



Examining the Mediating Role of Academic Engagement in the Relationship Between the Perception of Educational Justice and Academic Competence Among Middle School Students in Learning History in the City of Babel

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the mediating role of academic engagement in the relationship between the perception of educational justice and academic competence among middle school students in learning history in the city of Babol. The research method was descriptive-correlational using structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of all middle school students learning history, totaling 2,800 students. Based on the Krejcie-Morgan sampling table (1970), a sample of 338 students from middle schools in Babol was selected using multi-stage cluster sampling. Data were collected using the Academic Engagement Questionnaire by Guniou and Kouzo (2015), the Academic Competence Evaluation by DiPerna and Elliott (1999), and the Educational Justice Questionnaire by Behrovan et al. (2013). The reliability coefficients for the questionnaires were 0.87, 0.80, 0.78, and 0.90, respectively. The results indicated that the perception of educational justice had an impact on academic engagement ($\beta = 0.185$). Additionally, the perception of educational justice influenced academic competence ($\beta = 0.374$). Furthermore, academic engagement affected academic competence ($\beta = 0.522$). The findings revealed a significant relationship between the perception of educational justice and academic competence through the mediating role of academic engagement ($r = 0.270$). It is suggested that teachers can enhance academic engagement by employing creative and interactive learning methods, such as historical simulations, multimedia resources, or role-playing activities.

Keywords: *Academic Engagement; Educational Justice; Academic Competence; Learning*

Introduction

Academic engagement refers to a deep and lasting enthusiasm for learning, driven by a strong intrinsic motivation to explore and understand specific subjects or fields. It manifests in a student's commitment to academic activities, curiosity, and active interaction with content beyond mere obligation. This enthusiasm fosters persistence in overcoming challenges, and a thirst for knowledge, and often leads to meaningful contributions in a chosen discipline (Yasin Hajem, 2023). Perception of educational justice refers to how individuals or groups view fairness and equity within the educational system. This

perception encompasses access to resources, opportunities, treatment by educators, and outcomes such as grades or career prospects. Educational justice involves ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to succeed while addressing systemic inequalities that may hinder such fairness (Vero & Poka, 2017). Academic competence refers to the recognition of an individual's academic achievements and abilities, typically measured through objective criteria such as grades, test scores, research accomplishments, or scholarly contributions. It emphasizes performance, knowledge, and demonstrated proficiency in a specific field, often serving as the basis for awards, admissions, or academic progression (Hill et al., 2024). Learning history involves understanding and internalizing past events, ideas, and contexts to gain insights into current issues and future possibilities. It promotes critical thinking, the analysis of cause and effect, and the understanding of diverse cultural and social perspectives. History lessons aim to enhance moral and civic understanding, helping learners avoid repeating past mistakes and make informed decisions (Doritz et al., 2020).

The central issue of this study is to understand how students' perceptions of educational justice influence their academic competence in middle school history and whether academic engagement acts as a potential mediating factor. While educational justice—students' perception of fairness in educational resources, treatment, and evaluations—is linked to academic performance, it remains unclear how these perceptions translate into students' sense of competence or self-efficacy in their studies. Academic engagement, encompassing students' interest, motivation, and excitement for learning, might play a key role in this relationship by increasing interaction and effort in response to perceived fairness.

