



Revising Fairness as Social Justice in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Young children's ideas of fairness have been studied in a range of laboratory settings with findings that children see fairness as equal distribution of resources. However, many studies occurred in decontextualized environments (i.e., laboratory settings), which hardly provide opportunities for children to exhibit nuanced ways to enact fairness. By observing children in more authentic contexts, their classrooms, this article complicates the concept of fairness as equality and attends to the ways that children respond to issues of fairness by acting as contributors to their classroom communities on a daily basis. Drawing on a larger video-cued ethnographic research project, we specifically focus on full-day films taken across three early childhood classrooms to contextualize young children's capabilities when they encounter issues of fairness. The findings indicate that young children have the ability to respond to fairness with social justice-oriented solutions by giving up resources, prioritizing other's needs, and advocating for others. When children confront issues of fairness in real-life contexts, they are capable of finding solutions that endorse equity.

Keywords Early childhood education · Fairness · Social justice · Civic action · Community · Learning by Observing and Pitching-in (LOPI)

Introduction

Young children are rarely included in conversations about civicness or social justice in the United States (US). When they are, young children are considered to be egocentric, and therefore concerned with their own safety and resources. Recently, early childhood researchers have started to study how young children understand fairness as a conceptualization necessary for strong social-emotional skills and self-regulation. The majority of these studies have concluded, young children see fairness developmentally—between the ages of 2 and 8—as equal distribution (Elenbaas, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2016; Sheshkin et al., 2014; Wittig et al., 2013) suggesting that fairness to young children means equality. However, seeing children through this developmental lens limits the scope for their abilities and participation (Cannella, 1997, 2000), when in reality, young children do

have abilities to engage in civics and various social justice practices (MacNaughton et al. 2009; Phillips, 2010; Serriere, 2010; Vilotti & Berson, 2019; Payne et al., 2020). Findings from the *Civic Action and Young Children* study suggest that young children of color living in communities with severe historical and ongoing economic injustices see fairness as need-based and contextual, in addition to and sometimes even instead of, same or equal distribution. In this article, we draw from over 500 h of recorded data from everyday life in three preschool classrooms to show how young children of color in a city-based Head Start program responded to, enacted, and articulated fairness. We also explore how the young children in our study countered the developmental assertion that young children only view fairness from an egocentric lens. From the onset of our study, we position young children of color as capable beings who can contribute to their classroom community through their actions, so observing them in their everyday classroom settings afforded us the opportunities to understand the various ways children enacted fairness. To contextualize young children's enactment of fairness, we present a vignette that involved three girls during outdoor playtime.

David Barry contributed to the original analysis of study.

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Zanaya, Deondra, Trinity, and the Ball

One day in the hot Texas sun, Zanaya and Deondra, who are Black and four-years-old, and Trinity, a four-year-old Latina, played outside with large red and yellow high-bouncing balls. Trinity seemed to be waiting for a turn to use Zanaya's ball, but eventually gave up and swiped it from her. Zanaya shouted to Trinity what her teacher had instructed her to when something happens, she doesn't like (instead of hitting or pushing), "Stop! I don't like that!" Zanaya then reminded Trinity that the ball she had taken was, in fact, hers. Zanaya starts crying. Deondra hears Zanaya crying, comes over, and gives her ball to Zanaya.

While watching this scene unfold, we were surprised. Not because Deondra had a hard time sharing or because she was selfish (quite the contrary), but because there were so many other ways that she could have tried to make the situation "fair," such as demanding Trinity to give the ball back to Zanaya, getting another ball so that all three of them would each have a ball, or insisting they each have the ball for a certain amount of time. Instead, Deondra gave up her ball for Zanaya. Her decision invoked a disadvantageous solution for herself in order to right a situation she saw as problematic, and to help her friend Zanaya, with whom she spent much time playing inside and outside the classroom. Deondra did not attempt equal distribution, but instead, tried to help everyone receive what they needed in that particular moment. This scene was one of many which the researchers observed in preschool classrooms serving pre-K Latinx and Black children that pushed our research team to rethink our understanding of fairness. The focus of this article is not to argue that children never equally distribute resources in early childhood classrooms, but to present children's capabilities of choosing equity over equality for others as a way to enact fairness. This article will illustrate that while the children in this study did share resources equally sometimes, they also chose not to and instead, emphasized making conditions right for people.

