

Affirming Epistemic Equality in Pedagogical Relationships: Outlining Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This paper sketches the outlines of a pedagogy for epistemic justice that aims to embody epistemic equality axiomatically, rather than pursuing it as an aim. To do so, the paper draws from a post-critical lens and engages with the perspectives of Rancière, Roth, and Heidegger.

Keywords: epistemic justice; equality; dwelling; poetry; pedagogy.

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Introduction

The *Manifesto for Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) states a «belief in the possibility of transformation, as found in critical theory and pedagogy, but with an affirmative attitude.» (p. 15) When conceiving of an education oriented towards social justice we cannot be satisfied with simply affirming social justice as a principle or value; affirmative practices that are conducive to social justice must follow. In this paper, I reflect on the question of what such practices could look like in a post-critical lens and ask, in particular, what it would mean to embody social justice within pedagogical relationships.

More traditionally “critical” perspectives – and the policy initiatives emerging from them – are often focused on the role of education in *remediating* existing social injustices. To remediate, following the online Cambridge Dictionary, means «to correct something that is wrong or damaged, or to improve a bad situation». The educational intervention, following such an approach, happens after the fact, i.e., after the injustice has

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occurred. In terms of practice, critical approaches are often focused on highlighting injustices and the systemic dynamics perpetuating them, including in formal education settings, and bringing them into people's awareness. Understanding systemic injustice and oppression, in such a view, can itself be considered an emancipatory practice (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 25). Other practices of remediation include additional support or special allowances for certain groups of students that are disadvantages within a specific system – such as for example within initiatives such as “No Child Left Behind” in the US (Feldman & Tyson, 2014) – with the aim of achieving equal educational outcomes for all, or at least enable equal access to quality schooling.

This paper's discussion builds on the following well-described problem: if we understand the role of education in relation to social justice primarily in terms of remediation or repair, we accept social inequality as a fundamental fact, as a given. The fact that it is built on an assumption of inequality, rather than equality, makes the idea of remediation in social justice education potentially problematic. The same problem applies to the pedagogical relationship underpinning the above-described approaches to social justice education grounded in a critical perspective: the critical pedagogue, functioning as the “emancipator”, assumes an inherently superior position when relating to their students, i.e., “the oppressed”. The pedagogue is believed to know the systems of oppression and understand the tools for liberation. «It becomes the task of the critical educator to make visible what is hidden for those who are “object” of the emancipatory endeavours of the critical educator» (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 26). In such an understanding of the pedagogical relationship, inequality is assumed; it is the basic structure defining the relationship and the aims of education. Yet, to assume inequality means to create and perpetuate inequality as it renders emancipation into something that is done to “the oppressed” by “the emancipator”.

In response to this problem, the questions I want to engage with in this paper is: how might a post-critical lens help us to reconceive the role of education in relation to social justice from *remediating injustice* to *affirming and embodying equality* at the heart of the pedagogical relationship?

In keeping with the theme of the symposium titled *Affirming social justice in education? Post-critical vistas* at the *Scuola Democratica* Conference in Cagliari in 2024, from which this paper emerged, the discussion engages with a post-critical perspective. The focus is on exploring the motive of affirmation as a basic feature of a pedagogy that embodies justice instead of seeking to remediate existing injustices. Therein, the ensuing exploration takes inspiration also from Rancière's (1991) argument that «equality, in

general, is not an end to be attained. It is a point of departure, a presupposition to be verified by sequences of specific acts» (cited from Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p. 9). I contend that to define such “specific acts”, as pointed out also by McCreary (2021), rather than defining a new set of ‘best practices’ or «a discursive form to be emulated» (p. 755), we must envision what a deeper embodiment of equality at the heart of the pedagogical relationship might look like. The thoughts articulated in this paper should be read as an exploration of such a perspective, rather than a proposition or advocacy of specific teaching approaches. The aim is to see also whether it is possible to affirm equality as an axiom without the need to prescribe well-defined forms of expression and pedagogical procedures that would undergird such equality (as that would potentially reintroduce the original problem in which one has to be enabled by “the emancipator” to perform in specific ways within a given system which is understood by “the emancipator” but not by the “to be emancipated”). To explore what this might look like, I will draw from Rancière’s notion of the ignorant schoolmaster, Roth’s thinking surrounding a science education that aims to “root” rather than “uproot”, and Heidegger’s notion of the “poetic dwelling”, which he uses to describe a particular language oriented towards authenticity and responsiveness in our relationships with others (Nardo, 2025).

