 2016). They recognize that students from disadvantaged families are more in need than students from privileged families because the former's parents have less access to financial, social, and cultural capital to prepare their children for school and support them during their education (Bradbury et al., 2011; Francis et al., 2020). The rationale is that if children's different starting positions are ignored and all students are allowed to work on learning goals at their own pace, the educational outcomes will diverge even further (Mijs, 2016). Thus, these teachers believe that students who have already mastered the subject matter should not continue with new subject matter but should do other activities, such as helping fellow students. Furthermore, the learning pace should be the same for all students. This prevents educational outcomes from diverging too much.

### ***Equal distribution of resources***

The other interpretation of the principle of equality is equal distribution of resources. This principle is based on the rule that everyone receives the same share of resources, without regard to effort, contribution, ability, or outcomes (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Wright & Boese, 2015). Therefore, equality is inconsistent with a meritocracy in which effort and contribution are rewarded. Equality is mostly supported when the goal is to maximize group harmony (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015). The equality principle can be used because it is a very simple allocation rule that requires less effortful thought than other principles (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015). In education, for example, it can be easier for teachers to explain to parents the need to allocate resources equally than to make decisions based on performance, effort, or needs.

Teachers whose beliefs are in line with the principle of equal distribution of resources may believe that regardless of differences between students, each student should receive the same share of attention and support. Furthermore, teachers may believe that divergence in students' academic achievements may occur as long as each student has received an equal share of support from their teacher.

### **1.1.3. The Principle of Need**

Like the principle of equity, the principle of need calls for unequal distribution of resources (Wright & Boese, 2015). While the principle of equity justifies unequal distribution on the basis of students' demonstrated abilities, the principle of need justifies inequality on the basis of needs. That means assigning additional resources to the individuals or groups who need help, and those who are most in need receive more resources. This principle is generally seen as fair in caring-oriented groups or institutions where the goals are social welfare and responsibility (Wright & Boese, 2015).

In education, this principle emphasizes students' different starting points and the need to compensate for disadvantaged social groups to provide a "real" equal opportunity for equal outcomes (Kellough, 2005; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). This is in line with affirmative action policies for disadvantaged populations, which are

meant to further equal opportunities for all members of society (Connell, 1993; Stojanov, 2015). This principle justifies inequality based on the needs of disadvantaged students. Rawls (1971: p. 1) calls this the “redress principle: inequalities through birth and natural endowment are undeserved, and people are to be somehow compensated for these inequalities.”

Teachers whose beliefs about differentiation are in line with the principle of need may believe that they must dedicate additional time and effort to certain students (e.g., those with low-educated parents or parents who can provide their children with little support and guidance at home). The aim of differentiation is to help these students reach a performance level in line with their ability. Such teachers believe in providing more support for disadvantaged students than for more privileged students. They also believe that low-achieving students need to learn from their higher-achieving peers.

#### **1.1.4. Distributive Justice Principles in a Meritocratic Educational System**

The principle of equity is also called the merit principle, and it serves as the primary justification for meritocracies in Western countries (Mijs, 2016; Wright & Boese, 2015). In a meritocratic educational system, resources are distributed based on individual merit rather than on factors such as parentage, race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Even more importantly, in a meritocratic system, it is broadly believed that every student who invests enough effort, takes advantage of all opportunities, and is talented enough has the chance to succeed and fulfil their academic potential (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Wright & Boese, 2015).

However, many studies have questioned the fairness of meritocracy. On the one hand, meritocracy only can be realized in an unbiased system in which opportunities and rewards are distributed solely based on individual merit. On the other hand, even in an unbiased system, meritocracy can be rejected as unfair when only equity is provided and the two other justice principles (equality and need) are disregarded (Mijs, 2016; Wright & Boese, 2015).

An example is teachers’ time. Based solely on equity, the best students might receive some additional attention, but most people would likely agree that teachers’ time should be distributed more equally (Wright & Boese, 2015). One might ask why a high-achieving student needs better education and why talent should guide the distribution or allocation of resources (Mijs, 2016). Beyond that, if these students’ high achievements are the result of benefiting from privileged circumstances (e.g., more financial, cultural, or social capital), the additional attention they receive is usually perceived as unfair (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016).

Moreover, increasing equal learning opportunities for students from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES) requires teachers to compensate for educational disadvantages, so these students can develop according to their real potential and have their educational opportunities and school careers aligned with their natural abilities (Mijs, 2016). Devoting less attention to equalizing out-

comes and the need principle in education can have negative consequences for equality of opportunity.

To summarize, although the equity principle may be dominant in a meritocratic school system, equity in pure form is not sufficient to reach a fair distribution of educational resources or outcomes. In this study, we explore teacher's distributive justice values by having them reflect on decisions about differentiation.

## 1.2. A Differentiation Dilemma

Theoretically, a distinction can be made between differentiation in the classroom with the purpose of reducing differences between students (equalizing outcomes) and differentiation in the classroom with the purpose of increasing differences between students. Reducing differences leads to convergent learning outcomes. This implies that teachers devote extra time and attention to help low-achieving students (need principle) achieve the learning goals. This might come at the expense of time and attention for high-achieving students. Increasing differences leads to divergent learning outcomes. This implies that ability-appropriate performance goals are set for each individual student (equity principle), and teachers divide their attention and support equally among all students (equal distribution). This might come at the expense of students from families with a low SES because there is no compensation for their disadvantaged circumstances. The result may be that their educational growth and development will lag even further behind that of the more advanced students (Blok, 2004; Bosker, 2005; Deunk et al., 2015).

Teachers may experience the question whether to strive for convergent or divergent learning outcomes as an ethical dilemma. The dilemma is ethical (or moral) because it refers to a decision to strive for particular educational outcomes that are morally significant: divergent outcomes result in unequal educational opportunities for low-achieving students (mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds) and convergent outcomes may hinder learning opportunities for high-achieving students (mostly from privileged backgrounds). A decision about convergent or divergent learning outcomes may affect students' futures and may influence which students have more successful school careers than others (Brighthouse et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2017; Levinson & Fay, 2016). We call this a dilemma because it is about the choice between two action alternatives in complex situations, both of which are defensible (cf. Groundwater-Smith et al., 2011). In other words, opting for either convergent or divergent learning outcomes can be justified.

This differentiation dilemma is an example of choices classroom teachers have to make about the distribution of education "goods as resources" and thereby keep in mind when deciding which educational "goods as outcomes" they prefer. In this study, we used this dilemma to gain more insight into teachers' beliefs about justice through their views on differentiation.



In practice, when teachers are asked to make decisions about how to distribute educational goods like their support and attention, they probably mix the principles together such that they are not always used in a pure form (Cuguero-Escofet & Rosanas, 2013). For example, a teacher who supports the equity principle may also be committed to ensuring that all students achieve a basic level (principle of equalizing outcomes), even if it costs extra effort (principle of need). These kinds of mixed approaches seek to balance the strengths and weaknesses of the different distributive or allocation principles (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015).

### 1.3. Research Question

The differentiation dilemma can be seen as an example of an ethical dilemma. A teaching profession is full of ethical educational dilemmas (Chen et al., 2017; Lampert, 1985). Teachers are regularly faced with challenging ethical decisions, and they often have to wrestle with them on their own (Levinson & Fay, 2016). Teachers face practical dilemmas for which no correct choice is available and which thus require a compromise (Chen et al., 2017; Flett & Wallace, 2005).

As we discussed above, distributive justice is an embedded aspect of societal ethics. The three principles of distributive justice ought to regulate or evaluate the distribution of societal resources to individuals or groups in education (Resh & Sabbagh, 2009). Since these principles can be used to evaluate the fairness of the allocation of desirable outcomes across groups of people (Wright & Boese, 2015), and in other words, can be used to decide whether or not a practice or outcome is fair, it is important that teachers are aware of these principles and use them consciously. So far, however, little is known about how teachers apply these principles in their teaching. For this article, we studied teachers' views on the differentiation dilemma, reflected in their ethical considerations in the context of distributive justice values. The aim of this study is to gain insight into the professional considerations teachers apply and the dilemmas they experience in justifying their differentiation practice. More insight into these considerations may contribute to the contemporary discourse concerning social justice in schools and promoting equal educational opportunities. Therefore, the central research question of this study is: Which beliefs about justice do teachers use to legitimize the choices they make about differentiation in the classroom?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

This study was conducted in primary schools in the Netherlands. Such schools serve students from the age of 4 (grade 1) to 12 (grade 8). Teachers were recruited to participate in this study through school boards and head teachers. Fifteen teachers (who taught children from grades 1 to 8) participated. Four of them were men, they were all between the ages of 28 and 59, and they each had five to 30 years' experience in education. Three of the teachers taught children of



grades 1 and 2, one teacher grade 4 and 5, three grade 5 and 6, one teacher grade 6, one teacher grade 7 and 8, three teachers grade 7 and three teachers grade 8.

