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Evolving social justice in school psychology practice – A systematic review of practitioner perspectives from UK and USA educational contexts

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ABSTRACT
Social justice has received increasing attention in school/educational psychology literature in response to growing diversity within school populations. However, it is suggested that an emphasis on defining the construct has led to a practice-to-research gap. This systematic literature review explores how social justice is currently represented and enacted in school/educational psychologist (S/EP) practice within empirical literature published over the last decade. Eight studies comprised 68 participants across UK and US contexts were identified and analyzed through an inductive critical thematic synthesis approach. Seven descriptive themes are grouped into three overarching analytical themes: (1) Initial and ongoing S/EP development; (2) Facilitating equitable access and participation within existing systems; and (3) Transforming systems which perpetuate injustice. A conceptual model of the synthesized themes is presented. S/EPs consistently describe social justice as integral to their role, offering concrete examples of practice across levels of service delivery and nuanced reflections around facilitating and impeding factors. However, continued reliance on English-speaking, self-selecting participants, along with limited diversity in the psychology workforce may suppress non-Western perspectives and uphold traditional evidence hierarchies. Future research should explore the application of emerging frameworks for the systematic integration of social justice in S/EP practice.

KEYWORDS
Social justice; school psychology; educational psychology; practice; practitioner views; systematic review

Introduction

Social justice is increasingly shifting to the forefront of school and educational psychology (Embeita & Birch, 2024; Grapin & Shriberg, 2020; Noltemeyer & Grapin, 2020). As school populations reflect the increasing cultural diversity of wider society, school/educational psychologists (S/EPs) are called to adopt social justice as a lens to develop their practice to better meet the needs of all children and young people (CYP) and families they serve (Hatzichristou et al., 2020). This reflects a growing recognition of the responsibility psychologists hold in promoting equity, inclusion, and fairness across educational contexts.

Several studies and commentaries have endeavored to understand how S/EPs define and understand social justice (Cumber & Gulliford, 2024; Grapin & Shriberg, 2020; Hatzichristou et al., 2020; Schulze et al., 2019; Shriberg et al., 2023). There is an overarching consensus that social justice is "*both a process and a goal that requires action*" (Grapin & Shriberg, 2020, p. 4), based on principles of equity and fairness. Whilst some focus on these principles, others prioritize cultural humility (Fisher, 2020; Pham et al., 2021), culturally responsive practice (Parker et al., 2021; Sakata, 2024), and community-based approaches (Theara, 2024) in the promotion of social justice. Graves et al. (2021) posit that there has been an over-emphasis in defining social justice within the school/educational psychology literature, and insufficient focus on initiatives to enact these principles in practice, leading to a "*significant practice-to-research gap*" (Graves et al., 2021, p. 363). This concern necessitates the exploration of how social justice is operationalized in S/EP practice.

It is felt that S/EPs are well placed to enact social justice principles through their varied work with individual CYP through to schools and wider systems (Fox, 2015; Power, 2008). In fact, there is longstanding recognition of the potential for S/EPs to shift away from a narrow focus of individual assessment and "treatment" of CYP, toward more meaningful change at the systemic level (Conoley & Gutkin, 1995). In the US, Conoley et al. (2020) acknowledge that while some progress has been made, there are still significant efforts needed toward systems-oriented delivery. Similarly, within the UK context,

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research indicates that the adoption of a traded service delivery model (where educational settings pay area local authorities for psychological services) in some local authority teams has created opportunities for S/EPs to expand the scope of their work, increasingly engaging in activities aligned with systemic change and socially just outcomes (Brownhill & Kelly, 2025; Lee & Woods, 2017; Schulze et al., 2019). As S/EPs continue to operate across multiple levels, it is essential that principles of social justice are embedded throughout all layers of their practice and remain central regardless of the level at which they intervene. This underscores the importance of understanding not just what social justice means in theory, but how it is actively described and operationalized in the literature.

Schulze et al. (2017) previously conducted a literature review exploring the significance of social justice to school/educational psychology practice. However, they acknowledge that their findings are drawn solely from US-based literature. While published research historically has overwhelmingly come from the US (Graybill et al., 2017), school/educational psychology operates across diverse international contexts, with variations in terminology, professional scope, and systemic positioning. These contextual differences complicate efforts to apply understandings that have come from one context, which have prompted multiple calls (Begeny et al., 2018; Nastasi et al., 2020; Schulze et al., 2017; Shriberg & Clinton, 2016) for more global perspectives of social justice in school/educational psychology practice.

Moreover, participants in Schulze et al. (2019) identify that social justice is an evolving construct as it responds to an ever-changing society. For instance, several empirical studies have explored further embedding social justice into initial training of S/EPs (Malone & Ishmail, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). The most recent paper included in Schulze et al. (2017) review was published in 2014. More recently, Embeita and Birch (2024) reviewed S/EPs' understanding of social justice as it relates to their practice, finding similar notions of equity, fairness, and advocacy. This review adopted a deductive framework synthesis approach, using a framework based on seminal research from Shriberg et al. (2008). Given the complexity and variability of social justice, with continued and evolving efforts to embed principles within school/educational psychology, the literature should be continually and repeatedly reviewed to explore how S/EPs perceive practice is developing over time. This review therefore takes a "bottom up" approach to examine school/educational psychology practitioners' views of how they enact social justice. It aims to capture emerging ideas and practice to explore the following research question:

How do S/EPs represent and enact social justice in their practice?

