

The Epistemic Challenge of Hearing Child's Voice

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Abstract Classical conceptual distinctions in philosophy of education assume an individualistic subjectivity and hide the learning that can take place in the space between child (as educator) and adult (as learner). Grounded in two examples from experience I develop the argument that adults often put metaphorical sticks in their ears in their educational encounters with children. Hearers' prejudices cause them to miss out on knowledge offered by the child, but not heard by the adult. This has to do with how adults view education, knowledge, as much as child, and is even more extreme when child is also black. The idea is what Miranda Fricker calls 'epistemic injustice' which occurs when someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower. Although her work concerns gender and race, I extrapolate her radical ideas to (black) child. Awareness of the epistemic injustice that is done to children and my proposal for increased epistemic modesty and epistemic equality could help transform pedagogical spaces to include child subjects as educators. A way forward is suggested that involves 'cracking' the concept of child and a different non-individualised conception of education.

Keywords Philosophy for children · P4C · Philosophy with children · Granny and the Goldfish · Epistemic injustice · Hermeneutic injustice · Testimonial injustice · Child as educator, social justice · Child · Childhood · Black child · African child · Symmetrical relationships · Asymmetrical relationships · Active listening · Dialogue · Relational pedagogies · Children's rights · Developmentality · Cracking concepts · Process-centred education · Observing children · Normalisation · Research ethics with young children · Essentialising · Otherising

Introduction

Structural epistemic injustice is done to children in much educational theory and practice. The reasons for this are not only that conventional theories of teaching and learning take as

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Gert Biesta puts it: ‘the isolated self-conscious individual subjects as a starting point for, and an unproblematic unit of, analysis’ (Biesta 1994, p. 300), but also that assumptions of the importance of the *age* of the individual subject has led, as I will argue, to epistemic injustice. The alternative of looking at education as interaction *between* subjects requires a methodological and ontological paradigm shift and makes it possible to answer the question whether child can educate in the affirmative.

The ideas of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) have influenced an important paradigm shift in contemporary thought. He construed subjects or individual selves as temporal thinking and feeling bodies (*Dasein*). That is, individual subjects, he proposed, always already find themselves ‘in’ the world. Self and world, mind and body, are not separate ontological entities (Heidegger 1979). Moreover, as further developed by Heidegger’s ‘children’ (in particular Hannah Arendt) a self always finds itself (*is*) *with* others (Heidegger’s *Mitsein*) and therefore a dramatically different picture emerges of what the relationship is between self and others in educational encounters (see e.g. Todd 2010). Such an ontological paradigm shift involves giving up the idea that individual subjectivity is pre-social. As Biesta explains, the implications for education are that teaching and learning is not a:

...one-way process in which culture is transferred from one (already acculturated) organism to another (not yet acculturated) organism, but as a co-constructive process, a process in which both participating organisms play an active role and in which meaning is not transferred but produced’ (Biesta 1994, pp. 311, 312).

In other words, meaning is the *result* of co-constructive processes and not a one-way process of meaning production. Meaning is not offered by one (adult) subject and received by the other subject (child)—both subjects ‘constitute the meaning of what is learned’ (Biesta 1994, p. 315). However, meaning can only be co-produced when the relationship between subjects is *symmetrical*,¹ that is, child is treated as a subject. I will exemplify this by commenting on a publicly available philosophical dialogue between young learners. My experiences of common adults’ responses to this philosophical dialogue in pre-service and in-service teacher education illustrate the point I want to make about the educational value adults attach to their exchanges with children (in order to be able to claim that child can educate). This in turn depends on their conceptions of childhood, otherwise adult will not ‘hear’ the child who speaks. I use the work of philosopher Miranda Fricker to develop the argument about subjectivity even further and propose that hearers’ prejudices cause adults to miss out on knowledge offered by the child, but not heard by the adult. Another example from practice will illustrate epistemic injustice as a result of how adults view education, knowledge, as much as child, especially when child is also black. Awareness of the epistemic injustice that is done to children and my proposal for increased epistemic modesty and epistemic equality could help transform pedagogical spaces to include child subjects as educators.

¹ ‘Symmetrical’ in the *epistemic* and *ontological* sense, not in the *political* sense. Power differences between children and educators in schools of course do exist and should not be underestimated. Biesta’s proposal for education to be symmetrical compares with Fricker’s distinction between *active* and *passive* power (see footnote 5). Ontologically speaking, passive power differences between adult and child always exist in schools, despite the possibly deliberate strategies and interventions to minimise active power differences.

Child-Centered Education?