## 2.2. Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. First, the researcher read aloud the ethical dilemma about convergent or divergent educational outcomes:

### *The Ethical Differentiation Dilemma*

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One issue in education practice is the purpose of differentiation. Is the aim to reduce differences between students? We call this creating convergent educational outcomes. Or is the aim (or result) to increase differences between students? We call this creating divergent educational outcomes.

A teacher who strives for convergent educational outcomes will devote extra time and attention to low-achieving students so that they will achieve the learning goals. This is done because low-achieving students need more time and support to master certain subjects than higher-achieving students do. But, as a result, higher-achieving students may sometimes have to wait to work on new subjects or other new learning goals, and they may progress less quickly than they would if they were allowed to learn at their own pace.

A teacher who strives for divergent educational outcomes will devote the same share of time and support to all students to help them achieve their learning goals. This practice does not compensate for lower achievements or disadvantaged family backgrounds (e.g., less support at home or less-educated parents compared to those of other students). This may result in an even larger gap between the educational growth and development of students from families with low and high SES. This can come at the expense of equal educational opportunities because students with different backgrounds have different starting points.

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The description of the dilemma contained both points of view and presented the ethical values that are relevant to the case. We used a dilemma approach because it stimulates thinking about a case in terms of justice, responsibility, and equality (Levinson & Fay, 2016). This approach invites the respondent to think aloud about what they believe to be the fairest decision.

Second, teachers were asked to express their views about the dilemma. The researcher then asked open-ended questions to examine teachers' thoughts about their views and choices related to differentiating in the classroom. Teachers were asked about their beliefs about differentiation, including what they think is the most equitable thing to do, what their experiences are related to the dilemma, what they believe is the right thing to do, and what they actually do in practice.

## 2.3. Analysis

Template analysis—a form of thematic analysis—was used to analyze the data (Brooks et al., 2015). The first step was to fully transcribe the interviews and become familiar with the data by reading through the data set in full. The second step was to carry out the preliminary coding of the data. Template analysis allows the use of themes, identified in advance as potentially useful ways of organizing the data given the theoretical or practical issues of a particular study

(King, 2012). The distributive justice principles (equity, equality, and need) were used as themes.

We examined the transcripts closely for any material that could be understood from the perspectives of each distributive justice principle and added new sub-themes for each distributive justice theme. Initially, we analyzed a subset of the interview data. We then critically examined each other's coding, seeking to ensure that the thematic structure could be justified. Through an iterative process of further modification and review, we were able to agree on a set of sub-themes for each distributive justice principle that could be applied across all the interviews. With this coding scheme, we were able to thematically organize and classify the data.

### 3. Main Findings

#### 3.1. Equity-Based Beliefs

##### 3.1.1. Connecting to Students' Learning Needs

The interviews revealed that most teachers believe it is important to meet their students' individual learning needs in their lessons. They referred to students' different needs, such as a particular instruction or learning task. From this we infer that most teachers support the equity principle, which states that what a student is entitled to depends on the student's own ability, performance, or effort (Arrow et al., 2000; Wright & Boese, 2015).

Teachers expressed this view of differentiation in different ways. For instance, Teacher 6 said: *"I think you should serve children according to their needs."* Usually, teachers' statements about the importance of connecting to individual learning needs were immediately followed by statements about the need to provide extra challenges to high-achieving or gifted students. Teacher 6 continued her statement: *"So that all students are really challenged. Because if you give those faster kids less extra instruction, they get bored and become lazy. I think you really need to look at what a child needs personally and then go deeper into that."*

Teacher 2 also first mentioned that all students should be challenged at their own level, and then she emphasized the difference in learning needs between gifted students and other students. She also used the fact that students have diverse needs as an argument for grouping students by level: *"In our vision of school, we want to meet students' needs. Strong learners have different needs than children who are not as strong in learning. That's why we cluster students: so that all students can develop at their own level."*

##### 3.1.2. Achievement and Ability Should Be Rewarded

During the interviews, almost all the teachers mentioned that they believe that high-achieving or gifted students "deserve" to receive extra support. From this we infer that offering additional support to gifted students is seen as a reward for their achievement or ability. Teacher 3: *"I think that gifted students deserve to be challenged more."*

In terms of social justice, we also consider this belief about differentiation to be an expression of the teachers' support for the equity principle. The equity principle justifies inequality in the use of resources (amount of support) because of students' achievements that deserve a reward (Arrow et al., 2000; Wright & Boese, 2015). In practice in these schools, the equity principle is also often applied to gifted students. This is evidenced by the fact that many teachers in the respondent group have established supplementary classes at the schools where they work, to which gifted students usually go for one part of a day in the week to be taught at their own level. This is not only a form of extra time and support from the teacher in the classroom, but also a form of using extra (financial) resources for this group of students.