Literature Review

Young Children's Conceptualizations of Fairness

Historically, fairness has been studied in decontextualized laboratory settings far from children's everyday lives. Researchers provide games and record young children's responses to issues of fairness (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Grocke et al., 2015; LoBue et al., 2011; Shaw & Olson, 2014). In these studies, young children typically

demonstrate a desire for equal distribution as a sign of fairness, insisting that everyone follow the same rules, have the same chance of winning a game, receive the same number of resources or turns, or be positioned the same distance from important parts of the game. For example, Wittig et al. (2013) found that 5-year-olds understood fairness as having equal amounts of resources. In this study, children were asked to play the mini-ultimatum game to distribute or receive gummy bears, and they were likely to reject the unequal amount of gummy bears when they knew they could have an equal share.

Other laboratory-setting studies found that young children tend to prefer and are more accepting of failure when every player has the same chance of winning and losing (Engelmann & Tomasello, 2019; Grocke et al., 2015; Shaw & Olson, 2014). In Grocke et al. (2015)'s research, five-year-olds accepted less resources when they used a fair spin wheel which presented an equal chance for everyone, but were less likely to accept the results when they had the unfair spin wheel which did not offer equal chances to all the participants.

Challenging Fairness as Equal

Not all experimental work was found to be endorsing children's ideas of *fairness as equality*. Some experimental work challenges the idea that children only see fairness as equal by bringing in additional factors that can influence children's decisions. For example, when allocating resources, children (3- to 8-years-old) consider the inequalities that the recipients experienced and assign more to those who had little resources in the past (Rizzo et al., 2020). Similar studies demonstrate that children can share resources based on the merits and needs of the individuals receiving the resources (Schmidt et al., 2016; Wörle & Paulus, 2018), how deeply the child understands the needs of the individual asking for additional resources (Wu & Su, 2014), and how collaboration between those receiving resources helps children accept unequal distributions (Corbit et al., 2017).

Another challenge to the developmental stance of *fairness as equality* has come from work concerned with the cultural nature of development and the need to see conceptualizations of fairness through a cultural lens. Paulus (2015) argued that fairness is likely a cultural notion by comparing the responses of children in the U.S. and Uganda. Unlike the U.S. children who would throw away extra materials to make sure everybody has an equal number of them, Ugandan children accepted unequal distribution of materials (i.e., stickers) which suggests the existence of intercultural differences in young children's ideas of fairness.

Emerging Conceptualizations of Fairness

Many studies heavily relied on experimental settings, which only test how children distribute and acquire objects in relation to others while omitting other measures of how children demonstrate and conceptualize fairness. However, a growing number of researchers are conducting studies within authentic, real-time early childhood environments. The studies conducted in early childhood classrooms indicate that children's idea of fairness is more complex than equal resource distribution. For example, Bentley (2012) looked at social justice practices in a kindergarten classroom where children participated in discussions of justice and fairness. She noted that at first the children did not understand the meaning of justice which limited the depth of their conversation; however, the teacher quickly changed the word 'justice' to 'fair' which then successfully sparked the discussion to help them understand the meaning of fairness in their daily lives. After that, the teacher read a book about Martin Luther King Jr. and listened to the children as they were constructing ideas about fairness and justice in relation to the story of Martin Luther King Jr. through their questions and conversations. In another study, Kim (2015) found that introducing storybooks that addressed race and social justice helped Korean bilingual kindergarteners begin discussions about social issues with each other. The findings indicate that children can critically engage with materials that are offered to them, when they feel that they are in a safe space where they can use the language that they feel comfortable with. Montgomery et al. (2017) illustrated in their study that the kindergarteners who participated in an art-based service learning project became not only aware of their own rights and privileges, but also were capable of taking actions to raise funds for their partner school in El Salvador after they gained knowledge on the educational inequities existing around the globe. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that children can have nuanced understandings of social justice when they are afforded opportunities to engage in discussions and activities that enable them to more deeply and fully explore justice-related issues. This supports the researchers' conclusion that children are capable of recognizing injustice and advocating for socially just and equitable treatment of others. Another noticeable theme is teachers' role in children's understanding of fairness. Because of teachers' facilitation such as organizing discussions or reading books, children could explore the idea of fairness in the context of social justice which is more complex and sophisticated than equal distribution. However, the teachers often led the conversations or activities by bringing in the topics of fairness and justice (e.g., MLK, racial issues, global inequities) into the space instead of letting children

choose the topics or contextualizing fairness in children's everyday classroom lives.

In our *Civic Action and Young Children* study, we intended to continue work in actual preschool settings to record and locate the embodied ways in which young children of color are acting civically in their early childhood classrooms. At times, the researchers did observe children equally distributing resources when they encountered issues of fairness but they did not always choose to do so. In this article, we seek to demonstrate the ways in which children attempted to fix or right unfair situations beyond simply attempting to share equally in their daily classroom lives.