Methods

Literature search strategy and selection of research

Papers were selected for this review by following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). In August 2024, systematic searches were conducted by the first author across PsycINFO, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Web of Science, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Additional papers were also identified in November 2024 and March 2025 through reference harvesting and hand searching of newly published special issues with a focus on social justice. The most recent paper examined within the Schulze et al. (2017) review was published in 2014, therefore the search in the present study encompassed papers published from 2013 onwards. Similarly, databases were searched using the same terms utilized by Schulze et al.: (Educational psycholog* OR School psycholog*) AND Social justice. The authors recognize that several terms could have been included to capture reflections of social justice by proxy (e.g. anti-racist practice, culturally responsive practice, decolonial practice). However, as the intention of this paper was to explore social justice as a broad overarching topic (and considering the volume of excluded returned records), the decision was made to focus on papers which made explicit mention of the term to avoid the authors ascribing practice as social justice.

As presented in Figure 1, the initial searches returned 1352 records. In total, 180 of these were excluded as duplicates, a further 862 were excluded for irrelevant titles/abstracts, and 287 records were excluded for not meeting the following inclusion criteria:

(1) Published in a peer-reviewed journal
(2) Participants included trainee and/or qualified S/EPs
(3) The research reported empirical data (qualitative or quantitative) on direct views of participants
(4) The focus was on the topic of social justice as it relates to participants' practice

After full-text review of the remaining 23 papers, eight were included in this study. Reasons for additional exclusions included research focusing on participant views of their training programs or their general views around social justice without relating to their school/

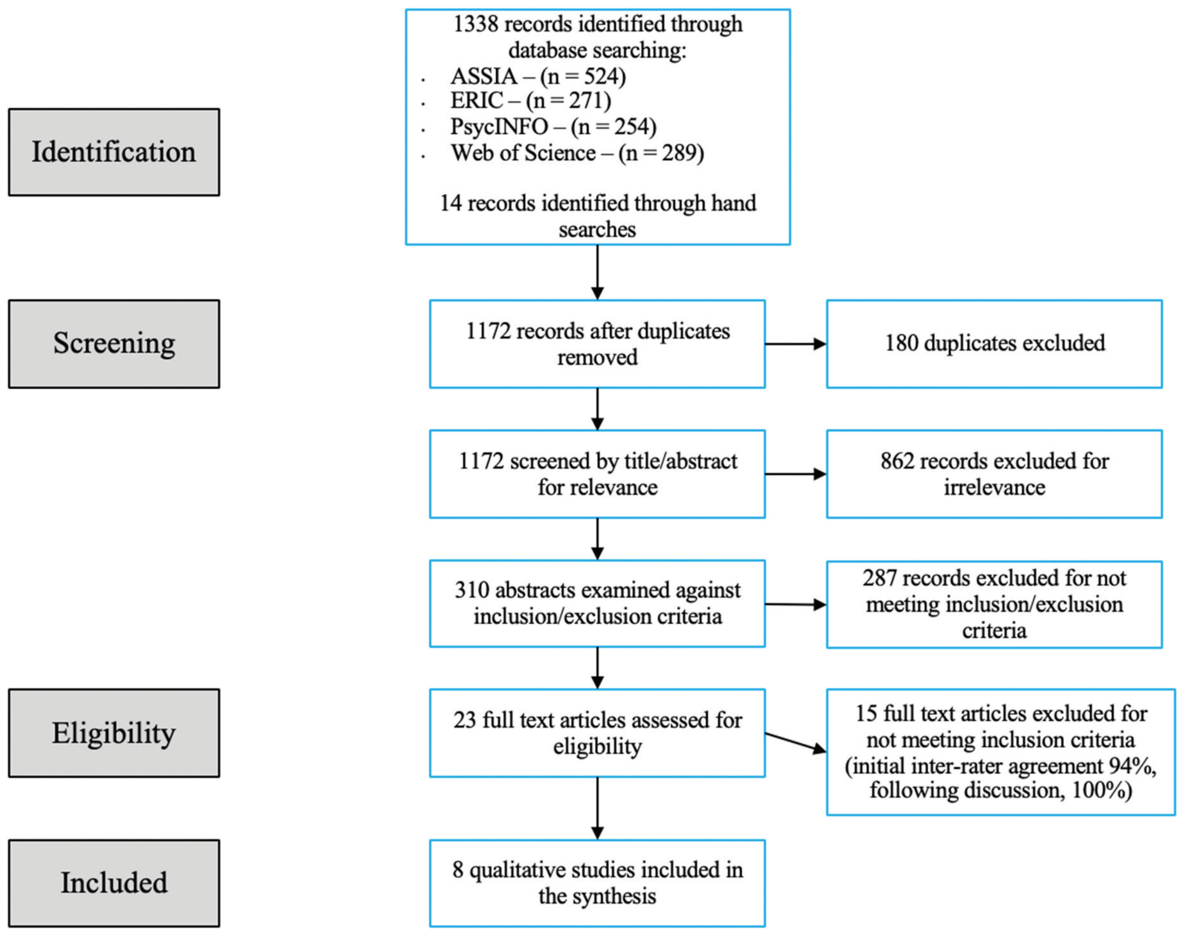

Figure 1. SLR process mapped to the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021).