This study seeks to explore whether fair educational practices not only foster a sense of ability but also the enthusiasm necessary for academic success, particularly in a challenging subject like history. By focusing on this mediating process, the research aims to provide insights into effective educational policies that enhance equity, motivation, and academic achievement for middle school students in Babol. Addressing the mediating role of academic engagement in the relationship between students' perceptions of educational justice and their academic competence is critical for creating a fair, motivating, and effective educational environment, particularly in middle school history. Educational justice—the students' perception that resources, evaluations, and teacher behavior are fair—affects their feelings of worth and support, directly impacting their confidence and sense of competence in a subject. However, academic engagement, or students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning, maybe the key factor that transforms the sense of justice into measurable academic competence by fostering greater involvement, persistence, and a positive attitude toward learning. This research can demonstrate how fairness in education not only builds students' confidence but also enhances their motivation, offering educators insights into fostering both equitable practices and engagement-based learning strategies. These findings are especially relevant to history, a subject that often requires critical thinking and analytical skills. Understanding this dynamic can help Babol educators design educational experiences that boost both motivation and competence, ultimately improving academic outcomes and creating a more equitable learning environment. Yasin Hajem (2023) examined the impact of educational justice on academic engagement through commitment in schools. The results showed that educational justice, through school commitment, influenced the academic engagement of students in Baghdad. Al-Montazer (2023) investigated the relationship between academic engagement and academic involvement through the mediating role of academic motivation. The results revealed a positive and significant relationship between academic engagement and involvement via academic motivation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the mediating role of academic engagement and academic involvement in the relationship between the perception of educational justice and academic competence among middle school students learning history in Babol.

Research Methodology

The current research examines the mediating role of academic engagement in the relationship between perceptions of educational justice and academic competence among students in learning history at the middle school level in Babol. The study is applied in nature and utilizes a descriptive-correlational method, specifically structural equation modeling (relationships between variables), and is quantitative. This study aimed to investigate the relationships among the research variables. The primary goal of this research is to examine and describe the relationship between the variables: perceptions of educational justice (independent variable), academic competence (dependent variable), and academic engagement (mediating variable). The data collection tools for this study include the standard Academic Engagement Questionnaire by Gunios and Cozzo (2015), the standard Academic Competence Evaluation Questionnaire by Diperna and Elliott (1999), and the Educational Justice Questionnaire by Behrovan, Noghani, and Golmakani (2013).

Academic Engagement Questionnaire The Academic Engagement Questionnaire by Gunios and Cozzo (2015) was designed and developed to measure academic engagement. It has been validated in Iran by Barghi Irani and colleagues (2019) for assessing academic engagement. This questionnaire contains 48 items and 6 components: value (psychological engagement), belonging (social-psychological engagement), cognitive engagement, relationships with peers (emotional engagement), relationships with teachers (emotional engagement), and behavioral engagement. The responses are based on a Likert scale (Strongly disagree = 1 to Strongly agree = 5). To calculate the score for each subscale, sum the scores of the items related to that subscale. For the total score, sum all the items of the questionnaire. The score range is between 48 and 240, with higher scores indicating greater academic engagement. In Barghi Irani's research (2019), the content, face, and construct validity of this questionnaire were deemed appropriate for assessment. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in Barghi Irani's study was reported as 0.96.

Academic Competence Evaluation Questionnaire This scale, developed by Diperna and Elliott (1999), contains 67 items and uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never to almost always. It measures two factors and has versions for teachers, students, and university students. The teacher version is for teachers of first to twelfth-grade students, the student version for sixth to twelfth-grade students, and the university version is for second- to fourth-year university students. The first factor measures academic skills, with 3 subscales: reading/speaking (items 1-11), mathematics (items 12-18), and critical thinking (items 19-30). The second factor measures academic enabling factors, with 4 subscales: interpersonal skills (items 31-39), classroom engagement (items 40-47), academic motivation (items 48-56), and study skills (items 57-67). Diperna and Elliott (1999) found a 5-factor model after factor analysis, which includes subscales for academic skills, interpersonal skills, academic motivation, academic engagement, and study skills. Cronbach's alpha for the subscales was reported as follows: 0.98 for academic skills, 0.97 for academic motivation, 0.95 for interpersonal skills, 0.94 for study skills, and 0.92 for engagement.

Educational Justice Questionnaire The Educational Justice Questionnaire by Behrovan, Noghani, and Golmakani (2013) consists of 18 items and measures three dimensions of justice: distributive justice (9 items), procedural justice (6 items), and interactive justice (3 items). The Likert scale is used for responses (ranging from very little, little, somewhat, much, to very much). The score range is from 18 to 90. If the scores range from 1 to 18, the level of the variable in the community is considered weak. If the scores range from 18 to 54, the variable level is moderate. If the scores are above 54, the variable level is very good. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire were confirmed by Javadin (2017), who reported a reliability coefficient of 0.90.