Theoretical Framework

Positioning Young Children as Contributors to the Classroom Community

Young children are active participants and contributors in their communities, and they show what they can accomplish in spaces where they are recognized as capable beings. Seeing children as contributors to communities requires different lenses than traditional developmental theoretical orientations provide (Chaudhary, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). Our primary lens for positioning young children as capable and contributing comes from the Learning by Observing and Pitching In (LOPI) framework that is commonly observed in Indigenous-heritage communities of Central America, Mexico, and the USA, where children are included and contributing to family/community activities (Rogoff, 2014). Since children are included and not separated from the adults' worlds, they observe what adults do and pitch in to help like any other member of their communities. LOPI addresses how the learning process is organized in Indigenous communities, but it is part of the larger Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompassing Native and Indigenous peoples' broader ways of knowing and being (Urrieta, 2015). The paradigm of LOPI helps us understand a wide range of abilities that young children can develop depending on their social milieu and what is assumed of them. Children from very young ages can work with others to help their communities when their participation is validated and respected. Children are "valued contributors to family and community efforts such as helping with household work and community events" (Rogoff et al., 2017, p.882), and can collaborate with others in sophisticated ways. Children's collaborations and contributions are embedded within their communities, which extend to the classroom context where children co-construct their community with their peers. As members of their classroom communities, young children contribute on a daily basis and navigate the issues related to fairness with a nuanced understanding of equity and social justice. Schools often do not take into account children's

actual abilities to participate and collaborate, but this needs to be changed to make a classroom more relevant to children's lives and to create spaces where children can freely show what they can do (Correa-Chávez & López-Fraire, 2019).

Young children are capable beings who deserve more of our attention, and when we listen to and observe them, their words and actions reveal their sophisticated knowledge and abilities. Yoon and Templeton (2019) address the importance of listening to children to understand their social world. Young children are usually brought into space where adults have the most control, and classrooms are not an exception. Yoon and Templeton (2019) argue that adults often ignore children's complex ways of being because of their own assumptions and agenda. Listening accompanies observation; it takes time, effort, and intentionality to listen and observe young children's ways of being. Through observation and listening, we can understand the sophisticated abilities of children trying to solve situations related to the issues of fairness.

Seeing what children do through the lens of community and contribution also has to acknowledge the ways in which race and white supremacy impact whether and how much young children can be positioned in strength-based ways. Critical early childhood studies demonstrate how racism and white supremacy misinterpret and overly police the behavior, speech, interactions, work, and play of Brown and Black children (Bryan, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Morris, 2007; Wright et al., 2015). Children of color, particularly young Black children, are not often able to enact their agency in their learning beyond resistance (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Black children are given little space to show their abilities, so what can be observed is limited because of the structural limitations and systemic racism that offers white children, on the other hand, a broader range of contexts in which they can act. Black and Brown children often learn within confined spaces and learning structures created by white people with biased views of what young children of color can and cannot "handle" (Adair, 2015; Wright, 2018). Acknowledging the tendency for white children to receive more dynamic, agentic learning when it is offered makes our study even more important since our work focuses on agentic spaces and the ways in which young children of color create and sustain communities. Since our study positioned young children of color as capable contributors, the researcher's role was not to evaluate but to gather all of the ways children took action to change what they believed was unjust and unfair.

Methodological Positioning of Young Children as Experts: Video-Cued Ethnography

Video-Cued Ethnography (VCE) is an ethnographic method that privileges participants' perspectives and enables researchers to position participants as informants and experts

(Tobin, 2019). To position young children as experts and contributors to classrooms, we used a variation of VCE. The original method of video-cued, multivocal ethnography was used in Preschool in Three Cultures and its subsequent studies (Tobin et al., 1989; Tobin et al., 2009). Tobin and his colleagues filmed an entire day of early childhood classrooms in different countries, edited the films to create short videos that depicted typical days of each classroom, and used the videos as cues when doing focus group interviews with teachers and directors (Tobin, 2019). Modified versions of VCE have been used in early childhood educational settings by recording specific lessons instead of full days or using videos as data for microanalysis (Hayashi, 2019; Kaomea et al., 2019).

Unlike the original VCE, in which researchers mainly used video as an interview cue, our study used a variation of VCE that includes three phases of research—participant observation, creation of a 20-min full-day film, and focus group interviews—and expanded the usage of video by considering it as another type of data (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus, 2018; McManus et al., 2019). The data for this article is drawn from the larger *Civic Action and Young Children* project, an international, video-cued, comparative ethnographic study in preschools of Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. (Adair et al., 2017). Through this project, the research team examined how young children coming from historically marginalized communities engage in civic action in early childhood settings, how early childhood educators foster children's civic capacities and participation, and the range of the notions of civic action that children bring from their families and communities. Civic action in this project was defined as children acting with and on behalf of their communities (Payne et al., 2020). Since the project included classroom videos as parts of data, the researchers could use videos to provide visual evidence of children engaging in civic action in their classrooms (McManus et al., 2019). In this article, the classroom videos are analyzed as our primary data.