educational psychology practice. Papers written in languages other than English were considered for the review, but none returned by the initial searches met the inclusion criteria.

Quality assurance of research papers

The remaining eight papers were reviewed using the University of Manchester Educational Psychology Critical Appraisal Review Frameworks for qualitative research (Woods, 2020). Each study was individually rated against a range of criteria which assessed research quality to establish their weight of evidence (WoE A) score (Gough, 2007). Aspects considered included research design, data analysis and conclusions drawn, and explicit researcher reflexivity. This process was to reflect on research quality rather than exclude further papers (Toye et al., 2013). Nevertheless, all eight papers achieved a score of 15/20 or higher, which is considered "high quality" (Gough, 2007). As the research question was focused on the content of practitioner views, the methods by

Table 1. Weight of evidence C (WoE C) criteria.

Criteria description	Scoring
The participants are solely from school/educational psychology.	2
At least one participant is from school/educational psychology.	1
The focus of the paper is social justice as it relates to practice.	2
The focus of the paper is social justice as it relates to practice and other issues.	1
The focus of the paper covers all aspects of school/educational psychology practice in relation to social justice.	2
The focus of the papers covers a specific aspect of school/educational psychology practice in relation to social justice (e.g. consultation, assessment).	1
The focus of the paper reflects on all aspects within the topic of social justice.	2
The focus of the paper is on a specific aspect of social justice (e.g. anti-racism, culturally responsive practice, school exclusion).	1

which views were gathered were not assessed (WoE B). Relevance to the literature review question was considered through the authors co-constructing criteria for WoE C (see Table 1). At this point, the authors reached consensus that the included studies were of sufficient quality and appropriate focus to address the literature review question.

Abstraction and synthesis

The review aimed to construct a conceptual understanding of how social justice is operationalized within S/EP practice (Gough et al., 2012). Therefore, a configurative approach was utilized. Included papers were analyzed using a three-step critical thematic synthesis approach, as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). First, the findings/results sections of each included paper were examined by free inductive line-by-line coding using NVivo 12 software. Free codes were organized into related and descriptive themes, and then further analysis of the descriptive themes took place to develop analytical themes. This process leads to the generation of new constructs, explorations, or hypotheses beyond what was described in the primary studies (Maeda et al., 2022). All steps of the analysis were initially conducted by the first author followed by an in-depth iterative process of discussion between the authors to sense-check the synthesis.

Reflexivity statement

Qin (2016) argues that for transparency and reflexivity, it is critical to articulate a researcher's positionality in order to clarify the personal experiences that have shaped the perspectives from which research is conducted. Both researchers are strongly motivated by a commitment to social justice and recognize the impact that their intersectional experiences of both marginalization and privilege have on their research approach. The first author identifies as gay and non-binary while recognizing the privileges associated with being White British, able-bodied, and generally perceived as male. The second author identifies as female and comes from an English-speaking immigrant background, though holds privilege in being perceived as White British. Both authors grew up in low socioeconomic status but recognize the privileges afforded by now being perceived as middle class. Whilst social justice motivates the research team, frequently returning to direct quotes from participants helped to ensure the descriptive themes remained close to the data.

Findings

Overview of included studies

Of the eight papers, three were conducted in the USA, four were conducted in the UK, and one was conducted across both the USA and UK. All eight studies adopted qualitative methods. It is important to note that the sample included both trainees and qualified S/EPs, representing a range of training and professional experiences. This heterogeneity may have influenced the perspectives reported, as trainees and qualified practitioners could differ in how they understand and operationalize social justice in their practice. There was inconsistency across the included papers around the extent to which participant and author demographic information is shared, making it challenging to contextualize their findings aggregately. Some provide detailed insight into aspects such as age, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience, whilst others simply state which region participants practiced in. Of the characteristics shared, there appears to be some diversity among participants/authors, though the majority appear to be White and female. All papers had at least a partial focus on participant views of social justice as it relates to their practice. Supplementary Table S1 provides greater detail around the composition of each included study.

Themes

Supplementary Tables 2 to 4 outline the analytical themes, descriptive themes (**bold** in text) and subthemes (*italicized* in text), identifying from which studies they were derived alongside exemplary quotes/extracts. The following section presents descriptions of the various themes, their relationships to each other, and how they collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of enacting social justice in S/EP practice.

