

Towards epistemic justice: Constructing knowers in multilingual classrooms

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Abstract

This linguistic ethnography of a Cape Town school addresses the paucity of research on multilingual children as knowers. Its focus on peer interactions reveals multilingual classrooms as crucial sites for the recognition of knowers and the promotion of epistemic justice. Epistemic justice addresses forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices (Fricker 2007; Ogone 2017; Santos 2012).

Educational reforms in South Africa have not yet managed to address persistent forms of epistemic injustice, wrongs done to people in their capacities as knowers (Fricker 2007): the recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Howie et al. 2017) found that 78% of South African Grade 4 children could not read for meaning in any language. A major factor is that over 80% are learning in an unfamiliar language. This paper suggests that monoglossic language-in-education policies and practices constitute a form of epistemic injustice in removing from many learners the ability to make epistemic contributions, a capacity central to human value (Fricker 2015; Santos 2018). Drawing on observations, interviews, and audio-recorded peer interactions, the paper reports on a pilot study where Grade 6 learners could use any language to negotiate knowledge in an English medium classroom. Findings show how learners construct epistemic stances which are simultaneously affective, serving both to build relations of knowing and promote solidarity.

Findings further show the potential of multilingualism as epistemic resource to contribute to cumulative learning (Maton 2013), render visible learners as moral agents and brokers of care (García-Sánchez 2018; C. Goodwin 2007), and recognize English language learners as legitimate knowers, thus helping lay the basis for conditions of epistemic justice.

Keywords: epistemic justice; language policy; linguistic ethnography; multilingual education; pedagogies of care

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