Research Sites and Participants

In this article, we focus on the U.S. portion of the study, including two monolingual English general education classrooms and one inclusion classroom conducted in English and some Spanish. For instance, the inclusion classroom was mostly taught in English and the teachers and children sometimes communicated in Spanish because four out of five teachers are native Spanish speakers. One of the two researchers who observed an inclusion classroom could speak both English and Spanish. Also, multiple members of the U.S. research team who participated in the process of coding and analysis are Spanish speakers, so it was possible

to collect and analyze data without involving outside translators. The three classrooms were at two different Head Start programs, and all three primarily served children from Latinx and Black families. Both Head Start programs were located in a large urban city in central Texas. One monolingual general education class was located at Cabritas Center, where Ms. Melissa and Ms. Camille taught 17 children (3 to 4-year-olds). The student population of Ms. Melissa's class was approximately 70% Latinx and 30% Black. The other two classes (one monolingual general education and one inclusion) were at Cielo Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC), which served 3 to 5-year-old children; the school population of this center was 65% Latinx, 33% Black, and 2% White at the time of the study. In the second general education class at Cielo, there was one head teacher, Ms. Luz, and one assistant teacher, Ms. Louisa, with 19 children. In the inclusion class at Cielo, there were five teachers—two head teachers, Ms. Amaya and Ms. Gomez, who co-taught the class, and three assistant teachers, Ms. Castro, Ms. Soto, and Ms. Jackson. There were 17 children in total – seven children with disabilities and ten children without disabilities. As a class, all the students and teachers spent the whole school day, including all activities together. All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The U.S. research team consisted of three professors and four Ph.D. students at the data collection stage. One of the teachers who participated in the study and a multicultural special education professor joined the research team and contributed to the analysis. The research team was racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse and cultivated a community-oriented approach to data collection and analysis with everyone participating in all phases, including the PI and research assistants.

The U.S. research team, as participant observers, spent 500 h collecting data, including field notes, photos, short videos, full-day videos, and focus group interviews at both Cabritas Center and Cielo ECEC during one school year. After each observation, all researchers wrote field notes documenting both the flow of the day as well as instances when children acted with or on behalf of each other. As the researchers learned the classroom routines and became known to the children and teachers, they started to take pictures and short videos whenever children engaged in something collectively without the direct instruction of the teacher. During the school year, researchers also filmed full days from the time children arrived to the time they left. Using this full-day footage, researchers made a 20-min film that represents a typical day in each classroom with scenes of young children acting civically, in other words, engaging collectively while acting on behalf of one another. The researchers showed the films to the teachers and

the children to make sure what had been captured in the video represented the typicality of their classrooms and get feedback about the film. Based on the feedback from the teachers and children, the researchers re-edited the film and used it to conduct focus group interviews with the teachers, families, and children who participated in the project (Adair et al., 2017).

Data analysis began with the research team participating in weekly meetings to examine civic action examples observed in the classrooms. During the researchers' data analysis process, we found hundreds of examples of Latinx and African American children acting with and on behalf of their classroom communities on a daily basis. In this article, we focus on 34 h of full-day video footage taken in three preschool classrooms as our primary data for analysis. We used open coding, which is an "interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.12) to identify categories existing in data. First, we broke down data by using linear scenes to document the settings, the actions of children who encountered issues of fairness, and capabilities that children demonstrated across an entire day in the three different classrooms (see Appendix A). We logged and transcribed the footage, and marked all instances when children acted collectively (in groups of two or more) without direction from teachers. Then, we focused on children's actual behaviors in each scene and categorized similar actions. During the data analysis process, we identified patterns in the ways in which children were responding to the issues of fairness; children did not always choose equal distribution and tended to find solutions that considered others when they encountered issues of fairness. We also realized that children tried to help one another to create fairness, but that their ideas about fairness were different from those we often associate with as adults. The ways in which young children in our study acted to correct injustices most often included: a) giving up resources, b) putting others' needs first, and c) advocating for others, all of which require unequal exchanges to make something right.

To ensure trustworthiness, we used member checking and peer debriefing (Mertens, 2014). The teachers who participated in the study confirmed the typicality of full-day videos, and the researchers met regularly to discuss findings. At the beginning of the analysis process, the researchers watched the same hour of footage from the general education classroom and separately documented instances of children acting with and on behalf of others (i.e., civic action). Then, the researchers met again to compare and discuss their findings. Peer debriefing was an ongoing process throughout the analysis process.