Analytical theme 1 – initial and ongoing S/EP development

Participants frequently described social justice as beginning with inward reflection and personal development. Across all studies, S/EPs emphasized the necessity of continuous self-examination to navigate the complexities of equitable practice. The descriptive theme of **embarking on a reflective journey** captures how S/EPs engaged with their values, identities, and experiences to foster socially just service delivery.

Many saw their work as a vocation rather than solely a profession, driven by a moral and ethical responsibility to address systemic inequities. *Recognizing a personal value and commitment to social justice* prompted participants to align practice with their underlying worldviews. *Iterative reflection in safe spaces* consolidates that reflection was described as both an individual and collective process, benefitting from safe, structured environments such as peer discussions, supervision, and professional development. Acknowledging their positionality; *knowing [their] own identity, power, and privilege* was key to challenging unconscious biases and preventing the reinforcement of oppressive systems. Although reflection often provoked discomfort, S/EPs felt that working through these challenges led to more authentic and effective advocacy. Iterative reflection – revisiting and refining insights over time – was seen as essential in moving beyond performative social justice efforts toward more embedded change.

A key feature of socially just practice was *cultural humility and responsive practice*, viewed as ongoing processes as opposed to acquiring static knowledge. Learning from and with marginalized communities deepened S/EPs' awareness of systemic inequities, challenged assumptions, and strengthened their ability to meaningfully engage with children and families. This was facilitated by *experience of working with a range of identities, cultures, and needs*, as encountering members of other communities was considered important for developing firsthand knowledge of their unique experiences and perspectives.

Participants highlighted tensions between their commitment to social justice and the constraints of capacity. *Capacity and burnout* reflects concerns around the emotional toll and professional fatigue experienced when encountering high caseloads, competing pressures, and systemic barriers. Despite this, some studies suggested that returning to reflective spaces could serve as a protective factor, helping S/EPs sustain their commitment while recognizing the limits of their influence.

Developing skills and values in the context of S/EP work was presented as complementary to reflective growth. Participants described applying insights gained from reflection in practice while also bringing real-world experiences back into reflective spaces. This cyclical process supported professional development and strengthened social justice-oriented practice.

Accountability and authenticity were emphasized as key principles. S/EPs described taking personal responsibility for promoting social justice, striving to align their work with their values while acknowledging moments when they had fallen short of ideal practice. Honesty and transparency in these instances were seen as essential for growth. A related skill was developing *comfort with uncertainty*, recognizing that socially just practice does not require having all the answers but instead *fostering curiosity* about others' experiences. S/EPs who embraced this open mind-set reported engaging in more meaningful dialogue and co-constructing understanding rather than imposing predetermined narratives.

Confidence in one's capabilities was seen as a gradual process. Many S/EPs initially hesitated to address encountered inequities due to fears of getting things wrong or facing resistance, but confidence grew with experience. Rather than unwavering certainty, confidence was framed as the ability to take action and persist despite challenges faced.

Another subtheme was the S/EPs role in challenging and reshaping dominant perspectives. Participants highlighted the power of language in *reframing the narrative* from deficit-focused views to systemic understandings of inequity. *Consultation* was frequently cited *as a powerful tool* for redistributing power, as well-structured consultation processes ensured that the voices of marginalized communities were heard and valued in decision-making.

Analytical theme 2 – facilitating equitable access and participation within existing systems

Participants across all studies highlighted that social justice in school/educational psychology is primarily enacted through daily work with schools. Their role was seen as facilitating access and participation for marginalized children and families within systems as they currently exist. A crucial aspect of this was **recognizing historical and current oppression and marginalization**, requiring S/EPs to acknowledge the systemic inequities which shape their work, and their own position within these structures.

Social justice was framed as *a broad and complex issue*, *evolving over time*. S/EPs often conveyed feeling overwhelmed by the breadth of intersecting factors by which communities experience oppression (race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability were all explicitly mentioned in the included studies). Similarly, understandings evolving over time reinforced the view that S/EPs must continually reflect and adjust their practice accordingly. For instance, the shift from "equality" toward "equity" was viewed as an important evolution of social justice thinking. Participants highlighted the need for *intersectional perspectives on oppression and marginalization*, recognizing the complex and overlapping ways children may experience inequity. Some participants cautioned against viewing diversity solely as a neutral or celebratory concept, instead urging S/EPs to critically examine how power and historical injustices shape experiences of marginalization.

A recurring theme was the extent to which educational systems perpetuate injustice. S/EPs frequently work within the *context of inequitable systems* which reinforce broader societal inequities. They reported feelings of conflict when institutional priorities clashed with social justice aims. The *competing priorities and perceptions* of the many stakeholders involved in education meant that practitioners had to delicately balance the perspectives of school staff, policy makers, and families, which often creates tensions, particularly when S/EPs feel unable to act in alignment with their values.

An important reflection was on the instances of S/*EPs perpetuating injustice* themselves. Examples included the history of standardized cognitive assessment and their potential contribution to upholding oppressive perspectives, and interventions which may have previously been considered best practice that are now viewed as reinforcing deficit-based thinking or segregation. This recognition underscored the importance of lifelong learning and professional reflexivity to prevent unintentional contributions to marginalization.