A first response to the question ‘Can child educate?’ might well be the obvious association with Romantic child-centered sentiments. It was Peters (1966) who first proposed the now well-known distinction between teacher-centred and child-centred education, but the binary overlooks the fact that certain pedagogies can be *process*-centred as exemplified below—an enquiry-based practice that also presupposes a different kind of subjectivity² and influences decisions about the *who* and the *what* of learning.

As Friqueqnon (1998) observes, both binaries fail to do justice to the difference between ‘childlike’ and the pejorative ‘childish’. By not making the distinction at all, authoritarian education is thereby failing to hear child’s voice: the trust, honesty, enthusiasm, openness and playfulness children can bring to their intellectual explorations. On the other hand, progressive education is failing by offering children freedom without responsibility. In contrast, certain process-centred approaches aim to develop the democratic habits of mind and skills that are characteristic of a ‘thick’ or participatory notion of democracy (Sheppard et al. 2011). Sheppard et al. (2011, pp. 75, 76) argue that these dispositions are developed through conceptual investigations (analysis of abstract concepts), an appreciation of the experiential and social context, epistemic independence (thinking and learning for oneself) and engagement in discussions about controversial issues (including the normative conceptions of childhood). As such, room can be made in class for process-centred pedagogies that are not empty of content (see footnote 2).

Worthwhileness

Educational practices, Peters states, are ‘those in which *people try to pass on* what is *worthwhile* as well as those in which they actually succeed in doing so’ (Peters 1966, p. 26; my emphasis). Routinely in schools adults are positioned to ‘pass on’ knowledge and determine what is ‘worthwhile’ learning. Perhaps learning can be worthwhile, but not for the adult who is listening? However, a sharp distinction between talking and listening is also problematic in a new ontology of subjects who co-construct meaning and understanding as we will see below (see also e.g. Maybin 2006).

Learning *with* children could possibly be a life changing transformation for the adults involved. Importantly, this is possible if and only if the adult regards this new knowledge as worthwhile. There are two dimensions of this ‘worthwhileness’ that I will be exploring. One is epistemological and the other is ethico-political and I will argue that they are intricately related. The ethico-political dimension of what counts as education (and therefore valuable) depends on what counts as knowledge and the assumptions we bring to subjectivity.

Epistemic prejudices³ are related to adults’ implicit and explicit assumptions and prejudices about child. Although much academic critique focuses on the social and cultural normativity of knowledge claims when deconstructing Cartesian dualist oppositions, their focus is almost exclusively on gender and race, the literature is still remarkably silent on

² See, for example, Benjamin and Eccheverria (1992). Although Rollins (1996) argues that the process of philosophical enquiry does not necessarily imply a deconstruction of ontological dualism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine and evaluate their arguments.

³ Fricker introduces the notion of ‘identity prejudice’ as ‘a label for prejudices against people qua social type’ (Fricker 2007, p. 4). This kind of prejudice leads to testimonial injustice.

child and how ageism influences what ‘we’ (adults) regard as ‘real’ knowledge and therefore by implication what it means to hear child’s voice—to use a current metaphor.

Epistemic Injustice

In her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), Miranda Fricker focuses on human practices through which knowledge is gained (epistemic practices) and their social situatedness, which exposes their ethical and political dimension. She argues that social identity and social power⁴ are involved in ‘two of our most basic epistemic practices: conveying knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences’ (Fricker 2007, p. 1). These two forms of epistemic injustice involve a moral wrongdoing to a person in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007, p. 1). She calls them *testimonial* and *hermeneutical* injustice. In cases of testimonial injustice a prejudice (e.g. accent or age) will cause a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word, and ‘sometimes this will be sufficient to cross the threshold for belief or acceptance so that the hearer’s prejudice causes him to miss out on a piece of knowledge’ (Fricker 2007, p. 17). Significantly she does not apply her analysis to child or childhood, but exclusively to gender and race. Children are still invisible in mainstream academic philosophy,⁵ so what follows is an application of her radical ideas to child. In examples from practice I offer below, teachers do not believe a child, *because* it is a *child* who is speaking, with typical responses such as: s/he is not telling the truth, or is immature, or at the other (sentimental) end of the scale: endearment: smiling, laughing, or expressions such as ‘oh, how sweet’. Credibility deficit is related to age, in that being a particular age has significant impact on how much credibility a hearer affords a speaker, and when and how s/he is silenced systematically. Fricker (2007, p. 145) explains:

When someone is excluded from the relations of *epistemic trust* that are at work in a co-operative practice of pooling information, they are wrongfully excluded from participation in the practice that defines the core of the very concept of knowledge (Fricker 2007, p. 145; my emphasis).