Findings

Young Children's Enactments of Fairness Beyond Equality

When Deondra tried to make the situation right by handing her own ball to Zanaya, who was crying after her ball was taken away by another child, Deondra was willing to give up hers so that Zanaya could play with it. Like Deondra, young children in our study did not always support or offer solutions that endorsed equality (i.e., equal distribution of resources). We learned that children often act in ways that promote equity and social justice by considering others and the situation. Depending on situations, children shared materials unequally, which resulted in including others in an activity. Children's enactments of fairness were not always confined to materials. Young children put their own needs aside even when it was their turn to participate in the situation and when they witnessed a situation that was not fair for their friend, they stood up for others.

In this article, we present three examples of children responding to issues of fairness that suggest young children are more sophisticated in their understandings of fairness, and that they can see beyond a simple "make everything same or equal" sense of justice and include a more complicated equitable distribution that even requires sacrifice on their part (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Omar is pouring his beads to give it to Nicole

Example #1: Equity as Giving up Resources

During center time, some of the children are playing in the art area, putting beads on pipe cleaners to create bracelets and necklaces. Omar (left) was in the process of creating something with the beads and a pipe cleaner. Nicole (right) walks into the art area and goes toward Omar. She looks at Omar's green bowl filled with beads and asks, "You wanna share? I want one." When Omar hears Nicole's request, he pours some of his beads into another bowl and gives it to Nicole. Nicole receives it and sits next to him to create her own. (Ms. Amaya & Ms. Gomez's inclusion classroom, 05/18/16).

Omar sharing his beads with Nicole demonstrates that children have the capability of sharing resources even when it requires sacrifice. For Omar, sharing with Nicole meant that he was losing his beads, but he did not show any outward signs of hesitation. Instead, he redistributed his own resources because he knew that Nicole did not have any beads. Omar's action contradicts the idea that young children tend to reject results when they receive less than other people, which is known as "disadvantages inequity" (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011, p.221). For Omar, sharing required giving up and having less of his beads to make the situation fair. Moreover, his action was a way to expand his relationship within the community by including Nicole in the shared activity. Omar took action—giving up the beads—to be a part of the community, and his action resulted in sustaining the community that he belonged to, because Nicole could participate and continue the craft activity with Omar.

Giving up materials for others was easily observed in children's everyday classrooms. Yet, it does not mean that the children always gave up resources. At times, the children in this study did make choices to receive equal share without giving up their own resources (e.g., making sure everyone is getting the same amount of food on their plate during mealtime, refusing to give materials to a peer when they had it first). However, the children also showed a range of ways to solve issues of fairness which includes giving a toy figure to a peer who was rejected to enter a play by others, giving a block that one was about to use to someone else who also wanted to use it for building a structure, or giving up a toy car that one was already playing with when he noticed that his peer wanted that same car.

Observing and listening to children in the classroom context enabled us to see the real-life issues children encounter and how they respond. At the same time, it revealed that children's abilities are more complex than what is often assumed. Yoon and Templeton (2019) describe "children's ways of being as knowledge (p.57)," and this is evident in Omar's actions. Omar's embodied way of sharing beads complicates the concept of fairness and helps us rethink equity. His action of distributing resources indicates that



Fig. 2 Deondra pulls out Makalynn's name card

fairness is not always about having an equal share. Rather, it presupposes an understanding of other individuals who may need the resources and an ability to be attentive to others' situations, while being open to the idea of disproportionate sharing to achieve equity. In this situation, equity was initially addressed through the material aspect of social justice by giving resources to the one who needs them. Then, the material aspect extended to the matter of participation, because without those beads, Nicole would not have had the shared experiences of engaging in crafts with Omar (Fig. 2).

Example #2: Equity as Prioritizing Other's Needs

Deondra (left) is going through the name cards by taking each one out and reading out loud her friends' names printed on the cards. Makalynn (right) came after Deondra and also goes through the names to find her own. Seeing that Makalynn was looking through the names in the opposite direction of where her name was, Deondra pulls out Makalynn's card and gives it to her. Makalynn takes it and goes to her seat. After that, Deondra finds her own name and leaves. Moments later, Makalynn comes back to put her name back when Isla is looking for her name. Makalynn stops what she was about to do and helps Isla find her name. After giving it to Isla, Makalynn puts her own name away. (Ms. Melissa's general education classroom, 11/06/15).