A recurring discussion was *the impact of labelling children with special educational needs (SEN)*. While labels can provide access to support, participants warned they may also reinforce stigma, limit expectations, and disproportionately affect marginalized groups, such as the over-representation of Black boys in categories like social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) difficulties. S/EPs were encouraged to critically evaluate how SEN identification interacts with broader inequities to avoid conflating objective need with systemic bias.

The descriptive theme of **empowering and advocating for others through an empathetic lens** highlights the central role of empathy in socially just S/EP practice. Participants emphasized that genuine connection fosters a deeper understanding of marginalized communities' experiences, moving beyond sympathy to inspire meaningful action. Those who viewed *empathy as core to social justice* reported building stronger, trust-based relationships and providing more responsive support.

Advocacy was identified as a key aspect of social justice practice, with many participants viewing their role as one of acting on behalf of marginalized clients. Some S/EPs felt a duty to speak out against injustice, particularly where children and families lacked the power to do so themselves. However, others questioned whether this approach risked reinforcing the idea that marginalized voices can only be heard through professionals. This perhaps led to the alternative perspective of *empowering others*. True empowerment was viewed as equipping children and families with the confidence and tools to navigate systemic barriers themselves, whilst acknowledging that structural inequities can make self-advocacy challenging. *Co-production*, where children, families, educators, and professionals collaborate as equal partners, was presented a way to achieve this. Participants stressed that effective co-production requires shifting away from traditional power hierarchies to ensure shared decision-making.

Another key aspect of empathetic practice was the importance of *connecting with others through shared identities and experiences*. Some S/EPs found that common experiences, such as cultural background or socio-economic experience, helped build rapport with clients. However, others emphasized the importance of engaging with perspectives beyond their own. Recognizing and validating diverse identities was seen as essential in avoiding assumptions or projecting personal biases.

Extending beyond a personal commitment to social justice, the theme of **fostering a shared value in social justice** highlights how S/EPs work to cultivate a collective priority among educators, policymakers, and communities. A key feature of this was *developing and learning collaboratively with others*. S/EPs often shared the view that it was important to join in reflection with school staff and families, working to reach shared understanding not just as individual practitioners or S/EP teams, but with all relevant stakeholders. Participants described the careful balance of capacity building without imposing expertise which could alienate consultation partners. They recognized the importance of finding allies within the school system to approach social justice collaboratively, *bringing others on board* to reduce the individual burden and enhance effectiveness. *Drawing on their expertise* was thought to be an effective way of facilitating more sustainable change.

Ensuring equitable access to education was identified as a fundamental component of social justice in S/EP practice. Addressing disparities in access to educational resources, support, and opportunities was discussed across all papers. Many participants acknowledged the *capacity of schools* to implement socially just practices themselves. Factors such as funding, physical space, and staff training all affect the success of these initiatives. Whilst some schools are eager to engage in social justice work, barriers such as time, resources, and competing priorities often hinder efforts. S/EPs highlighted their role in helping schools navigated these challenges toward greater implementation of social justice.

Analytical theme 3 – transforming systems which perpetuate injustice

Participants conveyed the need not only to facilitate access to existing systems but also to challenge and change those which perpetuate injustice. The theme of **systemic thinking and practice toward social justice** underscores how S/EPs engage with educational policy, institutional structures, and societal norms to promote equity.

A key responsibility conveyed was for S/EPs to critique and *challenge unjust systems*. Rather than focusing solely on individual cases, participants encouraged practitioners to address discriminatory policies and exclusionary practices that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. However, working within hierarchical systems presents with challenges, as power imbalances often limit opportunities for meaningful change. Participants emphasized the importance of *navigating power structures* to overcome resistance and strategically embed socially just practices.

Data-based decision-making was seen as an important tool for identifying disparities, such as patterns in requests for S/EP involvement and exclusion rates. While this approach helped bridge the gap between social justice ideals and practice, participants cautioned against uncritical use of data, which could reinforce biases rather than dismantle them. Instead, S/EPs advocated for a balance, using data to inform decisions while ensuring each case is approached with responsiveness and individuality. Furthermore, participants called for more *equitable service engagement and assessment* processes, encouraging practitioners to engage in a level of criticality toward the ways in which S/EPs become involved with CYP, the nature of their involvement, and the approaches taken in their work. This included reflections around the demographics of CYP that educational settings prioritized for involvement, alongside ensuring assessments were culturally relevant and both sensitive and purposeful to varying needs.

Despite the systemic barriers, social justice was consistently viewed as *core tenet of practice and training* as opposed to of peripheral concern. Participants noted a shift in training programs toward a more explicit social justice focus, supporting newly qualified S/EPs to integrate these principles more effectively. There was an appreciation for *evidence-based practice* and the grounding of scientifically validated strategies, helping to legitimize socially justice practices to decision-makers. However, several participants felt there was a current *disconnect between theory and practice*, describing a pervasive gap between their theoretical understandings and real-world application of social justice.