Of the two kinds of epistemic injustice, hermeneutical injustice is even more difficult to detect. Fricker defines it as: ‘the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource’ (Fricker 2007, p. 155). That is, the power relations and structural prejudice undermine child’s faith in their own ability to make sense of the world, and constrain their ability to understand their own experiences. Children’s situated lived experiences of learning, their friends, family or community are irrelevant to the ‘real’ work in class. As a result, child will lose confidence in her general intellectual abilities, to such extent that she is genuinely hindered in her educational development.

⁴ She makes a distinction between active and passive social power. Power is the socially situated capacity to control the actions of others, and in schools this is the case when teachers have active power over their learners by e.g. administering punishment, but also in a more passive way: the mere capacity that a teacher can hand out punishments influences and regulates learners’ behaviour (Fricker 2007, pp. 9, 10).

⁵ Academic philosophers such as Matthew Lipman, Gareth Matthews, David Kennedy, Walter Kohan, Karin Murriss and Joanna Haynes have argued for ‘philosophy of childhood’ as a distinct field of philosophical enquiry.

Stereotypes influence to what extent children are regarded as authorities and explains why little credibility is given to young speakers. Collective naturalised conceptions of child as unknowing, irrational and immature influence whether we regard educational relationships symmetrical or asymmetrical. A short transcript of a publicly available enquiry with children will illustrate the point. Hearers' prejudices cause them to miss out on 'pieces' of knowledge offered by the child, but not really heard by the adult. This has to do with how educators view knowledge, as much as child, and is even more extreme when child is also black.

I offer two critical incidents in my own practice as teacher educator to illustrate 'epistemic injustice' and also racial prejudice (in the second example). Credibility deficit is related to age in that being of a particular age has significant impact on how much credibility a hearer affords a speaker, and when and how s/he is silenced systematically. A way forward will be proposed that enables children to be taken seriously as knowers and therefore as educators.

Child as Educator

Teachers can embody many of the ideas of educational institutions—their theories and their practices. Pedagogies and what counts as content knowledge are shaped by conceptions of child and childhood, which prescribe the boundaries of what counts as valuable learning. Characteristic of most communicative exchanges between adult and child in school is children presenting to adults what the latter want to hear, not necessarily what children themselves genuinely believe in. The routine asking of closed, rhetorical questions by teachers is a mere symptom of a deeper engrained epistemic orientation that profoundly influences how we speak and regard what it means to think *with* children. Even when a serious and well-intentioned effort is made by teachers to encourage children's authentic speculations, the listening is a listening out for or rehearsal of what teachers already know. Teachers' self-identity as epistemic authorities constitutes a serious barrier to hearing child's voice even when room is deliberately made in class to listen to children's ideas (see Haynes and Murriss 2011).

The narrative grounding for the argument I am putting forward is a publicly available videotaped extract of a philosophical enquiry with children,⁶ in which the children are responding to the reading out loud of a written dialogue. The teacher in this UK middle school has been involving his learners twice a week in 1 h philosophy with children (P4C) sessions over a period of time.⁷ Also in the UK this kind of teaching is unusual: P4C is not part of the prescribed mainstream curriculum.⁸ Room has been made for learners' own ideas and questions about a text. The teacher is guided by children's interests, listens responsively and supports the emerging dialogue by asking philosophical questions. This particular dialogue progresses roughly as follows:

⁶ See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkeEjZVaEqk (accessed March 2012).

⁷ It is not clear for how long the teacher James Nottingham has been teaching P4C to this particular class.

⁸ See: www.sapere.org.uk for a charitable organisation that promotes P4C in the UK and www.ICPIC.org for the worldwide P4C network. For lesson preparation guidance see e.g. Murriss and Haynes (2010).

Granny and the Goldfish

Boy 1: Princess Diana...you only knew her name, but you didn't really meet her like, when she died people were sending her flowers and everything, but in a way she was a stranger, but I cared for her.

Boy 2: What is a stranger?

Girl 1: You haven't met them, but sort of not communicated with them.

Girl 2: I rather wish a stranger died than my family and friends, because you don't really know other people...they might be horrible.

Girl 3: Yes, but you are saying that just because you don't know them it is better that strangers die, just because you don't know them.

Girl 4: If there were such a thing like God, why would he like make horrible people in the world, like the people in Kosovo? Why does he make people suffer?

Boy 3: I don't agree with you Amy, because God might like some bad people on the earth, because He might think it's too peaceful, so he might say you have to have some bother sometime.

Girl 5: It's impossible to have a perfect world...I mean you have to have bad people in the world, coz if we did have a perfect world we would go round saying 'hiya' drinking cups of coffee all the time...always being nice to each other that wouldn't be right, that wouldn't be comfortable at all.