The second vignette illustrates children's abilities to put others' needs first. Finding one's own name card in the bin to practice writing was a daily morning routine in Ms. Melissa's class. Like any other day, the children gathered around the file

bin to get their own name cards. The ones who are done with writing their names could go to the carpet area where they could read books. Deondra, who was there first to find her own card, noticed Makalynn's presence when she came to the file bin to get hers. Deondra could have easily ignored Makalynn and continued her search for her own card. Yet, Deondra recognized Makalynn's need, and even though she was there first, she paused what she was doing to find and give the name card to her friend who came after her. The scene did not end here. When Makalynn came back to the bin to put her card away, she noticed that Isla was looking for hers. Like Deondra did for her, Makalynn stopped what she was about to do and prioritized Isla's need by helping her find the name card.

There were times the children in the study prioritized their own needs over others, such as sitting on a bicycle before others could reach it or continuing to use art material to finish one's own project when others were waiting to use it. What is noteworthy, however, is that there were many more instances when the children chose to put others' needs first. For example, children paused one's own activity to find and give a specific color of bead that one's peer was looking for, took out a cup which fell into a bucket full of water for a peer who did not know what to do when everyone else is doing an activity with teachers, or found a ladybug and handed it to a peer who lost it when everyone was eager to look for ladybugs including oneself.

Deondra and Makalynn were aware of the needs of their peers and responded by finding other's cards first. Young children's classroom is a community where they construct their own class culture with their peers (Lash, 2008). When children experience that their presence is accepted and their needs are being met by others, it can strengthen their sense of belonging to their classroom community. Taken together, the above scene showed children's capability of putting their own needs aside to contribute to other's work. Children's abilities of prioritizing other's needs extend the scope of young children's ideas of fairness that have been grounded around resource allocation (Grocke et al., 2015; Schmidt et al., 2016; Wörle & Paulus, 2018). Prioritizing other's needs is a complex ability, because children first need to be cognizant of others' needs, and it requires them to withhold their own desire and action. In doing so, children enact the notion that fairness is more than equal share or equal opportunity; it is about knowing when to set aside one's individual need to fulfill another's needs and collaborating with others as contributors to the classroom community.

Young children's collaboration and helping are part of the LOPI paradigm, highlighting young children's position as "valued contributors to family and community efforts, such as helping with household work and community events, alongside everyone else" (Rogoff et al., 2017, p.882). The classroom is another community where young children take part as active members. They are keen observers of their



Fig. 3 Brittany retrieves the magnet block from Liliana and gives it back to Zachary

surroundings and act in ways to contribute to the larger classroom community. Deondra and Makalynn knew what their peers needed, so they pitched in to look for the name card their peers tried to find. From children's actions, we could learn that enacting equity entails community effort and is not always about individual action nor resource distribution (Fig. 3).

Example #3: Equity as Advocating for Others

Some children are playing with blocks and toys on the carpet. Liliana (right) is building a structure using most of the magnet blocks. Next to her, Zachary (left) and Brittany (middle) were playing. Liliana takes away the only magnet block that Zachary was playing with. Zachary resists and says, "Give me." But Liliana says, "No," and she keeps the block right next to her. Brittany, who was watching this situation from the beginning, goes to Liliana and takes the block from her. Then, she gives it back to Zachary. Both Zachary and Brittany play together with toys. (Ms. Luz's general education classroom, 04/28/16).

The third vignette highlights children's capability of advocating for one another. In this scene, Liliana used a lot of magnet blocks to build her own structure. Most of the magnet blocks were already in her possession, but she still wanted to use the one that Zachary had. So, she finally took it away from him. Brittany was next to them and paid close attention to the interaction between Liliana and Zachary. Once she saw what Liliana did, she acted on behalf of Zachary by getting the block back from her. Brittany did not give more resources to Zachary, nor try to take half of the blocks that Liliana had to make resources equal, but she was aware of the inequitable situation that Zachary faced. She noticed that Zachary needed that specific magnet block that Liliana took away; thus, Brittany made the situation more socially just for Zachary by reclaiming the item that was his. Brittany's action indicates that she was attentive to the situation that was happening around her; Zachary wanted to regain the

magnet block that he was playing with, and Liliana did not need to add more blocks to her already large pile.

At times, the researchers observed children advocating for themselves by telling their peers or teachers about the resources (e.g., blocks, pencils, toys) they needed. Yet, the children were more likely showed different ways to advocate for others when they noticed a problem, such as asking others to move their chairs so that their classmate can have space, stopping a peer who is pulling a toy away from another peer, or bringing a teacher's attention to a peer who needs extra food during lunchtime.