As I explore the idea of a social justice pedagogy that fundamentally affirms equality, I focus on epistemic injustice. First coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), the term “epistemic injustice” refers to both the problem of an individual failing to receive equal recognition as a «knower» (testimonial injustice) and the lack of «collective interpretative resources» (p. 1) to make sense of certain social experiences (hermeneutic injustice). Testimonial injustice concerns situations when a person receives less credibility because of, for example, underlying sexist or racist biases. An example might be a police officer not believing someone, or believing someone less because they are a person of colour. Hermeneutic injustice often presents, for example, in relation to instances of sexual harassment in a culture where such a concept is lacking. Epistemic injustice is a form of discrimination from which many «secondary wrongs» (Fricker 2007), such as marginalisation, follow. It is therefore a matter of concern for an education oriented towards social justice.

Remediating Epistemic Injustice

The implications of epistemic injustice in formal education contexts have been discussed widely, in both theory and policy discourses. The UNESCO’s report *Reimagining our Futures Together* (2021), for example, considers

different manifestations of epistemic injustice in relation to education at length. One focus of the report is higher education, where, as it is stated, we continue to observe «distinctive ways of organizing, validating» that «legitimiz[e] certain forms of knowledge production» (p. 76). Unequal access and recognition, the report details, span across practices of knowledge distribution via the scholarly publishing industry, which favours certain languages and culturally non-neutral forms of expression, as well as the requirements of the scientific method itself. Concepts such as reliability and validity, the report stresses, are not culturally neutral, privileging some scholarly traditions over others. Moreover, «indigenous knowledges and modes of knowledge generation and sharing have generally been considered an object, rather than a form, of research» (p. 76) .

UNESCO's report *Reimagining our Futures Together* (2021) adopts a remediative approach to epistemic injustice in education, evoking primarily the notion of “repair”. It urges that «a new social contract for education – inspired by principles of social, epistemic, economic and environmental justice» (p. 119) must be created. Such a social contract, the report continues, should «*repair* injustices while transforming the future» (p. 3, my emphasis). Education ought to «prioritize deliberate, thoughtful engagement with knowledge [which] helps to build epistemic, cognitive and *reparative* justice» (p. 65, my emphasis). Practically this means, according to the report, that higher education curricula should focus more on pluralising different knowledges and forms of knowing. This can be achieved, for example, by opposing knowledge hegemonies and increasing young people's literacy on different levels (scientific, ethical, critical), or by educating teachers to foster engagement with diverse bodies of knowledge. In terms of pedagogy, the UNESCO report states further that «pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity [...] based on shared principles of non-discrimination, respect for diversity, and reparative justice» (p. 58) are required, centred on «participatory, collaborative, problem-posing, and interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and intercultural learning» (p. 58).

While there is nothing categorically objectionable with UNESCO wanting to repair past and perpetually continuing epistemic injustices, it is important to note the difference between its proposed approach, and practices that foreground the encounter of different forms of knowledge production and presentation under the assumption of equality, in the sense of Rancière. Seeking to *repair* injustice, following a Rancièrian perspective, means to start with inequality rather than equality. Interestingly, as the UNESCO report goes into further specifics about the pedagogical relationship, a more Rancièrian approach emerges: it is stated, for example, that students and teachers should understand themselves and each other as «knowledge-

seekers» (p. 59). Therein, the asymmetry underpinning the idea of the pedagogical relationship consisting of a “repairer” and a “victim of social injustice” is replaced, at least theoretically, with a more equal quest for understanding in a world shared by both teacher and learner. However, when it comes to the question of how that symmetry might be embodied more deeply and consistently in practice, the report does not offer a lot beyond the affirmation of the value of epistemic diversity and pluralism.