It is worth pressing the 'pause button' and reflecting on the teaching and learning here. According to analytical philosophers, teaching always involves a triadic relationship in which 'for all X, if X teaches, there must be somebody who, and something that, is taught by X' (Passmore quoted by McEwan 2011, p. 125). But what is the 'something' here and who is doing the teaching? A quick glance reveals a much more complex structure. The teacher is invisible, but his teaching prior to this episode has made this dialogue possible. The background to this extract is the establishment of a more or less self-sustaining democratic practice where the children have learned that taking risks in thinking out loud is permissible. Trust has been established and respect has been shown for their ideas and experiences by the adult in charge.

But then in the episode itself, something else is going on. The 'teacher' here is not one person; the children (teachers?) are listening responsively to each other and construct new thoughts together. The physical boundaries of turn-taking hide the collaborative negotiation of meaning making, and the language that is available to analyse the transcript almost forces us to stay with an individualistic subjectivity. A child asks the probing question 'What is a stranger?' and a definition of 'stranger' follows (although this might not have happened). Then the implications of what it means not to know a stranger are drawn: why save strangers if they might be horrible? The belief that families have moral priority in one's who-shall-I-save-first list is challenged: why should 'knowing someone' be a salient criterion? The responsibility for the existence of horrible people in the world is put in God's lap and his intentions are questioned. A solution is also proposed: we need the bad, not just the good, and it leaves me curious about what the reasons for this might be, other than having to contemplate how boring it would be to live in a world where you always have to be nice to other people!

The children's wonderings were genuinely thought provoking in the Heideggerian sense: we can only learn to think by '*giving* our mind to what there is to think about' (Heidegger 1968, p. 4; my emphasis). This 'giving' is only possible when adults are 'open-minded' and have 'epistemic modesty', that is, accept that their (and all) knowledge is

limited and that they can learn (also) from children. They need to be open to what they have not heard before, and, to resist the urge to translate what they hear into what is familiar. What, for example, were the girl's own experiences she was drawing on when claiming that drinking cups of coffee all the time and being nice to each other would not be comfortable? As Maybin (2006, p. 24) puts it:

Meaning-making emerges as an on-going dialogic process at a number of different, interrelated levels: dialogues within utterances and between utterances, dialogues between voices cutting across utterance boundaries and dialogues with other voices from the past.

For this reason, concepts such as 'speaker' (sending a message) and 'listener' (receiver of the message) are inappropriate metaphors as they do not do justice to the intersubjective tapestry the children are weaving, with meanings constructed that are dynamic and often ambiguous (Maybin 2006, p. 24).

Cracks in Concepts

In this classroom enquiry what were the children teaching (each other) and what were they learning (from each other)? The children were problematising through respectful, but courageous, cognitive challenge what it means to be a stranger. The 'final' product is untraceable in terms of linear progression as everyone's ideas functioned as building blocks with some connections more lateral than others. As a dynamic discursive system a philosophical enquiry is 'non-linear' and 'self-organising' (Kennedy and Kennedy 2011, p. 269) and, although on one level progress is made through logical thinking moves, at another level it is what Deleuze and Guattari (in Dahlberg 2003, p. 280) call the 'rhizome': a non-hierarchical construction of knowledge that has no roots or trunk, and is always *in between*. What is the teacher learning from listening to the children and the way in which they are listening to each other? What in particular is he learning from this encounter, and is it 'worthwhile'? Whose ideal is the utopia of a peaceful world—the assumed goal of many citizenship programmes, interventions and resources (created by adults)? Lastly, what in turn can we learn from this teacher and the democratic space he created in class?

This documentary is often shown in pre-service or in-service teacher education courses in P4C. Despite an audience sympathetic to the P4C ethos and generally holding young children in high regard as thinkers, the documentary invariably prompts adult laughter. A child's dislodging of the idea that peace is desirable and the probing thinking out loud does not seem to touch teachers' belief that peace is a goal towards which we should naturally strive. What they say (the content) is not heard—epistemic equality is absent. One form of disciplinary power, according to Foucault, is 'normalisation': schools define what is normal and desirable, and in this case norms are applied to how teachers interpret children's interpretations of reality. Such dominant discourses exclude other ways of thinking and of understanding the world (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, p. 17).