Brittany's advocacy portrays children's keen observations and contributions by taking actions on behalf of their peers when it is necessary. Brittany did not eloquently explain what the problem was, nor verbally point out the wrongdoings of Liliana. Instead, she seamlessly moved her body towards Liliana to take the toy back for Zachary. Observing is a different way of listening to children's knowledge which enables us to focus on children's actions to understand what they already know (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). By observing Brittany's actions, it becomes clear that the idea of advocacy does not always accompany verbal explanation, especially for young children. Through actions, children demonstrate advocacy and their knowledge of social justice.

Retrieving the item that belonged to Zachary also signifies the role of children as contributors to their classroom communities. Brittany was never asked to resolve this unfair situation at any point in this scene; however, she stepped up and took responsibility to get the block back from Liliana. She was capable of solving this unfair issue and actively engaged in the situation when she realized that there was something that needed to be done. This is one of many examples that shows children's ways of contributing as members of their classrooms; children do notice when fairness-related issues arise, and they actively advocate for others, and thus make the situation equitable, which maintains their communities.

Discussion: Rethinking Fairness as a Capability

When researchers study children's capacities to demonstrate fairness as equal resource allocation in experimental settings, they not only underestimate children, they limit our opportunities to see children's more complex capabilities. Current scholarship on children's understanding of fairness is primarily confined to experiments that test fairness in games or hypothetical scenarios (Schmidt et al., 2013; Wittig et al., 2013; Wörle & Paulus, 2018). Admittedly, it provided some insights related to children's perceptions of fairness, but presented a limited view on children by suggesting that younger children tend to find solutions that endorse equality while only older children can develop a more sophisticated concept of equity (Schmidt et al., 2016; Sheshkin et al., 2014). Unfortunately, these findings oversimplify the ideas of equality and equity among children. Adults often overlook children's abilities based on a misconception that young children are incompetent beings who have limited knowledge and skills to actively participate in their communities (Bartholomaeus et al., 2016; Dockett et al., 2012).

The majority of the developmental research on children's notions of fairness tends to be deeply rooted in white, middle-class values, leaving out how children of various cultural backgrounds conceive of and enact fairness (Blake et al., 2015; Choshen-Hillel et al., 2020; Huppert et al., 2019; Paulus, 2015). In order to see young children as capable, we first need to acknowledge that not all young children are seen as the same in educational settings. Deficit perspectives toward children of color result in less intellectually challenging learning environments because they are assumed to be lacking abilities, whereas white children receive rich learning experiences as they are assumed to be capable of handling sophisticated learning experiences (Adair et al., 2017). However, what limits these young children during these situations is not their actual competence; rather, it is the adults' narrow and deficit perception of children's ability which then restricts the contribution, participation, and capability demonstrations of children of color.

Widening the lens to see children's actual, embodied demonstrations of understanding and acting fairly (and unfairly) towards others in everyday settings with their peers (i.e., at school) gave us the opportunity to observe more authentic and child-relevant examples of how children understand and demonstrate socially just capabilities on their own terms. By observing what children do instead of what we expect them to do, early childhood researchers can understand and appreciate the unique capabilities of young children and ultimately, position young children of color as brilliant experts (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Rogoff, 2014) who are capable of

addressing unfairness by helping their classroom community members, instead of insisting on everything being equal.

Conclusion and Implications

Children see fairness as social justice when they can engage in real-life contexts where they encounter issues of fairness. Children's classrooms are the places where they can civically participate in daily activities and real-life problem-solving processes (Danner & Jonyniené, 2013). By looking at how children actually respond to issues of fairness that arose in their classrooms, it becomes clear that children's enactment of fairness is far more complex than equal resource distribution. Children develop their civic competence and abilities through engagement in everyday interactions with others in their immediate "here-and-now" classroom context (Kemple, 2017, p.626). As Boutte (2008) argues, children's real lives should be "a starting point for deepening their understanding of social justice" (p.170). The issues that children face in their classrooms are organic and related to their daily experiences, which provide authentic contexts where children can come up with various social justice-oriented solutions. Our findings suggest that children are capable of finding solutions that endorse equity by giving up resources, prioritizing other's needs, and advocating for others. Our findings also suggest the importance of everydayness in understanding children's capabilities of acting upon the idea of social justice (Payne, 2018).

The information gleaned through this study concludes that children's ways of knowing and being when they encounter matters of fairness are contextual, because they need to understand the situation, who is involved, what others' needs are, and what needs to be done to make situations equitable. Their lived experiences and embodied knowledge teach us how they identify and respond to issues of fairness and justice as active contributors. Furthermore, children also act as valid members of their classrooms by solving communal problems. Positioning young children as contributors to their communities requires a shift in our understanding of how we perceive young children and their capabilities (Rogoff, 2014; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). When adults hold a narrow perception of young children, adults will be less likely to notice a range of capabilities that young children display (Bartholomaeus et al., 2016; Dockett et al., 2012). Therefore, the adults' limited view of children's competence restricts children's participation and contribution—not their actual abilities. This study builds on the experimental work that proceeds the researchers by providing qualitative evidence from children's actual encounters with social justice in their classrooms. The significance of our study lies in its attempt to re-envision young children's idea of fairness as social justice by extending and complicating the scholarship through theoretical

positioning of young children of color as brilliant experts and contributors to their communities.