Similarly, when it comes to the problem of epistemic injustice, recent discussion in the philosophy of education has focused on a remediative approach, centred around specific mitigative measures in the classroom, curriculum reform with view to cultivate epistemic virtue, and awareness of existing forms of epistemic injustice. Dunne (2022), for example, articulates a need for educators to be aware of their «epistemic duty of care» (Dunne, 2022, p. 285), which includes understanding the issue and developing concrete teaching approaches that mitigate both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Others within the field have focused the structural problems within educational governance and institutions that perpetuate epistemic injustice (Nikolaidis, 2023), or on clarifying what forms of epistemic virtue we should be aiming to cultivate in educational contexts to remediate testimonial injustice (Kotzee & Sato, 2023).

There must not necessarily be a categorical division between remediating approaches focused on the repair of epistemic injustices and what I have described as a “Rancièrian approach”; in practice, they are not mutually exclusive and might complement each other. Yet, philosophically, there is a difference. Here, I am interested in better understanding that difference and reflect on its implications for pedagogy: how might epistemic *equality* be affirmed and embodied within the pedagogical relationship itself? This means, for example, rather than discussing the manifold ways in which education perpetrates epistemic injustice, or constructing a view of education as a means to remediate or mitigate epistemic injustice, I seek to consider what an alternative pedagogy might look like in which equality is an axiom rather than the aim. While the cultivation of specific epistemic virtues and critical awareness doubtlessly plays a role within such a pedagogy, the focus here lies on exploring the possibilities of affirming and embodying epistemic equality at a deeper level. Such a pedagogy is oriented towards equal recognition within the pedagogical relationship in which all participants are equally perceived as “knowers”; it also has to do with presence and valuing authenticity in expression.

Sketching the Outlines of a Pedagogy of “Dwelling”

To draw the outlines of such a pedagogy, I turn to the notion of “dwelling”, with focus on how it was developed by Roth (2018) in relation to how we learn, and science education in particular (Nardo, 2025). The originally Heideggerian concept describes a particular way of being by building, entailing both preserving *and* constructing, that, I believe, may help us to think about what it could mean to ground pedagogical interactions oriented towards epistemic justice in affirmation rather than critique and deconstruction.

Building that contributes to “dwelling”, according to Heidegger, rather than imposing predefined aims and ideals to attain specific forms and outcomes, is responsive to what is present. It means to both preserve and actively construct in relation to what and who is encountered. Rather than a construction as deconstruction, it could be described as a “building on” what is. “Dwelling” is also inherently social, embedded in a world that is always already there, inhabited by other “dwellers”.

With its emphasis on preservation (rather than merely critique and deconstruction), “dwelling” is naturally aligned, I believe, with a post-critical rather than traditionally critical perspective: it foregrounds the need to be truly present to what is and decide what is worth affirming and preserving within what is encountered, while at the same time emphasising that being means to contribute to the further construction of the world as we engage with it. Moreover, “dwelling” is oriented towards what Heidegger (1971) calls «letting dwell» (1971, p. 157) of the self and the other. “Dwelling” does not mean to fit into a certain mould through how one expresses oneself, encountering others through a certain lens or with a certain aim in mind (e.g., “emancipation”). Rather, it has to do with authentic expression and the desire to understand the other’s authentic expression. Neither of these can ever be complete; “dwelling” is necessarily transcendent, constantly moving beyond itself towards what it is not (yet).

Our “dwelling” in the world is also inherently precarious. Various tendencies to objectify ourselves and the other, and fit them and ourselves into existing categories encroach on our presence in the world and our reception of other’s contributions and expressions. To affirm epistemic equality in our encounters with others require constant effort. Forms of epistemic injustice clearly play a role here: the idea of epistemic injustice highlights the fact that prejudice and the inherently exclusionary nature of the available interpretative resources hamper openness and understanding of the world and the people we encounter. “Dwelling” foregrounds the need for openness to the other’s distinct otherness, and for their unique contribution.