Most teachers were very positive about this development and stressed how important it is for such students to interact with students at their own level. Those teachers also indicated that they could not provide the guidance that those students need in their own classrooms. Teacher 7 especially emphasized the importance of encountering other gifted students: *"I think a supplementary class is actually a very good initiative. By getting together with peers every week, they get to know other kids. Then you see: they are also smart, they also do it that way or they do it differently than I do, and they learn to learn, especially by tackling difficult issues."*

Teacher 1 emphasized that more gifted students are not challenged enough in the regular classroom and the teacher cannot provide that challenge: *"The material offered in my lessons is often not complex enough for more gifted students. It takes them relatively little effort to master the material I offer. You then see that when they get to high school, they have not learned to learn. When they enter secondary education at the level where they belong, they actually have competition and then suddenly they have a hard time. They're not used to being really challenged. I can't give them that guidance in my own class."*

### **3.1.3. Divergent Learning Outcomes Not as a Goal but as a Result of Tailored Instruction for Gifted Students**

The interviews revealed that most teachers felt that student learning outcomes seem to have been growing further apart in recent years. They see this as a consequence of teaching in which they try to meet students' personal learning needs as much as possible. In the interviews, teachers told us that learning outcomes are diverging because they have begun to pay more attention to gifted students. For example, several teachers told us that in recent years they have changed the way they teach. Previously, they were very focused on providing additional support to low-achieving students to ensure that they met learning goals. From this we conclude that the focus of differentiation used to be on equalizing outcomes. Equalizing outcomes in education means preventing unequal outcomes due to factors such as differences in parental background (Brighthouse et al., 2018; Mijs, 2016).

However, these teachers said that they now provide some additional support in the classroom to gifted students or high-achieving students so that they can

engage in more challenging learning tasks and continue to develop. From this we infer, as already mentioned, that the equity principle is applied especially to more gifted students. As a result, teachers acknowledged during the interviews, the learning outcomes of the students in their class tend to diverge more. According to them, achieving divergent learning outcomes is not the primary goal of providing additional support to gifted students. Instead, the goal is to meet their students' learning needs. For them, the fact that learning outcomes are diverging more is evidence that they are now more responsive to the learning needs of especially gifted students than they were before.

Gifted students are rewarded for their achievements by extra challenging material that corresponds to the achievements or abilities they have demonstrated. As Teacher 2 explained: *"Until recently, we were mainly doing convergence. We especially wanted to improve the lower-achieving students. Then you did see the differences getting smaller, but you also saw that the better students didn't grow much. Nowadays, we also have a gifted/talented specialist who's really working to develop students at the top of the class. So indeed, now we're doing much more of that diverging and we're seeing the differences widening. That's also good because now we also address the top of the class."*

### 3.2. Equality-Based Beliefs: Equalizing Outcomes

#### 3.2.1. Focus on Convergent Learning Outcomes for Low- and Average-Achieving Students

Some other teachers indicated during the interviews that they generally strive to achieve the same learning outcomes for all students, but they do make an exception for gifted students. They described that students who have been diagnosed as gifted, in particular, receive more extensive and challenging learning tasks to reach their personal goals, and the differences between these students and the rest of the group increase as a result. For the other students, the equality principle—equalizing outcomes—is applied. Teachers are focused on ensuring that all students eventually master the same material.

Teacher 13 described: *"I have a number of children here who have been labeled gifted. I also notice that, say, nine times out of ten, they have already mastered the material that is offered. So they often get extended material anyway. But I try to get the majority of the group on a similar path. So with the students who are at the top, the differences only widen. And all the ones below that, I try to get them moving in that same direction as much as possible."*

#### 3.2.2. Working with Shared and Personal Learning Goals

The interviews further revealed that most teachers believed that students should not only have personal learning goals but also shared learning goals. From this we infer that those teachers not only support the equity principle but also the equality principle in terms of equalizing learning outcomes. As an example, Teacher 1 stated: *"I believe that all students should receive education tailored to their needs."* Later in the interview, this teacher said: *"I do believe that a child should always meet the lesson goal, so I always strive to achieve it. For example,*

*today it is 'the direct object', so my effort is focused on ensuring that everyone will soon be able to point to the direct object in a text. In that case, I don't care if I have to repeat it ten or twenty times. My aim is that everyone can achieve that."*

On the one hand, teachers want to meet students' personal learning needs, and on the other hand, teachers want students to achieve certain shared learning goals. Thus, there are also learning outcomes that teachers would like to see for all students as a result of their instruction. Teachers usually do not state that they strive for equal learning outcomes, but they do state that there are minimum goals for all students. The interviews revealed that when teachers speak of personal learning goals, they are referring to learning goals that are in addition to the minimum learning goals. The minimum requirement for all students is that they achieve the minimum goals of the lesson.

Teacher 2 articulated this as follows: *"We do have minimum learning goals that are the same for all students, and we provide basic instruction to all students. After that, each student works at their own level. For instance, say that the goal of the lesson is 'division problems.' Even in that you have distinctions: these ten children do these assignments, and those ten children only do five assignments, for example, but they also have enrichment material. They're working through it in different ways, so there again we can make a distinction."*

### 3.3. Equality-Based Beliefs: Equal Distribution of Resources

#### 3.3.1. Equal Distribution of Time and Support

During the interviews, most teachers said that they felt it was important to equally distribute the time they have for supporting students. From this we infer that, in terms of social justice, most teachers support the equality principle of distributing resources equally (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Wright & Boese, 2015). Three arguments for equal distribution of time and support were frequently used during the interviews.

*Every student has a right to an equal amount of time and support*

First, teachers see it as a right of each individual child to receive an equal amount of time and support from the teacher. We infer this from the teachers' word choices. They frequently used words such as 'right' and 'deserve.' The following quotes illustrate this finding. Teacher 4: *"Everyone has the right to equal attention."* Teacher 9: *"It's difficult, but I think every child deserves the same amount of support to start working on their learning goals."* And Teacher 10: *"Basically, in fact, I think that every child has a right to the same amount of educational time, the same amount of guidance, and the same number of opportunities for growth."*

*Equal distribution is a prerequisite for meeting individual learning needs*

Second, most teachers mentioned during the interviews that equal distribution of attention is necessary to meet all the students' individual learning needs. Based on the interviews, we find that the underlying idea of these teachers is that if the amount of time and support is distributed disproportionately, not every child can develop to their full potential. Students who receive less attention rela-

tive to others will, according to these teachers, grow less in their development (relative to their potential) than if they had received the same amount of attention.

For example, Teacher 8 said: *“I think every child should get the same amount of educational time—which means the same amount of instructional time—so you act upon the learning needs of each child. That would be a great ambition. Then every child could start to grow in their own way.”* Teacher 3 said: *“I believe that every child has the right to equal support, the right to take the next step in his or her development in every area, and the right to be guided in that as well as possible. I also don’t have a group of students who I think will do it on their own. Even very smart children have the right to go through that maximum development, as does a weaker child.”*

Teacher 3 added that adaptive teaching is mainly about matching students’ learning environments to their learning needs. Customization is not about adjusting the amount of time and support for students; that should be the same for all students: *“I really think that every child has a right to the same amount of support and the maximum support. And of course, if children get less support at home, you keep a closer eye on them to make sure they develop in the right way. In that sense, yes. But there’s no need to put more time into that. I think if you have a good learning environment that’s geared to that, children can choose their path.”*

*More time for one student comes at the expense of time for others*

Third, the interviews revealed that many teachers also consider equal distribution of time and support to be important because they do not want more time for one student to come at the expense of the time they can spend on other students. Teachers believe that their students would be denied an opportunity to take the next step in development if the teacher gave them less attention because the teacher was, in effect, using their time to support other students. As Teacher 1 put it: *“I think every student should be challenged at their level. I can’t let the stronger students fend for themselves so I can focus on supporting the somewhat weaker students.”*

Teacher 7 said: *“It’s difficult because you notice that children who have received less at home require more explanation. But if I were to give them more attention, that means that a student who is on the upper or middle end cannot receive that attention, so their development would stagnate. That’s tricky because you see that a student who probably gets more support at home makes bigger steps. But by investing more in another child who has less support at home, you may be hindering great growth in the other. That’s why my ideal is the same amount for everyone.”*

### **3.3.2. No Additional Support for Students Whose Parents Have a Low Socioeconomic Status**

Most teachers mentioned during the interviews that they believe the SES of their students’ parents should not influence the distribution of attention in the classroom. They do not believe that students with a low SES who receive less support at home should receive more support at school. Most teachers said that all stu-

dents should receive equal attention, regardless of the support they receive at home. From this, we infer that the equality principle of distributing resources equally is more dominant in teachers' beliefs than the need principle that justifies giving additional resources to the students who are most in need (Kellough, 2005; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016). In this case, these are students with parents who are less able to prepare their children for school and support them during their school careers (Bradbury et al., 2011; Francis et al., 2020). Teachers mentioned the following two arguments to explain this view:

*Not being aware of students' backgrounds*

Some teachers told us that they are not aware of the SES of their students' parents which, according to them, also means that those characteristics cannot influence their attention distribution. These teachers also reported taking no actions to find out the SES of their students' parents. From this we infer that these teachers do not consider the SES of their students' parents to be important in determining how much support students need. Teacher 6: *"To be honest, I don't really know which parents do which kind of work. Aside from that you know the families a little bit, but I've never actually looked into the profession of the parents. I just look at what the child needs."*

*Making distinctions based on differences in socioeconomic status is stigmatizing*

Some teachers clearly expressed that they did not want to differentiate between students with parents who were highly or poorly educated, or differentiate based on the status of the parents' professions. These teachers felt that it could be stigmatizing to students if certain expectations of them were based on their parents' backgrounds. Teacher 13 expressed this as follows: *"You can look at a lot of other things to see whether a child is coming along or not. I don't like to give a child a label, that's what I mean. If a child scores worse on reading, you ask yourself: how is their vocabulary? Are they able to read at home? Do they watch a lot of news? That kind of thing. But a child of highly educated parents, for whatever reason, may also score poorly. I don't like the label: your parents are poorly educated, so ..."*

### 3.4. Need-Based Beliefs

#### Uneven Distribution of Attention in Practice

During the interviews, most teachers said that in their daily teaching practice they distributed their attention unevenly among the students. It was notable that these were often the same teachers who also indicated that they thought it was important for attention to be evenly distributed among students. Teachers therefore indicated that they found this difficult in practice. There were many teachers in the research group who were aware that their practice did not reflect their beliefs about how to distribute attention among students.

Teacher 4 told us that in practice she provides extra support to low-performing students, but she finds that difficult to justify: *"Everyone has the right to equal attention from the teacher. At the same time, that's also where there's fric-*



*tion every time. I find it difficult. I want to give everyone equal attention. I want to do well for all my students and not make any distinctions. But you can't get away from that."* This did not mean that she thought this was an equitable practice, as Teacher 4 continued: *"I don't think some students have the right to more attention than others. But some students really need that extra attention more. That remains a dilemma."*

Teacher 9 told us something interesting during the interview. Like Teacher 4, Teacher 9 also struggled with a dilemma: on the one hand, she believed that all students deserve equal support, and on the other hand, she realized in daily practice that weak students need extra help. The dilemma became even more complicated for this teacher when she described that she also provided extra support to more gifted students. During the course of the interview, she realized that students who are not in the low-achieving or high-achieving groups receive proportionally less support. This clashed with her view that all students should receive equal support. This teacher's reasoning is illustrative of many of the teachers interviewed.

*In practice, more attention is paid to low-achieving students*

Teacher 9 believed that every student deserves the same amount of support. However, the practice she described was different: *"It's difficult, but I think every child deserves the same amount of support to start working on their learning goals. But that's really hard to do in a class of 26 students. What often ends up happening is that you give the lowest performing students—the kids who have more support needs—more support."*

From this, we can infer that in daily practice, Teacher 9 applies the need principle (Kellough, 2005; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016) to low-achieving students. She does so based on the realization that without that extra support, those students would not be able to achieve their learning goals. This teacher recognizes that some students need more support than others. Nevertheless, she found it difficult to give more support to low-achieving students because she also felt that all students should receive equal support.

From this we infer that teachers may find it difficult to justify to themselves their choice to provide additional support to certain students. This is the case when, for them, the equality principle of equal distributing resources for all students prevails as a justice belief while, in practice, they perceive that there are students who need more support. Like most other teachers, Teacher 9 was aware of the difference between her belief and her practice: *"In practice, I divide my attention unevenly, but I actually do think that I should divide my attention and support equally. The low-achieving students do get more attention from me in practice, and I don't think I should really be doing that."*

*In practice, there is less attention paid to and less growth among average-achieving students*

Teacher 9 said that she not only gives extra time and support to low-achieving students but also to high-achieving students. She indicated that she does this be-

cause otherwise those students will underperform or not be sufficiently prepared for secondary education. From this we infer that teachers also apply the need principle in practice to the gifted students.

According to Teacher 9, the extra support given to both the low-achieving students and the high-achieving students leads to an uneven situation in terms of the distribution of attention in the classroom. She only seemed to realize this during the interview. In fact, she also mentioned that she felt it was unfair that the middle tier—those students who are not among the weakest or strongest performers—were given less attention: *“And when I really think it through out loud now .... There is a group on the higher end who will underperform if I don’t give them extra guidance. Those students will run into trouble the moment something is expected of them in high school or college, to give an example. So, I want to teach them to learn. But then when you start looking at that middle tier, they really get less attention than students on the lower and higher ends of the class. So that’s uneven.”*

Other teachers also commented during the interviews that a middle group has emerged that receives less attention. Some teachers mentioned that they notice that this group also shows the least growth. Teacher 2 described this as being a worrisome situation: *“We continue to work with the lower end, but we also have the top end to deal with. What I do find, for years now, is that the middle tiers remain a bit stagnant. That’s actually very strange because that is your base, but what I notice is that they are actually growing the least of all. The bottom end gets a lot of attention, and it grows a lot. The top end gets a lot of attention, and it grows a lot. But the middle tier remains a bit stagnant, it seems. And that’s quite a worrisome situation.”*

## 4. Conclusion and Discussion

### 4.1. Conclusion

This qualitative study was performed to examine which beliefs about justice teachers use to legitimize the choices they make about differentiation in the classroom. We used justice principles (equity, equality, and need) as themes to describe and analyze teachers’ arguments. By doing so, we gained more insight into what teachers consider to be fair in the distribution of educational goods as outcomes and as resources.

Consistent with our expectation, teachers mix distributive justice principles to legitimize their beliefs. Findings demonstrated that the equity principle combined with the equality principle of equally distributing resources dominate teachers’ beliefs about differentiation. Teachers supported the equity principle through their belief that each student or group of students must be challenged on their own level or to their own ability and may learn at their own pace. Furthermore, teachers preferred to make decisions about differentiation based on the achievements students demonstrate in the classroom. This is in line with the primary justification of meritocracy (Mijs, 2016). In addition, teachers seem to believe

that every student has enough opportunity to fulfill their academic potential if teachers adjust teaching to the ability level that the students show in the classroom. This is a view that also fits the basic thought in a meritocratic education system (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016; Tyler, 2015; Wright & Boese, 2015). Finally, the support for the equity principle revealed the belief that high-achieving students had to be rewarded through additional resources.

Most teachers also support the principle of equal distribution of resources. This is shown by their belief that each individual child has the right to receive an equal amount of time and support from the teacher regardless of earlier achievements or family background. According to them, it is necessary to ensure that more attention is never given to one student at the expense of another.

Even though equity and equal distribution are dominant principles, in practice teachers also support other distributive justice principles. The need principle is used to legitimize the provision of extra support to low-achieving students so they may reach shared minimum goals. Teachers believe it is important that all students achieve these minimum goals, so teachers see a need to offer some students extra time and support. Furthermore, teachers use the need principle to legitimize giving extra support to high-achieving students because they presume that without such support, those students would underperform or be insufficiently prepared for secondary education. Presenting the differentiation dilemma led to the insight that teachers do not consciously make decisions about differentiated instruction that lead to convergent or divergent learning outcomes. Instead, they experience that their differentiation strategy—adjusting learning goals and instruction to personal needs based on students' earlier achievements—will probably lead to divergent learning outcomes. It is not the intention to allow learning outcomes to grow further apart, but neither is it directly regarded as a problem. The divergence of learning outcomes is not associated with unequal opportunities for students from families with a lower SES. This implies that teachers may not intentionally use differentiation with the purpose of reducing inequalities between students from different social backgrounds. In fact, in general, teachers do not believe that students with parents with a low SES should receive more support at school (unless they belong to the group of students who need more support to achieve the shared minimum learning objectives). However, to increase equal learning opportunities it would be necessary to compensate for the educational disadvantages of students whose parents have a low SES (Mijs, 2016; Walton et al., 2013; Wright & Broese, 2015).

## 4.2. Discussion

Teachers' differentiation beliefs and practices may be influenced by teachers' self-efficacy regarding their teaching abilities. Teachers' self-efficacy can be defined as teachers' belief in their ability to influence the learning of all students, even those who could be regarded as difficult or unmotivated (Bandura, 1997). In this context, teachers' efficacy includes beliefs about the ability of teachers in general to influence achievements of disadvantaged students through differen-

tiated instruction, as well as personal beliefs in their own ability to positively influence the learning of disadvantaged students through differentiated instruction (Rubie-Davies, 2015). Future research might examine the relations between teachers' self-efficacy and their differentiation practices and beliefs about differentiation in the context of equal learning opportunities.

Teachers seem to struggle more with a supporting dilemma than with the dilemma of learning outcomes. On the one hand, they see in practice that some students need more time and support. According to them, both low-achieving students and gifted students need extra support: the low-achieving students need extra time and support to achieve shared learning goals, and the gifted students need more time and support to succeed in more challenging education. In practice, this may be difficult because it requires differentiated instruction in which the truly gifted are distinguished from the socially privileged (Merry, 2008). This may be problematic, because especially socially privileged parents seem to pressurize teachers to make sure that their children may participate in the more challenging education programs for talented students. This requires teachers to withstand parental pressure to avoid contributing to unequal opportunities (Egalite, 2016). In addition, teachers themselves may unconsciously have biases about students' abilities because of certain social class backgrounds (Merry, 2008; Rubie-Davies, 2015).

On the other hand, teachers want to distribute time and support equally among all students because they are convinced that every student deserves the same amount of teachers' time. This is a real practical dilemma for teachers, especially because they presume that, in practice, less attention is paid to average-achieving students and that those students show relatively less growth than the other students. Teachers who experience this practical dilemma may value what Merry (2008) calls a principle of adequate educational challenge. This principle claims that it is a matter of fairness that *all* children, including the gifted, deserve to be adequately challenged. The question is whether teachers are able to organize their teaching so that learning opportunities increase for all students.

We suggest that this basic struggle of teachers is a consequence of the fact that in the Netherlands, as in many Western countries, policymakers encourage schools to focus on equal learning opportunities to alleviate social or economic problems, and to simultaneously provide the most challenging education for talented students (Labaree, 2012). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to give more attention and support to disadvantaged students and to high-achieving students. Such a contradictory policy requires schools and teachers to make their own choices by analyzing and specifying their own vision of both social issues—equal learning opportunities and education for talented students—and determining how they can positively contribute to both issues.

### 4.3. Implication for Practice

Based on these findings, we argue that teachers do not know enough about ana-

lyzing and specifying values to make decisions about ethical dilemmas, even though they are confronted with those dilemmas on a regular basis (Chen et al., 2017; Levinson & Fay, 2016). We suggest that teachers should not be wrestling with those dilemmas on their own. The principles of distributive justice as an embedded aspect of social ethics may be useful in discussing the distribution of resources with their colleagues or other stakeholders. This may enable them to systematically reflect on their choices about distributing educational goods (Brighthouse et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers may learn how to act as change agents for social justice. This requires that teachers learn how to collaborate with colleagues to achieve a shared vision and responsibility for the development of schools (Pantić & Florian, 2015). Pantić and Florian's model of teacher agency for social justice can be used to develop an educational program. This model includes four aspects: 1) a sense of purpose, commitment to and understanding of the principles of social justice; 2) competence and deeper understanding of which ways equal learning opportunities for all students can be enacted in different contexts; 3) attention for professional autonomy including perceptions of teachers' roles, principal's leadership, collaboration and school culture to improve equal learning opportunities; and 4) reflexivity, teachers capacity to reflect, question, and challenge the status quo of equal learning opportunities and exploring alternatives. Further research might investigate how teachers can engage in dialogue about social justice and education, how they can best be challenged to constantly critically reflect on which values they want to pursue with differentiation in the classroom, how they can achieve these values and whether these are actually being realized.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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