This article offers important implications for early childhood educators and early childhood programs. Early childhood educators and programs for young children need to offer time and space for children where they can encounter and experience the idea of fairness and social justice in their everyday contexts. Teachers can provide time to young children by withholding their urge to intervene and letting children negotiate. Hayashi (2011) explains teachers' hands-off approach through the concept of *Mimamoru*, a Japanese cultural belief and practice that can be translated as "teaching by watching" (Hayashi, 2011, p.109). By watching children solve their own problems without teacher intervention, teachers provide time and opportunity for children to learn by experiencing conflicts (Nakat-subo et al., 2021). Teaching by watching requires a belief that children can handle their problems without adult's mediation. Yet, the power relations of adult/child in the US allow regulatory interactions where adults often control children of color's actions in educational contexts (Pérez et al., 2016). When children have enough time and control of their learning, however, they can exercise their agency and develop their capabilities to further their learning (Adair & Colegrove, 2021). Supporting children in determining their own solutions to their problems takes time because children have to negotiate when they confront issues of fairness. If teachers intervene, this may shorten the amount of time spent on figuring out solutions, but this will take away children's opportunity to solve social justice issues. Teachers also need to provide space for play where children can have different opportunities to experience various situations that bring up issues of fairness. Through play, children search for "their own ways of living together" as members of the classroom community (Serriere, 2010, p.66). By offering children time and space for play, teachers can support children's embodied ways of learning as well as their contribution to the classroom community. Researchers and policymakers who work with young children can also benefit from this study as it problematizes deficit perspectives. Deficit discourse blames individuals, children of color, and their families instead of looking at the larger systems that continue to oppress them (Davis & Museus, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Multiple stakeholders in education who can make impacts on structural levels need to challenge the deficit discourse, which requires a shift in one's perception of Black and Brown children and their capabilities (Adair et al., 2017; Adair et al., 2018; Adair & Sachdeva, 2021, Colegrove et al., 2021). Advocacy work needs to start from positioning children of color as agentic and capable beings.

Appendix A

See Table 1

Table 1 Example of linear scene analysis table

	Environment	What children do	Capabilities
Vid 002	Children come in and write their name on a card as a signing-in activity in the morning. After they write it, they put the card in the chart and goes to the carpet to play with magnet blocks. Teacher is standing by the door to greet children	Giovanni shows his new watch to Jordan which he got from Annie's boys and girls club. David saw it and keeps saying that "I'm gonna get one." Giovanni shows his watch one more time to David and he says "I'm gonna get one." Giovanni tells David "I'm gonna buy you a same watch like me," because Annie has two same watches like that. David says his sister didn't get the watch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Notice what others want - Verbalize the plan to offer object that one's friend does not have
Vid006 2:44–3:50	Children are having a free play time on the carpet. The teacher is by the door greeting children	One girl took a red square magnet block that was in front of Zachary. Zachary (hard to hear but) is telling her something and says "Give me" at the end but the girl says "No." Another girl Brittany who was watching this situation goes to the girl who took the block and takes it back from her. Then she gives it to Zachary. They both play together with toys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verbally claim one's object - Give the object back to a peer when somebody took away his toy
Vid006 5:25-	The teacher asked them to clean up so children are putting the toys inside the tubs	Three boys and one girl stand up together while holding the tub filled with magnet blocks. They are holding it and moving it together to put it inside the shelf. Giovanni pulls it to his side and says "I got it" but David keeps holding onto it and says "No, everybody got it" Even though Giovanni said that he didn't need help, David tells them that "We all need to do it" Then, when they almost reached the shelf, Giovanni tells the girl that only boys can help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collectively putting things away

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Data Availability Due to institutional review board guidelines, data and materials are not available for use beyond approved researchers.

Code availability The larger civic action and young children study has a detailed coding framework created in Dedoose that is forthcoming in publication but is not available to share yet. Analysis for this manuscript took place with three specific codes taken from the civic action and young children study's framework. These codes include giving up resources, prioritizing other's needs, and advocating for others.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors have no conflicts of interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical approval Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of University of Texas at Austin. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent Written informed consent was obtained from parents/legal guardians and teachers who participated in this study.

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