S/EPs acknowledged the current lack of diversity within the profession as a barrier to social justice. They expressed concern that psychology – historically dominated by Western, Eurocentric perspectives – does not always reflect the diverse communities it serves. Practitioners proposed that *increasing representation in psychology* of ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse professionals could help bring new perspectives to social justice efforts, reducing disparities in service delivery. Some papers highlighted efforts already being made through recruitment initiatives, mentorship programs, and inclusive training pathways to diversify the profession and better reflect the communities they are serving.

By engaging at the broader systemic level, participants felt enabled to better address social injustices within educational settings, not just for individuals. **Working bravely and collaboratively to challenge injustice** reflects the role of S/EPs in fostering critical dialogue, leveraging their professional influence, and forming meaningful partnerships to drive systemic change. While S/EPs felt well-positioned to advocate for this change, they described the need both for bravery and perseverance alongside a commitment to collaborative problem-solving.

Challenging injustice often involves *initiating difficult dialogues and making unpopular decisions*. S/EPs highlighted the necessity of addressing sensitive issues despite resistance, particularly when advocating against exclusionary discipline or other entrenched practices. *Bravery in practice* recognizes the calls from several studies to maintain courage in the face of opposition despite feelings of vulnerability when voicing dissent. Providing challenge with care through skillful application of the "critical-friend" approach was identified as an effective method of initiating these conversations, whilst participants acknowledged that constructive criticism is not always well received, especially in hierarchical or change-resistant environments. Nevertheless, the importance of *building and maintaining relationships* was recognized by participants in all included studies. S/EPs underscored the importance of trust-based collaboration with school staff, families, and community networks to effectively communicate and implement socially just practices.

Whilst S/EPs often position themselves as facilitators rather than direct power holders, some participants noted that their professional status affords them influence. However, they cautioned that that S/*EPs as power holders* must remain aware of their complicity within oppressive structures to avoid reinforcing marginalization.

Finally, translating social justice principles into practice was identified as a challenge. Participants stressed the *need for frameworks and specific actions* such as practice models and reflective guidance, in order to support S/EPs to evaluate their work, set goals, and measure progress toward socially just outcomes.

Discussion

This systematic literature review critically examined findings from eight empirical studies which explored S/EPs' perspectives of enacting social justice in their practice. Three analytical themes and seven descriptive themes were synthesized from the data. The findings are discussed here in relation to existing research. The review limitations and implications for future research and practice are then considered.

Similar to previous findings and commentaries (Embeita & Birch, 2024; Hatzichristou et al., 2020; Shriberg et al., 2024), there was consensus across the included studies that social justice is viewed as integral to school/educational psychology. Practitioners provide clear descriptions of social justice in their practice, identifying both optimal practice and nuanced reflections around factors which facilitate or impede this. Whilst some participants viewed embracing social justice as more of a personal investment, others described the impetus to do so followed more deliberate focus on social justice within their training. It is possible that ongoing efforts to integrate social justice within training programs (Malone & Ishmail, 2020; Miranda et al., 2014; Moy et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2024) mean that practitioners more recently entering the field may have an increased recognition of the importance of socially just practice, and greater confidence around how to enact this. That being said, Zhang et al. (2024) add that whilst many training programs have embedded multicultural perspectives, trainers reported feeling less prepared/confident to deliver transnational training (understanding human experience in a global context). This suggests that while training programs play a crucial role in shaping practitioners' awareness and commitment to social justice, there remains a need for ongoing development to ensure that this preparation is both comprehensive and globally relevant. Notwithstanding this, Shriberg and Clinton (2016) maintain that it is likely the case that concrete actions cannot be similarly applied across international contexts, and the ways in which S/EPs promote social justice are contextually dependent.

The present findings highlight that social justice work for S/EPs is not only about external advocacy but also requires personal reflection and self-awareness. The descriptions of individual and collective development (having awareness of one's own culture, thinking, and actions) align with descriptions of embracing a global-intercultural perspective outlined in Nastasi et al. (2020). However, the findings of this review suggest that while reflective practice is valued, its effectiveness may be limited without organizational support and buy-in from those who influence service delivery. Mercieca and Mercieca (2022) posit that S/EPs are often positioned within systems that perpetuate injustice, at times being asked to practice in opposition with social justice. The protective power of connection with colleagues, taught stress management techniques, and supervision (Pitts, 2018; Watson, 2024) can mitigate the systemic pressure to practice in misalignment with values, which is associated with psychologist burnout and a desire to leave the profession (Boccio et al., 2016). The safeguarding of reflective spaces within school/educational psychology is therefore important to the endurance and commitment of S/EPs in enacting social justice.

The theme of *developing and learning collaboratively with others* included data from studies which framed efforts to share understandings of social justice as a process of "educating families and school staff." This framing perhaps implicitly positions S/EPs in a hierarchy of informed socially just practice which unintentionally perpetuates marginalization by implying a deficit in the understanding of others, rather than acknowledging the collaborative and evolving nature of social justice work. *Developing and learning collaboratively with others* is intended to reflect a more inclusive and participatory approach, acknowledging that all stakeholders are continually learning and developing their understanding of social justice.