Statistical Population and Sampling The statistical population for the present study consisted of 2,800 middle school students in Babol, as per the Education Organization's statistics. To determine the sample size, the Krejcie-Morgan formula (1970) was used, resulting in a sample size of 338 students. The study used cluster sampling, where 338 students were selected from the middle school history learners in

Babol due to the benefits of reducing costs and time, easier sample management, and direct contact with sampling units.

Data Analysis For data analysis, both descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) and inferential statistics will be employed. Initially, descriptive statistics will be used to examine the demographic characteristics of the variables studied. Then, inferential statistics will be applied to address the research questions. Descriptive statistics will include frequency and percentage, while inferential statistics will use effect size measures for the relationship between perceptions of educational justice and academic competence with the mediating role of academic engagement, using Amos software.

Findings

Perceptions of Educational Justice Have an Impact on Students' Academic Engagement in Learning History at the Middle School Level in Babol

The findings in Table (1) show that the effect coefficient of perceptions of educational justice on academic engagement is significant, meaning that perceptions of educational justice affect academic engagement ($\beta = 0.185$). According to the coefficient of determination (r^2), 53.1% of the variance in perceptions of educational justice is shared with academic engagement.

Table (1): Effect Coefficient of Perceptions of Educational Justice and Academic Engagement

Dependent Variable: Academic Engagement					Result
Statistical Index Predictor Variable	Effect Size	Squared Effect Size	T-test	Significance Level	
Perception of Educational Justice	0.729**	0.531	9.927	0.001	Hypothesis Confirmation

Perception of Educational Justice Affects Students' Academic Competence in Learning History at the Middle School Level in Babol

The findings in Table (2) show that the impact of perception of educational justice on academic competence is statistically significant. This means that perception of educational justice has an effect on academic competence ($\beta = 0.374$). According to the coefficient of determination (r^2), 14% of the variance in academic competence is shared with the perception of educational justice. This result indicates that students' perception of fairness in education plays a significant role in influencing their academic competence in history at the middle school level.

Table (2): Impact Coefficient of Perception of Educational Justice on Academic Competence

Dependent Variable: Academic Competence					Result
Statistical Index Predictor Variable	Effect Size	Squared Effect Size	T-test	Significance Level	
Perception of Educational Justice	0.374**	0.140	2.630	0.009	Hypothesis Confirmation

Student Enthusiasm Impacts Academic Competence in Learning History among Middle School Students in the City of Babol

The findings in Table (3) show that the impact coefficient of student enthusiasm on academic competence is significant, meaning that enthusiasm affects academic competence ($\beta = 0.522$). Based on the coefficient of determination (R^2), 27.2% of the variance in academic competence is shared with student enthusiasm.

Table (3): Impact Coefficient of Student Enthusiasm on Academic Competence

Dependent Variable: Academic Competence					
Statistical Index Predictor Variable					
	Effect Size	Squared Effect Size	T-test	Significance Level	Result
Academic Engagement	0.522**	0.272	5.027	0.001	Hypothesis Confirmation

Perception of Educational Justice Has an Indirect Effect on Academic Competence through the Mediating Role of Student Enthusiasm in Learning History at the Middle School Level in the City of Babol

The findings in Table (4) show that the correlation coefficient between the perception of educational justice and academic competence with the mediating role of enthusiasm is significant. This means that there is a significant relationship between the perception of educational justice and academic competence through the mediating role of enthusiasm ($r = 0.270$).