To cultivate “dwelling” means to be attuned to the other as a being that constantly brings itself forth outside of existing categories and stereotypes. Doing this is “hard work”; it requires a constant re-examination of established habits of listening and speaking that move us away from authentic encounters. It also requires the fundamental recognition that the other’s and the self’s authentic “presencing” are «simply worth caring for» (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 17).

What would it mean to encounter our students this way? As educators it would mean, first and foremost, to receive their distinct epistemic perspectives with interest, with a desire to preserve and further construct in collaboration with them, rather than the desire to shatter those perspectives or replace them with “what is correct”. When we view the educator not a superior knower, but a dweller alongside other dwellers, we are operating under the assumption of equality.

Roth (2018) considers in detail how this sort of pedagogical interaction might occur in science education, where we expect to be little room for the affirmation of epistemic equality. What do perspectives matter in the face of scientific “facts” and “truths”? According to Roth, “misconceptions”, gaps in understanding, and even the fantastic explanations of how the world works often held by children are inherently valuable; they are inherently worth engaging with and to be preserved. While they do not align with mainstream science, they form an essential part of our ability to wonder at the world and feel at home in it. A sense of belonging and wonder, in turn, motivates us to care for the world and to continue to tend to it. Being at home in the world, following Roth, precedes our ability to build in a way that is conducive to “dwelling”. Non- or even unscientific explanations of the world are what initially root us to our surroundings and enables us to “dwell” in it. In that, they are inherently worthy of being listened to and to be preserved in new forms, as they are being transformed educationally; they contribute to a sense of being at home in the world thus enabling us to participate in its further construction.

Following Roth, the detached perspectives of the Western science canon, impose certain ways of thinking that increase distance between school and the lived reality of students. Children’s ways of knowing and inhabiting the world are often «discredited» (p. 37). “Non-standard” ways of knowing and knowledge production are privileged that exclude particular groups. In contrast, an education oriented towards dwelling implies a different valuation of a child’s original relation with their surroundings. It supports “rooting” by preserving subjective viewpoints, while, simultaneously «keeping [them] in transformed and transforming ways, to associate to [them] the new relations that correspond more closely to science» (Roth,

2018, p. 51). Roth, we gather, is not proposing to simply accept any and every perspective at face value and preserving it unchanged. Rather, his vision has to do with the creation of connections between student's life experiences and the scientific perspective which, as they are encountered and engaged with, tie on to and expand the student's "rooting" in the world. It also has to do with a fundamental rethinking of the pedagogical relationship, and the abandoning the idea of the teacher as someone who's task it is to replace false ideas with correct ones.

As part of a science education that is oriented towards "dwelling", footed on epistemic equality, Roth (2018) emphasises, the teacher must also be aware and teach their students how a scientific mindset, «as significant and fascinating it may be, also constitutes a narrowing of the perspectives that comes from the objectifying rationalist and rationalizing gaze» (p. 52).

There are parallels between Roth's vision of a science education that is conducive to "dwelling" and Rancière's (1991) reflections on the ignorant schoolmaster, where an idea of emancipated learning outside of the structure of "ignorant minds" having things explained to them by "knowing minds" by is explored. In what Rancière calls the "explication model" of teaching, the teacher decides when the act of learning begins. «He decrees the absolute beginning» (p. 6) of learning, implying that what the student knows and has learned before this moment has no relevance or connection to what is supposed to be learned now. The assumption is that «until he [the teacher, A.N.] came along the child has been groping blindly [...] now he will learn» (p. 7). The belief underlying such an assumption, Rancière argues, is that there are two intelligences. The first «registers perceptions by chance, retrains them, interprets and repeats them empirically, within the closed circle of habit and need» (p. 7). This intelligence, assigned to «the child and the common man» (p. 7) is framed as epistemically inferior. Perspectives produced by this intelligence are taken less seriously; they have less value. The second intelligence, perceived and enacted as superior, «knows things by reason, proceeds by method» (p. 7).

The assumed inequality of the intelligences in the pedagogical relationship centred around "explanation" justifies the imposition of one viewpoint over the other. It ignores the fact that the child, too, is on a quest to understand the world and has meaningfully done so in many ways, as discussed also by Roth (2018). As a sidenote, the same principle applies on a socio-cultural level: indigenous and other perspectives that do not conform to the Western ideal of the scientific method are viewed as inferior. This ignores the ways these perspectives have enabled highly functional and potentially much more desirable forms of human-world interaction. The result within the pedagogical relationship, so Rancière's argument, is the dis-

emancipation of the learner, who, rather than applying their own reason, is now increasingly occupied with demonstrating “understanding” of what they have been explained by the teacher.

What the truly emancipating teacher teaches instead, according to Rancière, is that no other intelligence is needed, no superior “knower”, to understand the world. The aim, Rancière writes, is not to «load the memory, [but] form the intelligence» (p. 22). This entails a shift in the pedagogical relationship and the task of the teacher; it does not make the teacher obsolete: «A person – and a child in particular – may need a master when his own will is not strong enough to set him back on track and keep him there» (p. 13). The proposed education is not one directed by the student’s immediate interests or inclinations; the teacher and the subject matter are keeping the student engaged: «The book prevents escape. [...] We know too that the master won’t have the right to stand anywhere else – only at the door. The student must see everything for himself, compare and compare, and always respond to a three-part question: what do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?» (p. 23). The teacher interrogates, they «demand speech, that is to say, the manifestation of an intelligence that wasn’t aware of itself or that had given up» (p. 29). Following Rancière, this sort of relationship is best achieved by the ignorant schoolmaster, i.e., the teacher who «effectively knows no more than the student» (p. 30). It will otherwise be difficult for them to “verify” students’ utterances without being overly directive and tip into an explanatory approach. Yet, just like Roth (2018), Rancière emphasises that this does not imply a rejection of science, or the creation of «a science of the people as opposed to that of the scholar» (p. 31). What it does mean is that the teacher, instead of correcting and explaining, is focused on the redirection of students’ attention to the «materiality» (p. 32) of the subject matter. The material which functions both as a connector between teacher and student, who are interacting as «two minds at an equal distance» (p. 32), and a source of verification that the teacher can point to. To be able to direct and support processes of learning while also embodying epistemic equality at the basic level, the teacher, Rancière emphasises, must be emancipated themselves, meaning, they «must know [themselves] to be a voyager of the mind [...], an intellectual subject partaking in the power common to intellectual beings». This will entail «a minimum of instruction, drawn from the principles of reason, science, and the general interest» (p. 33).

A pedagogy that embodies epistemic justice is not about creating hierarchies between less and more developed explanations, approaches and ways of thinking: «It is not about opposing manual knowledge, the knowledge of the people, the intelligence of the tool and of the worker, to

the science of schools or the rhetoric of the elite» (p. 36). Rather, the aim is to recognise «that there are not two levels of intelligence, that any human work of art is the practice of the same intellectual potential» (p. 36). On this basis, as articulated by Roth (2018, p. 23), the student starts with what is familiar and then expands their knowing and understanding by engaging with ideas, concepts, theories, disciplines not yet known to them. This way, the student learns «about the interconnected nature of the environment in which he live[s], many aspects of which he had not known before» (p. 23).

Science, in this conception, is neither a heap of facts and procedures or a replacement of previously held “wrong” or “naïve” ideas; rather, it is a means to an end, allowing the student to further expand their belonging to the world they live in, by widening their understanding of it, and, thus, making them more able to act in it. Therein, Roth (2018) writes, «our knowledgeable ways of getting around the world constitute the ground for learning anything else (e.g., in schools)» (p. 37). In reality, «these forms of knowing our way around the world are often discredited» (p. 37). Rancière’s (1991) ignorant schoolmaster works against such tendencies by relating to the student as someone who «in fact already knows innumerable things» (cited from Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 5).

Poetry and Equality

A pedagogy affirming epistemic equality axiomatically, rather than pursuing it as an aim, has, at its core, to do with language; how we express ourselves and how we receive the expressions of other. «There is an equality of speaking beings that comes before the relation of inequality», Rancière (1991, cited from Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 5) writes. To be heard without prejudice is a form of justice; for one’s contributions to be received with curiosity and open-mindedness under the assumption of equality is a form of justice. Injustice is done when this assumed equality is disturbed by established habits of communication and expression that also inherently shape how we receive and interpret other people’s utterances, ideas and understandings – especially when interpretations and habits of interactions are biased or shaped by stereotypes (Dunne, 2022). We must, as stated in the post-critical manifesto, reestablish «our relation to our words, opening them to question» (Hodgson, Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2017, p. 17).