The papers in this review were drawn from UK and US contexts. While both the UK and US educational systems provide compulsory schooling from early childhood through adolescence, the UK follows a nationally standardized curriculum and examination system, whereas the US system is more decentralized, with curricula and assessments varying by state and district. This difference is important when comparing the work of school psychologists in the US (who are typically located within school systems) and educational psychologists in the UK (who tend to work in EP teams, usually located within area local authorities), as the policy context, accountability structures, and educational priorities that shape their roles and practices are influenced by the level of centralization within each system. Although service delivery models differ, the values, skills, and approaches described appear to hold relevance across both contexts. Whilst Embeita and Birch (2024) note differences in the influence of institutional power across these two contexts, practitioners across both national contexts in the present review described their potential to affect systemic change. This perhaps suggests that despite structural differences in service delivery, the core principles of social justice-oriented practice remain consistent and that while shaped by different policies and frameworks, practitioners in both contexts share common challenges related to inequity, access to resources, and the need for advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups. The emphasis on reflection, consultation, and collaboration may stem from the shared professional ethics of psychology (Health and Care Professions Council, 2023, National Association of School Psychologists, 2020), which prioritize evidence-based decision-making, empowerment, and equitable support for children and young people. Additionally, it would seem that systemic barriers such as funding limitations, bureaucratic constraints, and institutional resistance to change, are similar regardless of service delivery context.

A conceptual model of how social justice manifests in S/EP practice has been produced from the synthesized themes (see Figure 2). Continual reflection and development as practitioners are positioned as essential precursors and ongoing processes alongside the enactment of social justice through two forms; facilitating access and participation to systems as they currently exist; and working to transform those systems which perpetuate injustice. Empowering and