The children's *dialogue* (not individual children) brings something authentically new and interesting into the world, but it remains hidden because of the unusual educational practice (oral), the teacher's different role and the collaborative nature of the philosophical work which shifts subjectivities. Here the boundaries between the thoughts and the thinkers who were thinking the thoughts are blurred. My analysis did not focus on how, for example, individual children's language use might reveal their 'stage of development', but I was guided by interactive and social conceptions of learning (Maybin 2006, p. 22). What

is here educationally worthwhile is learning through collaborative talk. Their talk, Maybin (2006, p. 23) would argue, is dialogic, that is, the:

speakers' utterances are always simultaneously orientated, in terms of their structure and context, in two directions: backwards towards previous utterances, both within the current conversation and through memory in past conversations, and forwards, towards an audience (and possibly future audiences).

The children's experience of deconstructing and reconstructing the concept of a 'perfect world' is both on an individual *and* a collective level (Kennedy and Kennedy 2011, p. 269)—a kind of 'social thinking' (Maybin 2006, p. 22). Through the activity of thinking together they have discovered 'cracks' in the concept. Kennedy and Kennedy (2011, p. 272) propose that ethical concepts (here: 'perfect world') are shaped by normative beliefs. They argue:

This crack in the concept is where contradiction is encountered, problematisation begins, and where its propositional content breaks open into a question, or series of questions. The concept of friendship, for example, cracks open on the normative question of whether I am or could or should be a friend of all humankind, or whether there is such a thing as friendship across species. It could be argued that this crack, and the questions that emerge from it, is the focal point for our historical potential as a species, for it is here that cognitive, and by implication psychological, social and political reconstruction become possible, and the actual encounters the utopian.

My reading of the transcript reveals not only a cracking of the concept 'perfect world', but at the very same time exposes the earlier proposed and oft-used triadic relationship between teacher, learner and content as individualistic, thereby inadequate for understanding how learning takes place in the relationship *between* people when they think collaboratively. Collaborative thinking between teacher and children is a social, rational, affective and imaginative practice. Its identity is explicitly and implicitly shaped by teacher's ideas, and therefore informs what is 'worthwhile' in class. The social epistemic practice of children thinking together also exposes the cracks in the concepts of 'teacher', 'learner' and 'content'. Concepts harbour unexamined assumptions and prejudices—not always at a conscious level (Kennedy and Kennedy 2011, p. 272). Often unexamined beliefs, one's own school experiences and deep seated emotions, connected with freedom, control, power and social status, influence how we conceptualise education, what is worthwhile and who is worth listening to from an epistemic perspective.

This in turn is connected to teachers' self-identity as an epistemic authority. When teachers smile knowingly to one another or laugh as children express novel ways of understanding the world, this endearment allows them to avoid any re-examination of their own beliefs and assumptions. Sentimentality and endearment seems to presuppose vulnerability *and* inequality, the kind we feel when watching a lioness licking her cubs, but only when they are safely behind bars or on television (Haynes and Murris 2012). This laughter is an example of adult distancing from child. Children's speculations are seen as unusual, sweet, perhaps foolish, but harmless. At the same time, in contradictory fashion, child is also often seen as wild, uncontrollable and possibly dangerous. Perhaps adults are afraid to hear what children are saying as worthwhile? John (2003, p. 23) speculates:

...we are still largely deaf to what they have to say and teach us about the world as they see and experience it. We are deafened by dissonance. Is this inability to listen related to a reluctance to relinquish our view of what children are and, in doing so, to relinquish our own power?

When room is made for children to think collaboratively (like the children in the documentary), they are educators, but not in an individualistic sense.

Burman argues that attempts to conceive of children as naive or sentimental serves to prevent social unrest and ‘are rooted in an attempt to deny children’s agency (notwithstanding the claims of child-centredness)’ (Burman 2008a, p. 293). To accept children as knowledge bearers would, for adults, have far reaching implications for educational theory and practice. Children would need to be included in decisions about what is worthwhile in school: curriculum content, choice of pedagogy, design of the school and playground, policies and staff recruitment. This would amount to real participation, not mere consultation (Haynes 2009, p. 35). The implications of having to relinquish adult power is one reason why adults neutralise the epistemic value of what they hear when child speaks. Teachers on the whole like to be in control of how educational texts are interpreted. But there are also deep seated *epistemic* reasons for teachers’ assessment of the worthwhileness of children’s comments.

Obstacles for Hearing Child’s Voice

The popular idea that childhood is a social construction smoothes over the cracks opened up by a philosophical enquiry into the concept ‘childhood’. Unlike Aries’ famous thesis that childhood was absent in certain historical periods, Archard urges for a distinction between ‘concept’ and ‘conception’: the latter being an expression of ‘a specification of attributes’ we bring to the difference between child and adult (Archard 2004, pp. 27, 28). A social constructionist approach underestimates the *differences* between adult’s and child’s embodied way of being in the world (e.g. their playfulness and use of fantasy and imagination). Ironically, in an attempt to do justice to differences, social constructionists downplay the importance of lived embodied experiences in the construction of knowledge by polarising and simplifying the complex relationship between the biological and the social.

David Kennedy poses the question of what the similarities and differences are in the way children know the world: ‘if children’s knowledge is not *just* a weaker, or sketchier, or more rudimentary version of adults’—then what can they tell us? This is where the notion of child as a voice from the margins, hitherto excluded from adult discourse, and therefore from adult self-understanding, comes in’ (Kennedy 2000, p. 515). Walter Kohan puts it even stronger when he points at the danger of arguing that children think like adults: ‘on the contrary, that would be yet another way of silencing them’ (Kohan 1998, p. 7). The concepts ‘adult’ and ‘child’ are in a polar conceptual relation; each only has meaning, because the other exists. Adult subjectivity is constructed in contrast to what it is not. Hence, whatever we claim about child influences how we understand adult and vice versa (Kennedy 2000, pp. 515–516, 521). How we imagine children, as for example deficient in reason, emotion control, responsibility and maturity, has consequences for how we imagine ourselves. Matthews warns against the epistemological implications of an unreflective adoption of scientific theories of childhood (Matthews 1994, p. 26). The normativity of scientific theories that postulate children’s ‘progression’ through developmental stages has been compared with the development of the species (Matthews 1994) and the development of nations and countries (Burman 2008b).

The highly influential paradigm of developmental psychology is still pervasive in educational practice, despite decades of serious academic critique and challenge (see e.g. Burman 2008a; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Donaldson 1978; Kohan 2002; Matthews 1994; Walkerdine 1984). The immoral implications of developmentality are that they tend to

marginalise children and limit what is possible in education. Matthews calls developmental theories ‘condescending’, as they encourage adults to ‘distance themselves from children—both from the children around us and from our own childhood selves’ (Matthews 1994, p. 66). As Haynes (2009, p. 30) puts it, developmental theories are based:

...on detached observation rather than engaging with children and listening to their ideas, [and] position children as the objects of teaching and research, rather than as subjects with their own stories, interests and views. They tend to position adults as those who always know better what children think or need.

Developmental theories essentialise and generalise about children and their capabilities. They assume that cognitive development is a linear biological (natural) progression of stages of the abstract disembodied psychological subject, and difference is recognised only in terms of deviations in relative progress on this linear scale. Children are theorised and treated as ‘becomings’, not ‘beings’, as ‘persons in the making’, not ‘persons’ (John 2003, p. 42). Whether attached to persons or nations in the making, progress to ‘intellectual maturity’ or ‘civilisation’ is an abstraction of the individual from its social context, its class, its gender, its culture—the social is reduced to the individual (Burman 2008a, p. 292). What developmental theories exclude is what individual persons as-a-matter-of-fact are capable of and presuppose that the concept of ‘experience’ is unproblematic and has no cracks—as a quantifiable unit that you can have more or less of (Murriss 2000). In their ‘simple directness’, Matthews argues, children can ‘...often bring us adults back to basics. Any developmental theory that rules out, on purely theoretical grounds, even the possibility that we adults may occasionally have something to learn, morally, from a child is, for that reason, defective; it is also morally offensive’ (Matthews 1994, p. 67).

In an historical approach to the iconography of childhood in adult representation, Kennedy (2000, p. 530) summarises the relationship between adult and child as follows:

The emancipated middle-class adult of a Europe ‘come of age’ constructed his self-understanding on a strong sense of individuality, subjective privacy, and the suppression of affect, none of which are particularly salient aspects of the developmental stage of childhood. But this very psychological separation carried its antithesis within it, and at the height of ‘enlightenment’, the adult began turning back to the child. Through dialogue with the child’s form of life, he received the ‘word’ of the child as a new message about himself. The outcome of this fusion of horizons is both a new ability to really pay attention to children as children and as individual human beings, and—necessarily—a new self-understanding of what an adult is.

Kennedy draws our attention to the idea that child is a dimension of human experience and is relational. How do we begin to break down this distancing from children’s ideas in educational practice, and support this process of reintegration of children into the psychological world of adults? The obstacles seem insurmountable, because of the psychological cost of having to give up a particular kind of self-identity, and the deep-rooted naturalised conceptions in educational practice of knowledge, as much as child. And the obstacle is even greater when child is also black.

Black Child

Adult’s distancing from child is even more visible in educational encounters between white adults and black children (a double distancing in fact), with black child constructed as

‘disadvantaged’. The western universal construction of childhood as innocent, helpless and unknowing has been incorporated into aid and development policies. Burman argues that these imperialist representations ‘castigate poor people for their poverty’ and ‘lapse into racist assumptions about child neglect and penalise the children of the poor rather than promote their welfare’ (Burman 2008a, p. 293). Transformation of the other (black ‘disadvantaged’ child) is conceived in terms of access to the same socio-economic goods as white people—through equal educational opportunities. In South Africa this limiting western transformation goal has been internalised and has become part of the policies at universities that train teachers. Burman argues that developmental psychology reproduces western values and models within post-colonial societies and therefore functions as a tool of cultural imperialism (Burman 2008a, p. 294). She observes that the priority of schooling for black child in such countries might be inappropriately imposed. Without sentimentalising poverty or condoning child labour, Burman (2008a, pp. 293, 294) argues that:

Western practice frequently ignore[s] the extent to which families (and children) are dependent on the incomes children generate, and would therefore need to be compensated in order to let their children attend school. Further, the schooling which is on offer is often of varying quality, and may take the form of enforced assimilation to a colonial language. The schooling experience may therefore be one which fails rather than enables children. The Western priority accorded to education may be misplaced in the sense that this is unlikely to be organised around principles of personal development or enlightenment.

I will illustrate with an example from my own practice as teacher educator how normative oppressive discourses about black child are internalised in certain school practices. I was supervising student teachers in a government⁹ suburban school in Johannesburg (South Africa). The teachers in this primary school are mainly white or Indian. This particular student teacher was also white. All the children are black African with a small number of Indians. Some live in this prosperous, white area of Johannesburg with members of their family employed as domestic workers and gardeners. Their homes are outbuildings in people’s gardens and accommodation is basic (often with one or two rooms for an entire family) and income is very low. This socio-economic arrangement between white middle-class people and their black workers is a colonial legacy, and its current existence justified among whites as a charitable act as it offers otherwise homeless people a (despite small) roof of their head, food to eat and most importantly access to the school in their neighbourhood—the assumption being that these schools offer something superior to, for example, township schools (which as a matter of fact might or might not be the case). Other children arrive daily in ‘taxis’¹⁰ from a township and a neighbouring residential suburb, home to many refugees¹¹ from countries such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The school’s medium of instruction is English—for many children, their second, third or even fourth language. I was told that ‘many children’ have HIV/AIDS, but without the legal requirement to disclose this information to teachers, this must have been a guess.

⁹ The striking difference between government and independent schools in SA is an apartheid legacy. In many ways independent schools in SA are similar to state schools in, for example, the UK, but there are also some important differences. Unfortunately there is no space to explore this further in this paper.

¹⁰ Minibus share taxis in South Africa are cheap, private minibuses used almost exclusively by black people.

¹¹ As many refugees are illegal in SA, it is impossible to quantify numbers.

Uprooted from their cultural, ethnic and linguistic context these black children are stripped of their humanity. In this particular school, they are regularly submitted to implicit and explicit verbal and physical abuse; Even with the very young, corporal punishment is routinely administered despite being illegal since 1996.¹² Text books and other classroom resources have little connection with their own contexts, and pedagogies are authoritarian and teacher centered.

During one of my scheduled visits, the supervising teacher explained to me why one of my students could not control her class. I had raised the issue with her that shouting over children's voices in order to return a sense of order to the classroom was a problematic strategy from a pedagogical as well as moral point of view. In our discussion I focused on my student, but as this first year student had been merely imitating her supervising teacher, I used the space to also raise these issues with the teacher, hoping for an open exploration about the link between pedagogy and discipline. Later, the supervising teacher and I met again informally on the '*stoep*' outside (the student was not there) where six other members of staff were having their lunch. She started the conversation by saying that the student had much to learn about discipline, because of the 'nature' of these children. Deliberately ignoring her comment, I repeated my views about the intricate link between the choice of a traditional teacher-centered pedagogy, boredom and disaffection, and suggested how the student could have taught the lesson differently. The supervising white teacher responded by saying that (my fieldnotes):

These kids are not like us. They are sneaky and underhand. They steal and lie about it. It's a cultural thing. They don't stop talking and are lazy. They are naughty...I'm so exhausted at the end of the day...There are some good ones of course.

In culturally and racially distancing herself from these children my pedagogical suggestions fell on deaf ears. On the one hand, she was trying to make me complicit through the use of the word 'us' (I am also white, middle-class and live in the same neighbourhood) as 'they' are not like 'us'. On the other hand, identity prejudice (see footnote 4) made it possible for her not to take my testimony seriously, because as a foreigner I lack her kind of knowledge and experience and therefore simply did not *know* what I was talking about. The other white and Indian teachers strongly affirmed and confirmed what she was saying, offering their own examples and anecdotes. These children got what 'they' deserved: 'they' could not be trusted. When 'they' speak they are neither moral authorities, nor epistemic authorities. They are *children*, and moreover they are *black*, therefore know little, and the knowledge they do have does not count as it is irrelevant to the official curriculum. Structurally, what the learners in this school think and know makes no difference to the lessons. Their talk is mere disruption, not worth listening to. 'They' are lazy, cunning, underhand thieves who 'for their own good' are force fed with information.

Such stereotypes and conceptions of childhood essentialise children and influence how 'we' listen to 'them', and explain why no credibility is given to these young speakers. Hearers' prejudices cause adults to miss out on pieces of knowledge offered by the child, but not heard by the adult.

Black Child's Double Disadvantage

Fricker would argue that 'epistemic injustice' is done to these children. Her two kinds of epistemic injustice illuminate how black child is doubly disadvantaged by injustice in this

¹² For an exploration of the complexity of the seemingly still prevalent practice of corporal punishment in SA schools, see: Murriss (2012).

case-study. First, child is wronged in her capacity as a ‘giver’ of knowledge. In particular the prejudice that black child is lazy, unreliable and untrustworthy influences decisions by teachers to accept that what s/he is saying is true or not, and therefore constitutes knowledge or not: *epistemic trust* is absent. A teacher’s perception of a child as trustworthy provides a justification for accepting what s/he says (Fricker 2007, p. 77). Secondly, in the case of hermeneutical injustice, black children will find themselves having some social experiences ‘through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible’ (Fricker 2007, p. 148). They will increasingly lose confidence in their own ability to interpret their experiences. In both cases child is not heard and/or silenced.

Epistemic injustice is the case with all children (e.g. developmentality). Child is epistemically incomplete: the child as the native, the irrational other, the magical thinker (Kennedy 1996). Conceptions of childhood and implicit and naturalised discourses about child inform how adults experience and interpret their educational encounters with children (the empirical bodies of a certain age in their classrooms). But when child is black (and also female) the injustice done to her could be even greater. Already in 1995, Judith Ennew pointed out how the conception of childhood in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* is western. Globalised first through colonialism and international aid agencies, child is that of a western indoor child: ‘a domestic child, a child who lives inside—inside society, inside a family, inside a private dwelling’ (John 2003, p. 40).

John (2003, p. 42) argues that the ethnocentric Convention is more about child as vulnerable dependant than child as citizen, and insists that children’s rights should be about children’s entitlement ‘to be treated as people regardless of age, circumstance or context’ (John 2003, p. 41). In contrast to the western child, African childhood is not necessarily a stage of incompetence: children are capable and responsible members of a community in which they have to contribute to the subsistence of their families and wider communities (Twum-Danso 2005, p. 12). Children have responsibilities, including participation in warfare as child soldiers (instruments of adult violence), but as Twum-Danso argues, they are also marginalised as individuals without participation rights and invisible in peace-building and reconstruction (Twum-Danso 2005, p. 25).

A Way Forward

Through a problematisation of what counts as ‘worthwhile’ knowledge, I have drawn the attention to Fricker’s notion of epistemic injustice, and, grounded in two examples from practice, I analysed how children are regarded as less than full epistemic subjects by teachers in the UK and SA. The main obstacles for hearing child’s voice were identified as: child as conceptualised by the human rights discourse, developmental psychology, race and gender.

Epistemic justice involves resisting essentialising and normalising discourses about child and hearing child’s unique voice, which manifests itself in the relationship with others. My first example of a televised unusual pedagogical practice was used to show how the phrase ‘child as educator’ can make sense if for the analysis of the episode a different conception of education is used, that is, a move away from individualised subjectivity. The theory and practice of P4C challenges the hidden discrimination of epistemic injustice by making room for children as thinkers, and demands children to be taken seriously as knowers. However, P4C is not part and parcel of UK mainstream education and it

profoundly challenges the epistemological prejudices and developmentality of the UK National Curriculum (Haynes and Murris 2012).

I have argued how pedagogies and what counts as knowledge are shaped by conceptions of child and childhood. As more childlike (not childish) adults, new kinds of relationships can be forged by adults with their own childhood selves as well as with children. Elsewhere in this Special Issue, Walter Kohan refers to child educating as not this (physical) child in the world, but also the child I (adult) still am. When thinking *with* children, adults need to 'give' their mind to what there is to think about, which is only possible when adults are 'open-minded', have 'epistemic modesty', 'epistemic trust' and are committed to 'epistemic equality'. This ethico-political commitment implies being open as a teacher to what I have not heard before and resisting the urge to translate of what I hear into what is familiar. This transformation is particularly urgent for more just educational encounters with black child.

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