The key role of language and communication emerges from Rancière’s account of the ignorant schoolmaster who, instead of explaining, questions. In a pedagogical relationship that embodies epistemic equality, language and communication must be returned to the purpose of authentic expression and

understanding, rather than explanation. The teacher, Rancière (1991) writes, «is first of all a person who speaks to another, who tells stories and returns the authority of knowledge to the *poetic condition* of all spoken interaction» (cited from Bingham & Biesta 2010, 6; my emphasis). What might be meant by “poetic” here?

Poetry, according to Heidegger (1971), is an essential element of “dwelling” as a way of being. It is, he writes, «what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling» (p. 216). The notion of the poetic captures a way of «responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language» (p. 213). It is a way of using language with the aim of authentic expression and understanding. It is the attempt to take “authentic measure” of the world using words: «Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is» (p. 71). Poetic language allows us to exist outside of deeply entrenched and habituated manners of speaking, listening and thinking that distance us from the reality of our surroundings by abstraction. In that, poetry brings forth truth and beauty of a thing by attending to its authentic being (Magrini, 2012); striving for such expression is an act of preservation, of affirmation.

Poetry is also inherently «open and ready for the unforeseen» (Heidegger, 1971, p. 214). It does not begin with the need to standardise and objectify, but with the desire to truly approach and approximate reality through language, outside of established concepts and categories. It entails encountering one’s surroundings in the spirit of openness rather than with the aim of controlling, engineering and directing outcomes. It is a form of non-scientific «authentic measure-taking» in which we encounter something as it is, instead of «mere gauging with ready-made measuring rods for the making of maps» (p. 224). As such, poetry may open other ways of seeing and experiencing that are foreclosed in an exclusively “scientific” perspective; it may create connections between everyday experience and science, fostering what Roth calls “rooting”.

Summary

This paper’s objective was to explore what a pedagogy that affirms epistemic equality axiomatically might look like. In particular, the aim was to examine how we would have to rethink the basis structure of pedagogical relationships, rather than defining and defending specific practices. To that end, the perspectives of Rancière, Roth and Heidegger were brought into conversation.

What emerged are the outlines of a pedagogy oriented towards “poetic dwelling”. Such a pedagogy continuously re-examines how we use language and constantly strives to return our expressions and utterances to the aim of “letting dwell”, i.e., to capture authentically and bring into presence, rather than to categorise, control and standardise. It can be described as the continuous effort to reengage experientially with what surrounds us and to articulate our experience with the world using poetic rather than habitual forms of language – both on the side of the teacher and the student. It is a pedagogy that embodies equality at its core by affirming the value of students’ authentic expression and “dwelling” as «simply worth caring for» (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017, p. 17). The teacher’s action is oriented towards cultivating *and* transforming student’s epistemic positions, rather than replacing them.

It is worth reiterating that this is not an uncritical pedagogy, accepting whatever any individual says and thinks at face value. Much to the contrary, to continuously question long-held beliefs and assumptions, and to engage with subject matter with a willingness to transform previous understanding is essential to the sort of emancipation Rancière and Roth envision. Epistemic equality does not mean a rejection of facts and truths in favour of individual perspective; in the way it has been constructed in this paper, it simply means to underpin pedagogical relationships with the acknowledgement that a) different understandings of the world, formed through experience outside of school, build a meaningful foundation for learning processes in school and that they are worth both of preservation *and* transformation, rather than simply replacement, and b) that everyone has the capacity to develop their understanding of the world in interaction with the world without a superior “knower” emancipating them. Significantly, this does not mean that the pedagogical relationship itself is obsolete or that there are no discrepancies between teacher and student. The teacher remains a crucial and guiding figure in the process, in particular when it comes to how they speak, communicate, interrogate, and listen.

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