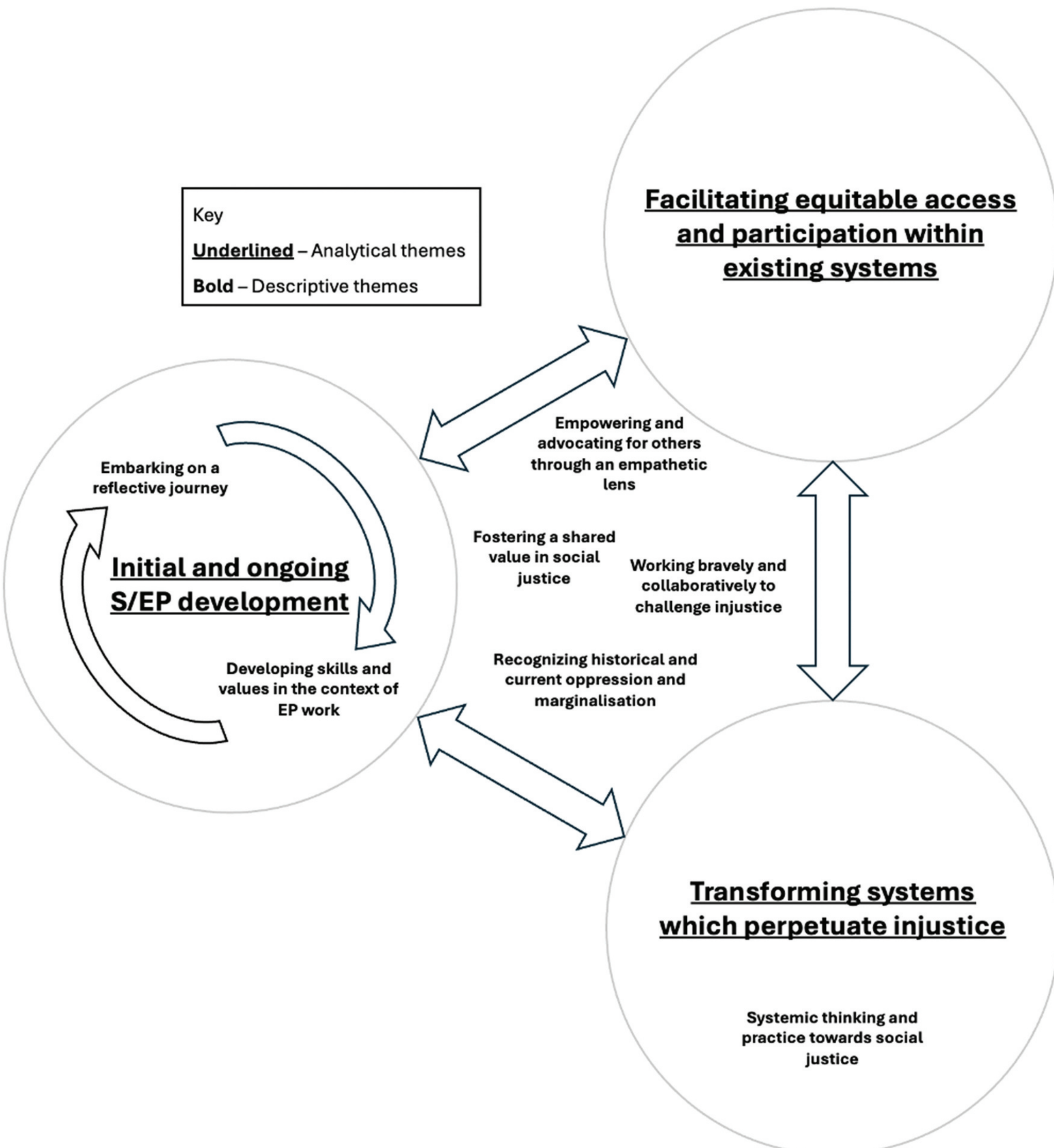

Figure 2. Model of social justice in S/EP practice.

advocating for others operates alongside working bravely and collaboratively to challenge injustice when encountered. These processes are facilitated when allies are sought and a shared value in social justice is fostered. All of this is further facilitated through acknowledging both historical and current oppression and marginalization, including recognizing when S/EPs are complicit with or reinforce unjust systems. Finally, S/EPs work dynamically and responsively to serve the communities in which they operate, returning to reflective spaces to consider their experiences to inform future practice. While the descriptive themes are organised within Supplementary Tables 2 to 4 as they are described within the data, some are presented centrally within the conceptual model to convey their influence and relevance across the three analytical themes.

Limitations and implications for future research

It is important to consider that a number of limitations apply to this review. As to be expected, participants in all included studies volunteered to share their perspectives. In many cases, they were asked to self-select on the explicit basis that they possessed a preexisting interest in social justice. Whilst this approach is helpful in gaining rich, informed data (and several of the papers consciously reflect on the representativeness of their samples in regard to other demographics), the perspectives gathered may not comprehensively mirror those present in the workforce. It is possible that the apparent unanimity in views may be exaggerated within the literature. Future research should consider efforts to gather a range of perspectives, including from those who may have less direct interest in social justice, in order to explore the ways in which views may diverge from this consensus.

Whilst the selection process for papers included in this review sought studies from a range of sources and languages, the eventual literature examined only research written in English and conducted in UK and US contexts. While evidence-based practice is recognized as important, it is noted that despite practice of school/educational psychology in more than 80 countries (Begeny et al., 2018), traditional evidence hierarchies inherently prioritize publishing from Anglophone countries (Chittooran et al., 2024). This not only disadvantages non-English language speakers, but risks suppressing non-Western perspectives, further marginalizing community-based, experiential, or global majority knowledge (Nastasi et al., 2020). Future research should continue to critically examine how traditional evidence hierarchies shape the knowledge of school/educational psychology and explore strategies for decolonizing research methodologies to ensure more inclusive and globally representative insights into socially just practice.

Implications for practice

Increasing representation within the psychology workforce was a shared priority among many participants in the included studies. Grapin et al. (2016) highlight several barriers to recruiting and retaining a more diverse school/educational psychology workforce from representations of the profession in undergraduate curricula, inaccurate and stereotypical representations of minoritised groups in textbooks and curricula, experiences of discrimination during their studies, and financial barriers. Furthermore, a perceived de-emphasis on social justice in training programs also contributed to disengagement, with some students feeling they were being trained to uphold the very practices they had hoped to change. Grapin et al. provide recommendations for educational institutions, training programs, graduate students, and practitioners to actively support the diversification of the field, ensuring that social justice is embedded in both training and professional practice. These would allow for greater accountability of not only diversifying the profession but also ensuring that training programs actively challenge systemic barriers to entering the profession, rather than reproducing them.

A key finding of this research is the importance of clear guidance and structured frameworks in supporting the enactment of social justice within S/EP practice, echoing the conclusions of Graves et al. (2021) and Embeita and Birch (2024). While many practitioners express a strong commitment to social justice, they often face challenges in translating these values into consistent and sustainable action. The use of structured frameworks can provide a roadmap for reflection, decision-making, and professional development, ensuring that social justice principles are not just aspirational but actively embedded in daily practice. Various resources have been developed including the School Psychology Social Justice Scale (Shriberg et al., 2024), a self-reflective framework for culturally responsive S/EP practice (Sakata, 2024) and a framework for reflecting on social justice in educational psychology services (Clay and Kelly, submitted). These provide opportunities for self-examination and collective dialogue, fostering a culture of ongoing learning and accountability, supporting the navigation of complex systemic barriers, challenging biases, and engaging in more equitable and responsive service delivery. Future research could explore how these tools are implemented in practice, evaluating their effectiveness in driving meaningful change and identifying potential adaptations to ensure their accessibility across diverse professional contexts. Embedding such structured approaches within training programs and continuing professional development may further support the integration of social justice as a core, rather than peripheral, aspect of school/educational psychology practice.

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Data availability statement

No new data were generated or analyzed in support of this review. All data used in this study are derived from previously published sources, which are cited within the article.

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