Table (4): Correlation Coefficient Between Perception of Educational Justice and Academic Competence with the Mediating Role of Enthusiasm

Dependent Variable: Academic Competence				
Statistical Index Predictor Variable				
	Effect Size	Significance Level	Result	
Perception of Educational Justice *Academic Engagement	0.270**	0.001	Hypothesis Confirmation	

Discussion and Conclusion

Perception of educational justice impacts the students' academic enthusiasm in learning history in the middle school level in the city of Babol. The findings from Table (1) indicate that the effect of educational justice perception on academic enthusiasm is significant, meaning that the perception of educational justice ($\beta = 0.185$) influences academic enthusiasm. Based on the coefficient of determination (r^2), 53.1% of the variance in the perception of educational justice is shared with academic enthusiasm. The results of this hypothesis align with the findings of studies by Yasin Hajim (2024), Almontazer (2024), Hasanpoor and Hasanpoor (2024), Kooi et al. (2024), MirMohammadKashi et al. (2024), Lotfi and Lotfi (2021). To explain this hypothesis, it can be said that the perception of educational justice plays an important role in shaping the academic enthusiasm of middle school students in Babol when learning history. When students perceive fairness in their educational environment, such as equal access to resources, fair grading, and impartial treatment from teachers, they are more likely to have increased motivation and enthusiasm to engage with the subject matter. Educational justice fosters a sense of

belonging and respect, which can significantly influence students' enthusiasm to participate in learning activities, including history lessons. This perception of fair treatment promotes a positive emotional and cognitive connection to their studies, fueling their interest in history. In the context of history learning, which often involves analyzing complex events, critical thinking, and interpreting multiple perspectives, students who view the educational system as fair are more likely to approach the subject with curiosity and dedication. This positive perception encourages them to immerse themselves in the material, ask questions, and seek a deeper understanding. Fairness in how historical content is presented and how students are assessed helps them feel confident that their efforts are recognized and rewarded fairly, which in turn increases their academic enthusiasm. In Babol, the perceived impact of educational justice on students' enthusiasm for history is very important, as historical learning often requires active engagement with different perspectives and a deep understanding of events. When students believe that their school environment is fair, they are more inclined to spend time and effort understanding history, which can lead to improved academic performance. Their enthusiasm transforms into better attention to historical details, critical thinking, and participation in class discussions. Therefore, creating a fair educational environment in Babol's middle schools can directly enhance students' enthusiasm and performance in history lessons.

The perception of educational justice has an impact on the academic competence of students in learning history in the middle school level in the city of Babol. Table (2) results show that the coefficient of impact of the perception of educational justice on academic competence is significant, meaning that the perception of educational justice influences academic competence ($\beta = 0.374$). According to the coefficient of determination (r^2), 14% of the variance between the perception of educational justice and academic competence is shared. The results of this hypothesis are consistent with the findings of Solastri (2024), Kuei et al. (2024), Mir Mohammadkashi et al. (2024), and Lotfi & Lotfi (2020). To explain this hypothesis, it can be said that the perception of educational justice plays a fundamental role in shaping the academic competence of middle school students in Babol when learning history. When students feel that the educational system treats them fairly, with equal opportunities and impartial evaluations, they are more likely to trust in their own abilities. This sense of fairness ensures that students believe their efforts and achievements are recognized based on merit rather than favoritism, which encourages them to work harder and strive for better academic performance in history. The belief that they are treated fairly can directly enhance their competence in historical knowledge and skills. In the context of history education, academic competence includes the ability to critically analyze historical events, understand different perspectives, and apply historical knowledge to contemporary issues. When students perceive educational justice, they are more likely to engage deeply with the subject, leading to better understanding and skill development. Fair behavior encourages students to actively participate in learning activities, from class discussions to assignments and projects, which in turn improves their mastery of historical concepts. By ensuring that teaching practices are fair, schools in Babol can create an environment that fosters the intellectual growth and academic competence of students in history. Educational justice not only affects the motivation of middle school students in Babol but also directly contributes to the development of their academic competence in history. When students perceive fairness in their teaching and assessment, they are more likely to take responsibility for their learning, which enhances their ability to think critically, analyze sources, and understand historical narratives. This competence is crucial for academic success in history and helps students develop skills that are valuable in their broader academic careers. A fair and just educational environment ensures that all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, have the opportunity to develop these skills.

Academic enthusiasm influences the academic competence of students in learning history at the middle school level in Babol. Table (3) results show that the coefficient of impact of academic enthusiasm on academic competence is significant, meaning that academic enthusiasm affects academic competence ($\beta = 0.522$). According to the coefficient of determination (r^2), 27.2% of the variance between academic enthusiasm and academic competence is shared. The results of this hypothesis are consistent with the findings of Yasin Hajem (2023), Al-Montazer (2023), Hassanpour & Hassanpour

(2023), Solastris (2024), Kuei et al. (2024), and Mir Mohammadkashi et al. (2024). To explain this hypothesis, it can be said that academic enthusiasm plays a significant role in influencing the academic competence of students in learning history at the middle school level in Babol. When students are enthusiastic about learning, they are more motivated to engage deeply with the subject. This enthusiasm drives them to explore historical topics with curiosity and passion, leading to a better understanding of historical events, concepts, and ideas. Enthusiastic students invest more time and effort in studying history, actively participating in discussions, and completing assignments, all of which contribute to the development of their academic competence in the subject. In history education, academic competence includes the ability to critically analyze past events, understand the causes and consequences of historical developments, and relate historical knowledge to contemporary issues. When students are enthusiastic about learning, they are more likely to approach historical content with an open and curious mindset, which enhances their critical thinking skills. This enthusiasm creates a deeper connection with the material, enabling students to retain historical facts better, understand complex narratives, and apply historical insights to real-world situations. As a result, academic enthusiasm becomes a driving force in strengthening students' overall academic competence in history. At Babol middle schools, fostering academic enthusiasm in history can lead to significant improvements in students' performance. Enthusiastic learners are more likely to seek out additional reading materials, ask questions, and engage in critical discussions, all of which enhance their competence in the subject. Teachers can increase both academic enthusiasm and competence by creating an engaging and stimulating learning environment that sparks students' interest in history. Ultimately, students who are passionate about history are better equipped to excel in their studies, achieve higher levels of academic success, and develop a deeper understanding of the subject.

The perception of educational justice has an indirect effect on academic competence with the mediating role of students' academic enthusiasm in learning history at the middle school level in Babol. The findings from Table (4) show that the correlation coefficient between the perception of educational justice and academic competence with the mediating role of academic enthusiasm is significant, meaning that there is a significant relationship between the perception of educational justice and academic competence through the mediating role of academic enthusiasm ($r = 0.270$). The results of this hypothesis align with the findings of studies by Yasin Hajim (2024), Almontazer (2024), Mohaedzadeh and Montazeryan (2024), Shirvani and Mousavi (2024), and Lotfi and Lotfi (2021). To explain this hypothesis, it can be said that the perception of educational justice, through the mediating role of students' academic enthusiasm in learning history in middle schools in Babol, indirectly affects academic competence. When students perceive that their educational environment is fair—characterized by fairness in grading, equal access to resources, and impartial behavior from teachers—they are more likely to feel valued and motivated. This sense of fairness strengthens their emotional connection to learning, particularly in history, which in turn fosters greater enthusiasm for the subject. Thus, educational justice provides the foundation for nurturing academic enthusiasm, which plays a key role in how students engage with their history lessons. Academic enthusiasm acts as an important mediator between the perception of educational justice and students' academic competence. When students are enthusiastic about history, they are more motivated to participate in class discussions, deeply explore historical topics, and actively engage in the learning process. This increased participation leads to better understanding, retention, and critical thinking—key components of academic competence in history. In this way, enthusiasm becomes the channel through which the positive impacts of perceived educational justice transform into tangible academic benefits, such as improved performance and deeper historical knowledge. Ultimately, the indirect relationship between educational justice and academic competence highlights the importance of creating a fair and just learning environment. A fair environment increases students' enthusiasm for history, which in turn enhances their competence in the subject. Educators can support students in developing the skills and knowledge needed for excellence in history by fostering both fairness and enthusiasm. This demonstrates how systemic factors like educational justice can have broad impacts on students' academic success through their emotional and motivational interactions with learning.

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