

Moderating epistemic injustice in teaching: A case study of the role of teaching assistants

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Abstract

Social injustice has many manifestations in South Africa. This chapter explores some of the ways in which it is manifest in schools and outlines possible ways in which the role of teaching assistants (TAs) may help to ameliorate this. The township and rural schools attended by many black children are often poorly resourced, overcrowded and teachers struggle to provide quality educational experiences. These issues are systemic in nature and thus unlikely to be either easily or quickly changed. However, while such conditions pertain, we need to question what can be done within the present system to help. Drawing on a case study from a peri-urban community in the Eastern Cape, we explain how it is possible to reduce the epistemic injustice that can result when children and teachers come from vastly differing communities and beliefs.

Working closely with the TAs, who live in the community and work in the school, we firstly supported the development of increased empathy by teachers for challenges facing parents and admiration for the resilience they showed in finding ways to deal with adversities. Secondly, the increased understanding of the community knowledge base led to changed attitudes and different behaviours. The teachers began to view the TAs as a valuable support that enabled them to adopt more inclusive practices. In effect, the TAs acted as an ‘epistemic bridge’ between the two communities, thus building the foundations for more socially just teaching.

Introduction

In a primary-school community comprised of teachers from urban, more affluent areas, and pupils from an impoverished peri-urban area, the role of the teaching assistants (TAs) who, like the pupils, live in the local community, is significant in the search for socially just educational provision. TAs manage to straddle the two communities. Like the teachers, they work (on a volunteer basis) in the school. Unlike the teachers, they live in the local community. Thus, they represent the intersection of the two communities, and have knowledge of and credibility in each of the contexts. Their position is therefore uniquely placed to build bridges between the two communities to which they belong, in order to develop culturally relevant teaching and learning.

There is much research to suggest the importance of teachers’ subject and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in improving the quality of teaching and learning (e.g., Swars et al., 2006; Loughran et al., 2012). It is clear, that effective teachers have deep subject knowledge, and highly developed pedagogic practice. However, authors, such as Taylor (2008) and Wilson (2007), have also noted the degree to which education is a contextualised practice, and emphasise the significance of connection to that context. Subject knowledge and PCK, therefore, do not exist in a vacuum but relate to and derive from the context in which they operate. In disenfranchised communities, similar to the one where this project was

located, it is common practice for teachers to live away from the community in which they teach. This means that they may not have intimate knowledge of the community in which they work, and may neither know, nor value, its knowledge and value systems. The contextualisation of subject knowledge and PCK is thus problematic for them. As a consequence, knowledge relationships can become unequal, leading to what Fals Borda and Rahman (1991) described as the epistemicide that results from Western “abyssal thinking” (de Sousa Santos, 2007). However, TAs, who are usually community members themselves, can provide a powerful and valuable communication channel between the teachers and the community in which they work, counterbalancing the epistemic injustice. In the project described in this chapter, this facilitative relationship was of particular significance. The work of the TAs became a vital enabler in the pursuit for culturally relevant teaching and learning. In the next section, we explore the ways in which epistemic justice is an essential component of social justice. Anderson (2012) suggested that the “cumulative effects of how our epistemic system elicits, evaluates, and connects countless individual communicative acts can be unjust, even if no injustice has been committed in any particular epistemic transaction” (pp. 164–165). Thus, through facilitating the co-construction of knowledge by the school and the community members, we hoped to ensure that “justice is done to each knower, and to groups of inquirers” (Anderson, 2012, p. 165).

Social justice: the good of each and the good of all

Social justice as a concept has a long, and often contested, heritage. It is mentioned in the works of Aristotle and Plato, and also found in the major texts of most of the world’s religions. In more contemporary times, it has often been appropriated by political and other movements. Arguably its use in manifestos, policy and promotion literature lends a sense of ‘good’ to the proposed actions, encouraging public support. Although generally understood as a ‘good’ thing, Atkins and Duckworth (2019) have argued that its meaning can be “slippery” (p. 5). For the purposes of this chapter, we focus especially on epistemic justice as a significant element of social justice.

As researchers and educators, our use of the term requires careful explication. As participatory action researchers, we are drawn to the ancient Greek understanding of justice as “virtue in action” (Hamed, 2014, p. 1163), seeing it as congruent with a view of justice as a way of life, rather than a political strategy. In epistemic contexts, action research has also been described in a similar way. Elliott (1991) suggested that action research is a moral science. Not only does the action researcher clarify what he called “the wise course of action” in the context in which s/he works, but also “deepens his [sic] understanding of the values they should realise”, adding that “values cannot be grasped in abstract terms. They are embodied in the concrete actions practitioners select to realise their values” (Elliott, 1988, p. 163). This is particularly important in the context of the school and community where we were working and resonant of Carr’s (1986) observation that practice is “historically located, culturally embedded” (p. 183). Adhering to this concept of the value-base of located and contextualised educational practice enables us to avoid privileging more formal (often Western) definitions of knowledge, and build new knowledge systems which relate to and serve the needs of communities, while simultaneously providing the means for these communities to become outward-looking and active. Further, in providing contextualised exemplification of curricular concepts, learning becomes more personalised, enabling deeper and more fruitful engagement and reflection with it.

In relation to education, concepts of epistemic justice challenge us to question and, where necessary, disrupt practices that do not contribute to human virtue or flourishing. Griffiths (2003) drew on the Aristotelian perspective that social justice is “a dynamic state of affairs that is good for the common interest, where that is taken to include both the good of each and the good of all” (p. 54). In the South African context, the “good of each and the good of all” can be challenging concepts. The legacy of apartheid still impacts on the lives of many, especially those in poor black communities. For the purposes of this chapter, we explore particularly the ways in which Sen’s (1999) concept of “capability deprivation” is one of the principal manifestations of the injustices experienced by a community group in a peri-urban location in the Eastern Cape, and examine one way in which it might be addressed. This type of deprivation, he claimed, is a more honest representation of poverty, than simple economic measures. Capability deprivation amplifies the problems of economic poverty, impacting on individuals by reducing the “the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value” (p. 87). This capability deprivation has become embedded in many communities, and transmitted and augmented over generations (e.g., Bird, 2007; Bird & Higgins, 2011; Duarte et al., 2018) to the extent that such communities have become marginalised. The high incidence of drug and alcohol abuse, and crime, including sexual assault, in township communities in South Africa can be seen as evidence of this marginalisation.

There is some evidence to suggest that education can help ameliorate the effects of this type of poverty (Tilak, 2002; Duarte et al., 2018), building what Sen (1997) described as human capital and human capability. However, Assari’s 2018 study in the USA found that white children are more likely to benefit from improved educational opportunities than black children. It would seem reasonable to assume that in South Africa, where structural and systemic inequalities are greater than in the USA, this race-related effect would be even greater. Added to this, access to appropriate high-quality education is not always available to many children from poor black South African communities, thus adding to the inequality. In schools in poorer areas, teachers struggle to offer quality, inclusive education due to overcrowding, language issues and the consequences of social injustice, such as traumatised and hungry children. Thus, the education system itself is a source of both epistemic and social injustice for these children and their communities. Since the situation will not change quickly, and systemic barriers are complex, we must find ways of addressing the issue in the here and now, such as providing support to classroom teachers to help them make their teaching more contextually and culturally relevant.

Conceptualising socially and epistemically just teaching in a challenged community

The concept of socially just education has been explored in a range of educational settings: for example, socially just pedagogic practices in teacher-education programmes (Whipp, 2013; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016); and social justice in the teaching of undergraduate student programmes (Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei, 2018). Issues identified include a need to critique the curriculum and traditional pedagogies, recognition of and responsiveness to the needs of learners, cultural recognition, and the acceptance of an ecology of knowledges. In other words, socially just teaching is, by default, epistemologically just.

Socially just teaching supports high-level engagement with schools and their communities, including the parents of learners. While there is significant research, nationally and internationally, to suggest that parental involvement in children’s learning is positively

related to achievement (Benner et al., 2016), many parents are perceived as hard-to-reach. There is also a tendency for teachers to judge parents from their own middle-class views and beliefs about parenting, and so blame them for not doing enough to support their child's education. Michael et al. (2012), in a South African study, suggested that this is possibly due to teachers not understanding the challenges faced by parents in the contexts of material and capability deprivation. In this study's school, there was a clear class divide between the teachers and the community in which they worked. As is the case in many schools serving deprived areas, the teachers live in middle-class suburban neighbourhoods, far removed both geographically and culturally from the conditions of the township in which the school is located. In effect, the school drew its teaching and learning populace from two very different worlds. These worlds have been built upon historical injustice and inequality, and the infrastructure of schooling perpetuates these inequities.

Despite the end of apartheid in South Africa, the emphasis on Eurocentric knowledge in the school curriculum, as well as the use of English or Afrikaans as the main Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) (Department of Basic Education, 2010), puts many learners at a disadvantage and may also be a barrier to parents in fully supporting their children's education. Most of the pupils and their parents do not speak English as their home language. The use of Eurocentric languages as LoLT makes a strong statement about the assumed epistemic inferiority of indigenous languages and knowledges. Gandolfo (2009) suggested that the use of European/English-language educational medium (ELEM) policies in education is instrumental in perpetuating hegemonic practices which privilege both Western languages and their corresponding forms of knowledge. In doing so, there is also a corresponding devaluation of indigenous languages and knowledges.

The school is thus a site in which we see the juxtaposition of two epistemic worlds – the Western-centric language and epistemology of the teachers, and the indigenous language and epistemology of the community. The school is the place where the differences between these two worlds are seen and experienced most acutely. It is also, however, the place where some meaningful connection between them may be possible. If we can find ways of connecting these worlds, of making their boundary membranes more permeable, we can perhaps change proximal worlds into intersectional worlds. This is potentially the site in which socially just teaching becomes possible.

However, Ramezanzadeh and Rezaei (2018) cautioned us that “there is still controversy regarding what justice and being just would mean in different educational milieus” (p. 137). Indeed, socially just teaching is a challenging term to define. Chubbuck (2010), in her study of pre-service teachers, posited that addressing issues of language, place, context, life-history and life practices are complex matters. Socially just teaching is therefore a culturally relevant practice, not only acknowledging the various knowledge bases of students, but also positioning students as knowledge sources.

Chubbuck (2010) suggested that a teacher should analyse a child's learning experiences from both structural and individual perspectives, in order to better meet the child's needs and thus “begin to redress the effects of and transform the realities of educational and societal structures that perpetuate learning inequity” (p. 202). Ramezanzadeh and Rezaei (2018), proposed that this involves teachers “understanding students, acknowledging the societal structures of the places where they live” (p. 138). We argue here that this is not a straightforward task for teachers. Damons (2017), who was Principal of the school at the time of our project, explained, in a seminar presented at Edge Hill University, how his expressed

empathy for the living conditions of parents/ community members, was challenged by one of them who responded “with respect Mr Damons, you do not wake up hungry in the morning”.

Implementing socially just teaching

Perhaps, even with the greatest and most genuine efforts, middle-class teachers may find it almost impossible to fully understand the life experiences and challenges of those who live in severely disadvantaged communities. Perhaps they cannot “get better acquainted with the problem” (Popper, 1972, p. 260). In order to explore ways in which teachers can begin to better understand the contexts of their pupils’ lives, and thus provide more socially just teaching, we need to go beyond the teacher–pupil relationship. In the case of this school, the role of the TAs is crucial. This group of six community members had been assisting in the school for a number of years. They had taken on a number of office and classroom tasks during that time and become valued members of the school community. In their unique position of belonging to both ‘worlds’ in the school, they had knowledge of both and credibility in both. They could be thought of as the embodiment of the intersection between school and community.

In low-income communities, parental support for, or engagement with, their children’s learning may be limited by the daily struggle they face in hostile environments (Spaull, 2013). The school in which the project was based was unusual in that it had six teams of volunteers in different areas that helped to improve the functionality of the school (Damons, 2017). One such team comprised the TAs. The use of community volunteers in general is also not common practice and was as a result of the vision of Damons, a Principal committed to working with the community to improve both school functionality and the provision of learning opportunities for community. The TAs in this school, all parents from the surrounding community, had been working with specific teachers for several years. They were all female and mostly single parents, ranging in age from 22 to 50 plus. As part of his commitment to developing the school and the community, Damons had supported a project to build leadership capacity in Heads of Departments (HoDs) in the school (Seobi, 2015). It was from this initiative that our project developed. One of the questions raised by the HoDs during Seobi’s study was “How can we mobilise teaching assistants to help teachers more in the classroom?”. Seobi (2015) found that “the participating HODs were concerned that some teachers do not use TAs effectively in the classroom, delegating to them menial jobs, such as cleaning, rather than using them to support teaching and learning” (p. 106).

Following discussion, it was agreed that a participatory action research project should be undertaken to help develop the role of the TAs in improving parental support of the learners. Over a two-year period, we (two university-based researchers) provided support for this endeavour, in the form of research training, skills development and mentoring throughout the project to the group of six TAs and five teachers who had volunteered to take part in the project. The team undertook three cycles of research, the first one focusing on relationship-building and purpose-development. Once they had identified a clear focus for their work, subsequent cycles comprised the collection and analysis of data from parents, and the development of parenting programme modules based on that analysis. The modules, developed by the teachers and TAs working together, focused on the development of parents’ self-esteem and personal life skills, increasing their capacity to find and use sources of support in adverse contexts, and on enhancing their ability to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to their children. In order to make the materials accessible to all community members as well as staff in the school, the teachers and TAs worked together to produce a

handbook for trainers and facilitators in both English and isiXhosa. This model of collaborative working was new to both the teachers and the TAs and, as we discuss later, significant in changing the way in which teachers valued the TAs and their knowledge.

Another significant and unusual aspect of this work was the fact that the parenting manual would be developed within the community in which it was to be used, drawing on the concerns of parents, and their community-based knowledge. Reviews of parental support programmes in developing countries suggest that they have little sustainable impact (Banerji et al., 2015; Buyuktaskapu, 2012; Cao et al., 2014). Because these interventions have normally been designed by external experts, this project, drawing on local skills and knowledge was, we felt, culturally relevant and appropriate.

Over the two-year period, we collected data via field notes and audio-recordings of all meetings; these meetings included the initial set-up and training, the regular participant meetings, and the evaluation meetings. Teachers provided reflective answers to short interview questions, which we explore later in the chapter. We also collected visual data in the form of diagrams and photographs of activities, and our own written and photo-diaries. Data analysis was, as is appropriate in participatory action research, an ongoing process involving all participants. This iterative process enabled us, as the (external) researchers to ensure validity of the programme development. A final meta-analysis was conducted by the two researchers, developing deeper understanding and explanations, though the drawing together of key themes. In this chapter we report on two themes: language and contextual awareness relating to poverty. (Other themes have been reported in McAteer & Wood, 2018, and Wood & McAteer, 2017.)

Theme One: Local Language

The issue of language was evident in all the communications within the school, and between the school and the parents in the community. Many of the parents spoke little English or Afrikaans and felt embarrassed by their lack of formal education. This, along with their poverty and its associated challenges, made them reluctant to engage with the teachers, feeling that they would be judged harshly and found wanting. The teachers and TAs wanted to help parents support their children's schooling, and this was where the TAs' role began to take shape. They had decided to develop a parenting programme for the parents but, rather than seek external expertise on the content of the programme, they had wanted to produce something more culturally and linguistically relevant.

The TAs had gained significant experience and expertise in English from working in the school. They were used to code-switching in the classroom with pupils who were being taught through the medium of English and most had developed reasonable fluency. They were, however, still conscious that they were not fluent first-language English speakers.

This element of the TAs' expertise was not just of practical use but was also central in assisting children access the curriculum, and parents and carers to have conversations about their children's schooling. Language is recognised as a key issue in the development of socially just practices. The Society for Linguistic Anthropology (SLA) (a section of the American Anthropological Association) suggests that language is heavily implicated in social justice. This is an issue which is noted in many post-colonial contexts. Malcolm (2014) described the situation for Australian Aboriginals and suggested that "The Indigenous language inheritance of Australia has been whittled away under the advance of English" (p.

1). Referring to Orelus' (2014) use of the term "hegemonic", he further added: "In terms of social justice, it seems to me that there is a recurring pattern, worldwide, of suppression of one group in society by another by means of a language that can be called hegemonic" (p. 2). In the case of South Africa, Mwaniki (2012) added that "probably more than in any other polity, language has effectively been used to serve the ends of social exclusion for some and social inclusion for others" (p. 214).

Parents in the school community have limited English-language skills and, compounded with issues of poverty, systemic disenfranchisement and structural inequalities, experience exclusion in many ways. This is problematic at many levels. Firstly, and perhaps most obvious from the perspective of the school, is the apparent lack of support among parents for their children's education. In South Africa researchers have found that parents in township schools may not visit the school for meetings, supervise or help with children's homework, or talk to them about it (Naicker, 2013; Sedibe, 2012). These matters have serious practical ramifications for children and for the teachers in the school. However, there is a much deeper implication of this exclusion. Gewirtz's (1998) exploration of social justice helps us in this regard. Drawing on the philosophy of Rawls (1972) and the work of Young (1990), she identified its two key aspects as distributional and relational. This is an important amplification of the concept and gives a deeper insight into the issues of language. If we consider the relational or social dimension of social justice, then we begin to theorise "about issues of power and how people treat each other, both in the sense of micro face-to-face interactions and in the sense of macro social and economic relations that are mediated by institutions such as the state and the market" (Mwaniki, 2012, p. 216). The macro social relations are significant here in that, without access to the language of education, business and policy, not only are people unable to engage in these fora, but the inequalities caused by lack of participation are amplified and further systemised. Thabo Mbeki, speaking at Opening of the Debate in the National Assembly, on 'