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Exploring Dutch student teachers' reasoning about structural inequality in education: a *social justice* perspective.

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Abstract This qualitative study examines the lines of reasoning employed by Dutch student teachers in relation to educational inequalities, with the aim of identifying opportunities for a social justice perspective to enrich their understanding. From our analysis of focus groups and interviews with 26 student teachers, three patterns emerged: a tendency to individualise inequality, rejection of negative labels and hierarchies, and difficulty identifying systemic solutions. The lines of reasoning within these patterns indicate that many student teachers struggle to recognise the structural aspects of inequality. Even those aware of structural inequality often perceive their role in fighting the system as limited. This study emphasises that caveats in student teachers' lines of reasoning reflect broader educational and societal discourses and challenges, highlighting the need for a social justice perspective to empower teachers to challenge existing structures and contribute to meaningful social change.

Keywords equity, social justice, teacher education, structural inequality, student teachers

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Belangen

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1 Introduction

Education is often claimed to be the 'great equaliser', a means of promoting social mobility for marginalised people. However, research has shown that the education system and teachers working within it can simultaneously reproduce the societal inequities they aim to challenge (Castagno, 2019; Freire, 2005; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). Given this paradox, there is a pressing need for educators to recognise these systemic injustices and actively work to transform them. Therefore, many teacher educators have been committed to developing social justice focused practices that challenge structural inequities by supporting prospective teachers to develop a critical consciousness of inequity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; North, 2006).

However, in the Netherlands, teacher education generally pays little attention to structural inequality (Gaikhorst et al., 2020; Geerlings et al., 2023) despite ongoing concerns about increasing educational inequality (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2018). Furthermore, many prospective and early teachers feel unprepared to teach diverse classrooms equitably (Gaikhorst & Volman, 2022), and Dutch student teachers are not used to discussing diversity in terms of structural inequality (Sincer et al., 2019). Although most student teachers see contributing to equity as part of their responsibility, they also struggle with what it means to adopt a social justice perspective. They are often unaware of how their practices can unintentionally reinforce inequities (Van Vijfeijken et al., 2024).

Although research has shed light on how issues of educational inequality are addressed in teacher education curricula and professional standards (Geerlings et al., 2023), little is known about how these efforts are reflected in student teachers' understanding of inequality. A better understanding of how they conceptualise inequality is essential to deepen or challenge their views to promote social change. International literature on social justice teacher education offers valuable resources for stimulating student teachers' critical consciousness (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Hosseini et al., 2024, 2025). Understanding their reasoning can support Dutch teacher educators in developing or improving social justice-oriented teacher education practices.

This qualitative study, therefore, aims to answer the following research question: ***From a social justice perspective, what lines of reasoning can be identified in how student teachers discuss inequality in education?*** This question will be answered by exploring patterns in student teachers' reasoning about the mechanisms underlying inequality and the role of teachers in either reproducing or challenging these mechanisms, highlighting how these patterns help or hinder student teachers in making their teaching more equitable.

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2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Critical approaches to fighting inequality

Considerable attention in teacher education for social justice has focused on changing student teachers' beliefs to foster critical awareness of systemic inequity, grounded in the idea that action requires critical reflection (Freire, 2005; Hosseini et al., 2024; Pantić, 2015). Teachers' understanding of social justice and their professional role affects their sense of agency, with different views on social justice leading to different practices (Pantić, 2015). Furthermore, a limited understanding of mechanisms of inequality can lead to the internalisation of dominant ideologies that hinder justice-oriented teaching practices, such as a belief in meritocracy, deficit ideology or colourblindness (Milner, 2010). Developing critical understanding, therefore, involves challenging or unlearning these dominant ideologies. While many approaches aim to counter deficit ideology and related perspectives, not all adopt a structural lens (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023). Much research has focused on what distinguishes a structural perspective from other approaches to diversity and equity.

King and Ladson-Billings (1990) first made a distinction between critical, liberal and conservative approaches. Conservative approaches are characterised by learning about 'other' cultures and assimilation, while liberal interpretations encourage teachers to embrace diversity (Gorski, 2009). Critical approaches focus on identifying and disrupting structures that perpetuate marginalisation and privilege, acknowledging power dynamics and recognising the inherently political nature of education (Cochran-Smith, 2010; North, 2006; Picower, 2012). From a critical perspective, educators are prepared to work towards changing the structures of inequity in education and society, rather than focusing solely on interpersonal interactions and skills for teaching diverse classrooms. Within a critical approach, liberal goals such as raising awareness of racial bias are combined with acknowledging and fighting the root causes of inequity on a systemic level (Gorski, 2009). Furthermore, critical approaches challenge commonly accepted ideas about the relationship between education and equity. They identify and critique the mechanisms through which education itself reinforces inequities, such as lower expectations for students of colour, curricula that silence Black and Brown perspectives, explicit and implicit racism in classroom dynamics, heterosexist gender norms, sorting of children into unequal socio-economic positions, and unequal distribution of resources (Castagno, 2019; Cochran-Smith, 2010; North, 2006). The liberal perspective fails to critique and challenge how education caters to the needs of dominant groups in society and privileges their norms, perspectives, values and behaviours while ignoring or punishing those of historically marginalised communities (Castagno, 2019; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990; Pascoe, 2023). This allows for deficit thinking and the misrecognition of marginalised students'

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knowledge and political struggles. Without a critical perspective, students and teachers need to change, not the system in which they operate (Gorski, 2008; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990).

2.2 The Dutch context

In the Dutch context, the discourse on justice, equity and diversity is mainly centred around the term '*kansengelijkheid*', which translates to equality of opportunity but is in practice used for a variety of perspectives on equality (Elffers, 2022; Elffers et al., 2024; Hosseini et al., 2021). Since the 1980s, research on inequality in the Netherlands mainly focused on perceived cultural disadvantages of 'underachieving' children from immigrant backgrounds, reflecting a largely conservative approach (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990; Stevens et al., 2019). Later on, researchers have increasingly focused on the impact of the Dutch education system, which is known for its early and rigid tracking, a form of institutional differentiation which has been shown to enlarge inequality compared to other education systems, such as those with delayed selection (Naayer et al., 2016; Van De Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010).

Over the past decades, the Dutch education system has faced frequent criticism for its early allocation of students around the age of 12 to different educational trajectories, which are not only strongly linked to social outcomes in terms of employment opportunities, income and health but also serve to reproduce stratification. This allocation process often allows for biases based on background characteristics such as social class and native language, resulting in students with similar cognitive abilities being placed on different pathways (Denessen, 2024; Elffers, 2022; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2018; Stevens et al., 2019).

This early tracking system has not fundamentally changed, despite widespread concerns over these undesirable social outcomes. Furthermore, Stevens et al. (2019) argue that, while educational research has shown the racialised aspects of early tracking – for example, students of colour are overrepresented within vocational tracks and more often receive 'lower' track recommendations than what their test scores would suggest –, educational research often takes on a more colourblind approach, focusing primarily on class and parental educational level. Although this can be explained by data highlighting the influence of SES on track placement, they warn that a focus on SES alone can overlook the existence and impact of racism.

This colourblindness has been highlighted by many scholars of racism in the Netherlands (Cairo, 2021; Nzume, 2023; Wekker, 2020). Wekker (2020) coined the term 'white innocence' to describe the denial of racism in Dutch society. This concept highlights the incorrect self-image of the Netherlands as a colourblind, tolerant, and courageous nation, despite its colonial history. Consequently, many Dutch people mistakenly believe that racism is not a problem in their

country. Leijgraaf and Reeves (2025) studied student teachers' awareness of racial inequality during a course on racism and privilege and found that student teachers were surprised to discover that racism existed not only in the US but also in the Netherlands. Another consequence of the Dutch colourblind self-image is that addressing racism often leads to discomfort and resistance because it is considered '*ongezellig'* (not 'cosy') (Cairo, 2021).

In recent years, however, there has been growing public attention for a more structural perspective on inequality and justice. In 2020, Black Lives Matter protests brought increased attention to institutional racism, including in education (Ghorashi, 2023). The same year, the documentary series 'Klassen' premiered on national television, showcasing how inequality manifests in the lives of various families from diverse social and cultural backgrounds in Amsterdam (Sylbing et al., 2020). The documentary received widespread media coverage, and many expressed sympathy for the protagonists, including the teachers, who were praised for their efforts to support their pupils.

2.3 Inequality in Dutch teacher education

Multiple studies have shown that Dutch teacher education generally pays little attention to inequality. For example, a study by Gaikhorst et al. (2020) in three urban teacher education programs found that inequality was only addressed to a limited degree in these teacher education programs, and participants explicitly mentioned a lack of attention to issues such as racism and stereotyping. This corresponds with earlier research on Dutch teacher education curricula, which indicated limited attention to inequality within the intended curriculum (Severiens et al., 2014). Multiple teacher educators have developed practices that try to fill this gap, for example, through a course on critical race theory (Soeterik et al., 2023) or challenging student teachers to examine their role working in the Dutch system of early tracking (Van Vijfeijken et al., 2024). However, Geerlings et al. (2023) argue that attention to inclusion, equity or justice within Dutch teacher education remains relatively limited. Furthermore, inclusive teacher education practices often explicitly tackle dealing with cultural differences but often neglect issues of discrimination and racism. Even teacher education practices that emphasise discrimination and racism in their curriculum are more focused on the interpersonal rather than the institutional level. For instance, they aim to stimulate interracial contact and empathy rather than challenge racism, e.g., in learning materials, teaching practices, or organisations. Moreover, most student teachers said they have never learned to recognise or reflect on possible discrimination or racism in their practices (Geerlings et al., 2023).

The limited focus on equality and inclusion within teacher education is unsurprising, given how these topics are addressed in the Dutch professional standards for teachers. For example, teachers are encouraged to align their practices with students' social and cultural backgrounds, tailor their practices

to individual differences, and contribute to citizenship education and moral development (Geerlings et al., 2023). However, acknowledging structural inequality is absent from the standards.

Given the limited body of research that examines how broader discourses in Dutch teacher education and the wider social context are reflected in students' understandings of inequality, this study will explore the lines of reasoning employed by student teachers, aiming to identify opportunities to further enrich their understanding through a social justice lens.

3 Method

Participants

In this qualitative study, five focus groups and six individual interviews were conducted with third- and fourth-year student teachers in Dutch primary education. Twenty-six participants from ten different teacher education institutes participated in the study. Student teachers were invited to participate through their institutes via class announcements, newsletters, or online platforms. They participated voluntarily and received a small gift card. The University of Amsterdam's departmental ethics board approved the study. We aimed for a sample with substantial variation, particularly in experiences with different forms of inequality. The initial recruitment yielded few participants of colour and LGBTQIA+ participants. To increase diversity within the sample, additional calls were made on LinkedIn and Instagram, encouraging student teachers from these groups to apply. This resulted in 5 additional participants. Table 1 describes participants' background characteristics.

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Table 1

Background characteristics of participants

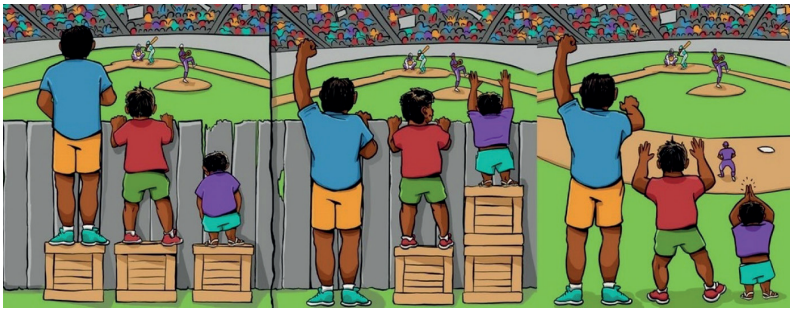
Pseudonym	Program	Interview type	Racial & ethnic background	Gender	LGBTQ+	Experienced poverty	Parental education level hbo/wo
Sophie	Parttime	Individual	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Chiara	Fulltime	Group 1	White Dutch	Woman	Unreported	No	Yes
Isabelle	Parttime	Group 1	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Quinten	Fulltime	Group 1	White Dutch	Woman	No	Yes	No
Marije	Fulltime	Group 2	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Demi	Fulltime	Group 2	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	No
Eveline	Fulltime	Group 2	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Lieke	Fulltime	Group 2	White Dutch	Woman	No	Yes	No
Julia	Fulltime	Group 2	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Maya	Fulltime	Group 3	POC, mixed race Asian/African/White, Dutch	Woman	No	Yes	No
Naomi	Fulltime	Group 3	White Dutch	Woman	No	Yes	No
Britt	Fulltime	Group 3	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Marieke	Fulltime	Group 3	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	No
Sam	Fulltime	Group 4	White Dutch	Man	Unreported	Unreported	Unreported
Inge	Fulltime	Group 4	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	No
Sanne	Fulltime	Group 4	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Cecilia	Fulltime	Group 5	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	No
Kees	Fulltime	Group 5	White Dutch	Man	No	Yes	No
Hiske	Fulltime	Group 5	White Dutch	Woman	Unreported	Unreported	Unreported
Maria	Fulltime	Group 5	White Dutch	Woman	No	No	Yes
Alfred	Fulltime	Group 5	White Dutch	Man	No	No	Yes
Bregje	Fulltime	Individual	White Dutch	Woman	Yes	No	Yes
Jimmy	Parttime	Individual	POC, Asian, born outside the Netherlands	Man	No	Yes	No
Lot	Academic	Individual	White Dutch	Woman	Yes	No	Yes
Hanna	Academic	Individual	White, born outside the Netherlands	Woman	Yes	No	Yes
Annie	Academic	Individual	White Dutch	Woman	Yes	No	Yes

Data collection and procedure

The 1-hour focus groups and the individual interviews were semi-structured, using a similar interview guide. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Teams to avoid burdening student teachers' busy schedules and to account for uncertainties in the wake of the pandemic. The main interview questions are listed in Table 2. Student teachers were also asked follow-up questions to elaborate and respond to each other's views. After starting with open questions, student teachers were asked to respond to images and videos representing inequity (such as Figure 1) to elicit more specific responses and explore whether their general views of inequity differed when responding to concrete situations.

Figure 1

Adaptation (author unknown) of original image by Angus Maguire for the Interaction Institute for Social Change



The videos were selected based on sensitising concepts from the social justice literature, such as meritocracy, colourblindness and deficit ideology. The first clip from Klassen shows a disappointed young boy (Yunuscan), whose teacher tells him that, despite his hard work, he did not reach the track he aimed for because his vocabulary and reading skills are limited due to growing up in a non-Dutch-speaking family. In the second video, Anyssa is advised a less challenging track due to family instability, despite her capabilities. The third shows white, middle-class children receiving pre-university track recommendations, credited solely to hard work. To spark conversation about racism, participants also watched a clip from a show by presenter Ajouad El Miloudi, featuring an elite, all-white, gentlemen's society, where both racist and colourblind statements are made.

Table 2

Structure of the interviews

Question/topic	Type of question
What does kansengelijkheid mean to you? (and to what extent is that currently the case)	Open: individual post-it, followed by (group) discussion
What are causes of inequality in education (or society)?	
For every factor mentioned, how does this cause inequality?	Structuring causes on post its, placing them in a schema with actors and agency
How would you describe these situations? What do you consider fair? What is the role of the teacher in this image?	Response to Figure 1
How do you see kansen(on)gelijkheid reflected in these clips?	Response to Klassen
What do you see? What responses do the statements made in the clip evoke?	Response to Ajouad
What does kansengelijkheid mean to you? (revisited)	Open

Analysis

We also adopted a social justice perspective to analyse the transcribed interviews, focusing primarily on how student teachers reasoned about structural inequalities. In our approach to the analysis, we drew on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Van Der Meide, 2018) and narrative inquiry (Bell, 2002). As a first step, the first author composed a narrative textual portrait of each interview or focus group, which allowed for a more comprehensive view of the data, rather than fragmenting it into separate quotes (Van Der Meide, 2018). These textual portraits were then treated as narratives, in which the stories participants told offered insight into their sense-making, their lived experiences with inequality, and the knowledge and assumptions present in their thinking (Bell, 2002).The first author wrote analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014) identifying the reasonings visible in these narratives, both for each narrative individually. These reasonings were then sorted in an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis to discover patterns. In total, 70% of the interviews, either the transcript or the narrative portraits, were analysed by two or more researchers. Between each stage of the analysis, the researchers engaged in extensive dialogue about their interpretations of the data and the process of distilling the wide range of individual reasonings into the seven lines of reasoning that were prominently present across multiple narratives. This dialogue was a crucial part of the approach, ensuring a thorough and reflective analysis of every transcript.

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Positionality and reflexivity

Our research team consists of four Dutch educational researchers and teacher educators. The first author is an Iranian-Dutch woman working as a PhD candidate and novice teacher educator. The other authors are white women with significant experience and various senior positions in teacher education or educational sciences. Although our formal positions and theoretical and personal backgrounds may differ, this project was driven by our shared commitment to contribute to social change through education. Our findings are not intended to blame individuals for structural inequalities in Dutch education but to critically question norms, ideologies and actions that may inadvertently reinforce inequality. Our work is "less about uncovering students' 'personal' racism, rather than considering how racist ideas in the world at large get 'programmed' into individuals and activated in people's behaviour" (Pollock et al., 2010, p. 214). We therefore believe it is crucial to confront how well-intentioned lines of reasoning can reinforce inequality, but also to highlight the complexities of teaching within an unjust system where there is never one right way to act.

The first author conducted the interviews, and the second was present during four focus groups. Our identities and choice of words may have shaped what participants felt comfortable sharing, as they may have signalled our stance on issues such as anti-racism. Furthermore, our experience of both privilege and marginalisation may have influenced our awareness of overt and subtle forms of injustice, especially those we have personally experienced.

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4 Results

Participants' responses to the interview questions and comments of others gave insight into their reasoning about what educational equality means and the implications for teachers. It is important to note that a significant finding was a substantial variation in knowledge and familiarity with discussing and recognising inequality among participants. Some participants offered detailed explanations of the mechanisms and assumptions underlying inequalities, while others provided more general descriptions or justifications, struggling to elaborate on their answers. The extent of the differences in discourse shows that student teachers have varied interpretations of inequality and the role of the teacher. Nevertheless, we identified seven recurrent lines of reasoning in most of the interviews, which we used to structure our results section. In cases where we refer to themes as occurring 'many' times or 'very often', this signals that such themes emerged across several interviews and groups, and were generally not contested unless otherwise stated.

1. Everyone should get more opportunities.

In many interviews, participants stressed that they were all in favour of providing extra attention to children with fewer resources. Nevertheless, multiple participants also pointed out that equality should not come at the expense of children who are doing well. In some interviews, participants explicitly stated that equal opportunities should result in everyone receiving more opportunities.

When participants were asked to respond to Figure 1, the lack of support for the tallest child in the second image was a recurrent theme. Participant Lot, initially emphasising support for those who are falling behind, articulated the dilemma of balancing support for all students:

> "That middle picture is indeed about 'okay, this way you have equal opportunities', but I think if you still have a crate left, it's not wrong to further help a child who has already grown a lot. So it's not just about helping children who don't get those opportunities but also about helping those who do."

2. Inequality is a matter of disadvantage.

In their responses, many participants focused more on individual situations of disadvantage than on the broader, unequal distribution of advantages and disadvantages. Consequently, privilege was rarely mentioned as a factor in inequality. An example of this line of reasoning can be found in participants' reactions to the three video fragments from Klassen.

A notable result was that many student teachers viewed the first two videos as examples of inequality, but the third video as a situation of equality. We noticed that they rarely mentioned privilege as an integral part of inequality. Instead, participants typically spoke of inequality in terms of disadvantages that hindered optimal personal development, rather than an unfair distribution of opportunities. As a result, they did not always recognise how situations of privilege also reflected inequality.

3. Inequality is caused by individual mistreatment or prejudice.

The racist statements and microaggressions in the Ajouad video evoked different emotional reactions. Many participants started to laugh awkwardly or made dismissive facial expressions. Almost all students expressed a negative opinion about the two white men and the culture within their gentlemen's club. For example, Sophie called them *"creepy old men who are not quite fully engaged in life."*. Generally, critiques of discriminatory practices and statements seemed more focused on the people expressing them rather than the underlying mechanisms.

Cases of racism – both in the videos and personal stories – were often reduced to incidents caused by individual mistreatment or prejudice, rather than manifestations of systemic racism. For instance, Jimmy believed that the current

lack of teachers of colour was due to school boards making hiring decisions explicitly based on race, rather than credentials. Discussions of racism that acknowledge its structural manifestations in subtle prejudice, good intentions or taken-for-granted procedures were absent from most interviews.

However, there were a few exceptions to this pattern. For example, Hanna mentioned these prejudices are often formed unconsciously and reflect dominant societal discourses. Furthermore, Chiara consistently mentioned structural injustices. When her classmates said that educational opportunities were a matter of luck, Chiara added a note:

> "I also think that there are many things in our society that make it necessary to be lucky with where you are born, even in the Netherlands. If those things were changed, and I don't have an immediate list of examples, but if those kinds of things were adjusted within our society, then that luck with where you are born would be less important."

When asked to illuminate, she mentioned a recent ethnic profiling scandal in the Netherlands that caused severe financial and emotional problems for the families that were affected. Chiara mainly focused on underlying structures rather than individual actions. Although the misconceptions and biases expressed in the Klassen videos caused visible irritation, Chiara did not consider the teacher in the video to be a lousy teacher. Instead, she criticised the teacher's assumptions about language learning, as there is evidence that reading to a child in a different language can positively influence their language proficiency in Dutch.

4. Educational tracks should not be seen as a hierarchy.

Although the Dutch educational system is known for being relatively stratified and hierarchical, most participants emphasised how they did not view the education system this way. For example, multiple student teachers stated that vmbo (vocational education) was *"also just fine"* and mainly criticised the pressure placed on getting into havo or vwo (general or pre-academic education), *"because one child simply works better with their hands and another is very theoretically inclined."* (Lieke). More specific examples can be found in participants' responses to the Klassen videos. Almost all participants found it annoying that the teacher in the video used negative language when she announced that Yunuscan was not allowed to enter the higher educational track he wanted. For example, Lot expressed that she felt sorry for the mother in the video because the teacher used negative words like 'problem' in her recommendation and would rather see her reframe this more nicely:

> "Your reading comprehension is a bit behind, I recommend reading many books, and vmbo is great; you can always go to university if you want."

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In other responses to the fragments, many participants also mainly focused on how the recommendations were communicated positively, and whether the children were happy about it. For example, most people did not consider Anyssa's track recommendation undesirable or a case of low expectations because Anyssa herself was happy with it. They did express sympathy for the protagonist in the third video (Viggo), who seemed disappointed when he did not receive the havo/vwo recommendation that was the norm at his school.

However, many participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the hierarchy in Dutch educational tracks and the professions for which these tracks prepare. Comments in the line of *"vwo is not necessarily better than vmbo"* (Lot) and *"one is very happy to become a carpenter, and the other very much wants to become a professor"* (Quinten) were frequently made during the interviews. This could be interpreted as a way of challenging and rejecting this hierarchy. However, we also observed a form of denial of the hierarchy in the participants' answers. As just a few participants (who form an exception to this pattern) also pointed out, a vwo-diploma or a professor job carries significant privileges in Dutch society. Rejecting the idea that vwo is better than vmbo would not necessarily change the unequal rewards for these diplomas in society.

5. It is not better to be white.

In response to the implication in the video by Ajouad that being white is preferable, many participants expressed their disapproval of this idea. In these discussions, we observed a denial of white privilege by advocating for a more colourblind perspective. In focus group 4, the (white) participants expressed how much they disliked explicitly mentioning race, as *"everyone is just the way they are"* (Sam). Very often, in their criticism of racist incidents, participants mainly focused on the negativity rather than the racism itself. For instance, Britt highlighted how the racist statements probably came from good intentions and were therefore not necessarily discriminatory:

> "He said it clumsily, but he actually meant it very well, in his own way. There was nothing malicious, nothing discriminatory about it. He just said it clumsily."

In focus group 3, an interesting dynamic emerged. In this focus group, participants seemed to reject racism when expressed in the videos, but also made racist statements themselves during the interview. For example, Cecilia wrote down 'norms and values' as an important cause of inequality. When I asked her to elaborate, she said:

> "Yes, for example, I was thinking about a job application process. Sometimes, one person has a better chance than someone else; for example, if you consider skin colour, a Dutch person would have a better chance than a foreigner. However, I think it also depends on

what you find important. If you think it's important to give everyone a chance, then you'll look at it differently than if, for instance, you prioritise financial considerations highly and know that a Dutch person has a higher education, or something along those lines, then you'll give that person a better chance."

In this statement, Cecilia assumes that people of colour are not Dutch and likely have a lower education level, and implies that hiring a person of colour would negatively impact a company's financial situation. In response to the image with different perspectives on equality or equity, Hiske compared her vision of inequality to her vision of 'Africa':

"You can keep pumping money into it, but you can also teach them to make it themselves. In the long run, that is much more efficient than continuously pumping money into it or endlessly stacking boxes."

In this comparison, which does not mention the role of colonialism or exploitation, it is suggested that the issue is not one of disadvantage but of deficits, implying that inequality is caused by people being unable to resolve their poverty. Thus, participants stating that being white is not inherently superior does not necessarily indicate a rejection of white supremacy.

6. Inequality inevitably derives from difference.

More than half of the participants expressed a line of reasoning that attributed inequality to differences between children, rather than how the education system handles these differences. When asked to identify causes of inequality, many cited the Dutch word '*afkomst*' (origin), most often referring to ethnic background. We inferred from their elaborations that they were referring to children in multilingual migrant households. Many participants tended to lump together different marginalised communities: people of colour were often assumed to also be migrants, Muslims, bilingual, and poor, without differentiating between various forms of identity and oppression. However, the most notable was the common assumption that growing up in a multilingual household automatically leads to language deficiencies in Dutch.

The language used by participants suggests that it is not how education addresses multilingualism or 'background' that leads to inequality, but the background itself. Although it is recognised that the current education system disadvantages multilingual children, the possibility of an alternative system that builds on the strengths of multilingualism does not occur to participants. A similar example of this line of reasoning was provided by Annie, who discussed students being excluded from the education programme because their parents could not afford the required materials:

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> "I had a pupil who didn't have any sportswear. Our rule is: If you forget your sportswear a certain number of times, you are not allowed to participate in PE class. But this child's parents did not have the money to buy sportswear, so he could never participate."

Annie did not mention how this rule led to the exclusion of children living in poverty. Instead, she proudly shared that she told parents that buying sportswear should be their priority.

Participants in focus group 2 also emphasised that teachers should discuss the differences in their living conditions with children rather than focusing on changing them. However, by suggesting that disparities in living conditions and social position should be normalised rather than challenged, they legitimised not only differences between children but also the inequalities associated with these differences. In focus group 4, Sam even argued that fighting inequality is undesirable because it is part of life:

> "I can remove all the obstacles for someone, but then you don't really learn how to live. Life is also about having obstacles and learning to deal with them."

This reasoning showed a lack of desire to change educational inequality; participants saw it as undesirable but seemed resigned to the status quo. This was not necessarily due to a lack of willingness or ability to act; multiple participants gave examples of what they had done or would do in their classrooms to fight inequality. However, these were often examples of actions that unknowingly reproduced misconceptions perpetuating inequality, even though they were intended well. For example, some participants seemed unaware of the arguments against speaking only Dutch at home.

Marije suggested that teachers should support parents by advising them to read Dutch children's books with their children at a very low reading level. Annie noted that international and Islamic schools better support multilingual students, but did not consider any implications for her teaching or development. Instead, she suggested advising multilingual students to attend schools where teachers speak their first language. Kees and Hiske stated that a teacher's responsibility is to identify and report problems at home, such as poverty. If a teacher notices that a child often comes to school without breakfast or lunch, they should report this to an official authority. Notably absent from this discussion in focus group 4 was an acknowledgement of the risk that such a report would have negative consequences for the child, a point highlighted by Chiara in focus group 1.

7. Inequality is too big and complex for teachers to tackle.

Other participants, however, expressed a different line of reasoning for their lack of confidence in their ability to fix inequality. They recognised how their actions

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could reinforce inequality but felt too overwhelmed by its complexity to see themselves as agents of change, minimising the positive impact of their actions. 'Breaking down the fence' was seen as ideal yet unattainable. Instead, teachers could only try to support disadvantaged children, according to the second image. These participants seemed pessimistic about the potential of education to create social change. For example, Hanna stated:

> "I don't think finding symptomatic solutions to those inequalities in the school system makes much sense if the problem is much deeper."

Similarly, Chiara pointed out how she found the video fragments painful to watch but did not see many possibilities for structural change:

> "I find that very difficult to see. These children are incredibly capable, but due to factors beyond their control, which are entirely out of their hands, their future is partly determined and influenced. I find that very sad. As a prospective teacher, I find that very hard to see. I would love to take all those children under my wing and say, 'We'll solve it.' But that is not possible because it is a much bigger problem."

Additionally, the participants rarely mentioned being supported in fighting inequality. Only Isabelle named an example of a colleague who positively impacted her by pointing out how one of her actions unconsciously increased inequality. By contrast, Sophie pointed out how her fellow teachers often talk about children in negative ways or refuse to change their ways if their actions are criticised for being racist. Bregje discussed how she felt alone in her efforts to learn about inequality in teacher education. To illustrate, she explained why she takes advantage of every opportunity to bring up inequality in class:

> "Yes, it's also important to learn how to keep your class quiet or teach a fun children's song, but these are problems that people are just sort of blindly going through or something, where they might cause damage later on because they are unaware of their own behaviour or worldviews, where they have never thought about how to empathise with someone with a different background, where they are entirely unaware of their white privileges. In a class full of children, especially if you teach in Amsterdam, it is just essential that you are aware of that. I find it so terrible that in Amsterdam, in teacher education, we don't get any lessons about it."

In the responses of these participants, an important tension emerged. On the one hand, they felt that their influence was limited and that they were not doing nearly enough to combat inequality. On the other hand, they were critical of how their actions and those of their colleagues could perpetuate inequality and gave many examples of how they tried to avoid this. For example, Isabelle said

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she attempted to disrupt her unconscious tendency to provide less demanding resources for multilingual students due to lower expectations, although she still found this difficult. Stories of student teachers like Chiara, Isabelle, Bregje, Hanna and Sophie show that they actively try to avoid harmful prejudices and look for ways to address overlooked or ignored issues, demonstrating the value of small actions. Their sense of powerlessness seems to stem from a lack of recognition of the impact these actions can have, even if they cannot change the entire system, rather than from an inability to act.

5 Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored student teachers' lines of reasoning about educational inequality, examining their perspectives on both the mechanisms that cause inequality and the role of teachers in tackling it. Examining these lines of reasoning from a social justice perspective enables us to identify aspects of inequality that may have been overlooked and can deepen and challenge student teachers' understanding of how to address inequality. Our findings indicate that, while student teachers recognise the existence of inequality, they often struggle to understand it in structural terms, which is a key aspect of a social justice perspective. Within the seven lines of reasoning, we distinguished three overarching patterns: a) a tendency to individualise inequality, b) a rejection of negative labels and hierarchies, and c) difficulty identifying systemic solutions.

When asked to describe what equity means to them, most student teachers referred to it as something that was both pedagogical (described as some form of access to or support for personal development that should be available to everyone) and distributive (described as fairness in the distribution of opportunities where someone's background is not a determining factor). However, in their responses to more concrete situations, we observed a more individualised interpretation of inequality. Equal opportunities were seen as something a child could either have or lack, rather than a relative concept. The distributive side of inequality tended to take a back seat, with a focus on making people feel supported rather than challenging the structures that put them at either an advantage or a disadvantage. For example, the idea of more opportunities for everyone ignores critical questions, such as "If some people move up, does that mean there will be a new bottom? If so, who will be there?" (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990, p. 22).

As the main responsibilities of primary school teachers are primarily focused on the pedagogical task of education, education professionals are not always prepared to become aware (and critical) of their role in maintaining the sorting function of the education system (Elffers, 2023), thereby overlooking how the

education system legitimises inequality to serve the capitalist system (Castagno, 2019; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). However, participation in this sorting process is an important part of what is expected of teachers in practice, such as working towards providing track recommendations (Elffers, 2023). The idea of getting 'every pupil in the right place', which legitimises current practices, is still widely accepted by many educational professionals (Elffers, 2022), as we also observed.

A second pattern we observed in student teachers' reasoning was a reluctance to name hierarchies, especially in negative terms. Participants often wanted to make children happy, even if they were in disadvantaged positions. This often meant avoiding explicit references to those disadvantages, being kind and positive instead. On the one hand, the argument that educational tracks should not be seen as hierarchical can be read as a critique of the system. Similarly, saying that it is not better to be white could be interpreted as a rejection of white superiority. However, such reasoning can also be seen as a denial of the structural racism that does, in fact, privilege whiteness. By denying hierarchies and simply communicating more nicely, the inequalities remain intact. As Pascoe (2023) argues, tackling inequality by aiming for a culture of kindness, while avoiding the political (cf. 'gezelligheid' (Cairo, 2021)), limits the potential of teachers and schools to create social change and challenge the discrimination embedded in practices and institutions. For example, this mindset can prevent teachers from examining and disrupting deficit assumptions in more subtle, 'well-intended ', manifestations of racism in educational practice. For example, the participants did not challenge the idea that children of colour receive less (valuable) support from home and are, therefore, 'behind' compared to white children. Although racism can lead to socio-economic deprivation that limits families' ability to support their children, this assumption is often also rooted in deficit ideology and racism due to a lack of recognition of the knowledge and behaviours of families of colour (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023).

The third pattern we identified in our analysis of student teachers' reasoning is their struggle to recognise alternatives. When participants were asked about the teacher's influence on mechanisms causing inequality, they mentioned various examples that could affect educational opportunities, such as low expectations, biased tracking procedures and limited representation in books. However, they could identify fewer solutions for these problems. Most participants suggested providing underserved students with extra attention or advising parents; some noted the need for teachers to recognise their biases. However, most participants overlooked previously highlighted issues and often criticised others' practices without reflecting on their own. Many students reported they had learned about practices such as maintaining high expectations or embracing multilingualism, but found it challenging to identify the implications for their classrooms. As a result, they often felt

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limited in addressing inequalities through pedagogical strategies aimed at reducing deficits, improving the overall quality of education, or fostering kinder interactions with pupils and families.

This pattern underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms by which educational practices can either reinforce or disrupt structural inequality. Earlier research has shown that student teachers often feel overwhelmed when learning to recognise structural inequality and struggle to envision transformative changes. Awareness of these mechanisms, however, is vital to connect macro-structures with daily actions and recognise the potential of seemingly minor disruptions (Hosseini et al., 2025; Pantić, 2015; Pollock et al., 2010). In the sixth and seventh lines of reasoning, this connection was sometimes missed, leaving student teachers feeling powerless against a system in which inequality almost seems inevitable.

Our findings, framed within a social justice framework, demonstrate how certain lines of reasoning can hinder the recognition of structural inequality or the development of socially just teaching practices. However, it is important not to perceive student teachers' reasoning as uninformed or naïve. For example, a pedagogical view on inequality is understandable, considering their professional responsibilities for the well-being of every child. Accordingly, the aforementioned caveats in understanding should not be seen as shortcomings of an individual teacher or attributed solely to student teachers lacking important knowledge. Instead, it demonstrates a discrepancy between the demands placed on teachers in pursuit of social justice and the roles they are expected to fulfil within the educational system, which reflects education's limited ability to solve broader societal inequalities. As Kolluri and Tichavakunda (2023) argue, a structural perspective on inequality that seeks to counter deficit ideology must also adopt an anti-deficit view of teachers, recognising how their contexts and responsibilities impose a role on them in which they are required to participate in practices that reproduce inequalities. Nevertheless, these lines of reasoning and the resulting uncertainty about how to act, which we observed in participants, also actively contribute to the reproduction of this status quo.

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5.2 Practical implications

Although our findings showed a great variety in critical consciousness of structural inequality, we observed a perceived lack of agency in almost all participants. However, we do not suggest that this argues for teacher education to focus solely on practical tools at the expense of a theoretical understanding of mechanisms. Instead, in our conclusion, we argued that our findings highlight the need to build awareness of inequality before pursuing solutions and teach student teachers to recognise small-scale resistance.

Pantić (2019) proposes that teacher educators facilitate the development of a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between theoretical and

practical implications of social justice by engaging with complex 'tough case' scenarios derived from practical experiences. As evidenced by our findings, scenarios such as those depicted in Klassen offer numerous opportunities to identify and challenge long-held assumptions. Providing students with the necessary support can help them recognise inequality and enable them to see both the potential and limitations of their own small acts of resistance. Çankaya (2020, p. 39) describes these acts as "micro-revolutions: minor infractions of social norms, insignificant disturbances of the status quo, and do not necessarily offer a solution". Framing small acts of resistance as micro-revolutions implies a transformative potential and highlights that fighting inequality requires a collective process. However, individual teachers can make a difference by daring to challenge taken-for-granted norms, assumptions, and practices, advocating for marginalised students and colleagues, and inspiring each other to develop socially just practices.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

A limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted at a time of heightened attention to social inequality, particularly racism. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement drew attention to institutional racism in the Netherlands, encouraging critical self-reflection among White Dutch people (Ghorashi, 2023). The recency of this period at the time of the interviews may have led to more awareness of privilege or influenced what participants considered socially desirable responses. Further research could provide more insight into how such views may evolve amid shifting political and societal dynamics.

As is common in qualitative research, this study does not aim to produce generalisable findings. Although we focused on identifying patterns in student teachers' reasoning, we acknowledge that these patterns cannot be assumed to represent all student teachers. Furthermore, our sample may include students who are more aware of or engaged with the topic, as participation was voluntary. The small sample size and limited diversity may have resulted in certain perspectives (such as those of students of colour) being underrepresented or absent. As such, this study does not support generalisations about all student teachers or allow for comparisons between different groups.

However, the presence of these perspectives – even among students who may be more aware of inequality – highlights the complexities of disrupting structural inequality in (teacher) education. By identifying how common lines of reasoning may hinder the development of social justice-oriented teaching practices, this study offers valuable insights into challenges student teachers may face in contributing to social change. Teacher educators seeking to fight the reproduction of inequity can draw on these insights to better understand how student teachers can be both challenged and supported through social justice-oriented teacher education practices.

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Samenvatting

Hoe denken toekomstige leerkrachten over kansengelijkheid? Een *social justice* perspectief.

In deze kwalitatieve studie onderzoeken wij de redeneringen van leerkrachten in opleiding over kansen(on)gelijkheid. Het doel is om aanknopingspunten te vinden voor opleidingsonderwijs vanuit een *social justice* perspectief dat het begrip van aankomende leraren verdiept en hen ondersteunt bij het ontwikkelen van handelingsalternatieven. Uit onze analyse van focusgroepen en interviews met 26 Nederlandse pabostudenten kwamen zeven redeneringen naar voren, die met daarin drie opvallende patronen: (1) een neiging om ongelijkheid te individualiseren, (2) een afwijzing van negatieve labels en hiërarchieën, en (3) moeite met het identificeren van structurele oplossingen. Vanuit een *social justice* perspectief gezien belemmeren deze manieren van redeneren de ontwikkeling van onderwijspraktijken die bijdragen aan gelijkwaardigheid en rechtvaardigheid. Tegelijkertijd bieden ze inzicht in de complexiteit van de positie van leerkrachten binnen een onderwijssysteem dat ongelijkheid versterkt; er is een spanning tussen de verwachting dat leerkrachten bijdragen aan kansengelijkheid enerzijds, en hun rol in het in stand houden van een ongelijkwaardig systeem anderzijds. Dit onderzoek suggereert manieren van denken die op *social justice* gericht opleidingsonderwijs ter discussie zou kunnen stellen, zodat studenten beter in staat zijn bestaande structuren te bevragen en met hun handelen bij te dragen aan sociale verandering.

Kernwoorden kansen(on)gelijkheid, social justice, lerarenopleiding, structurele ongelijkheid, leerkrachten in opleiding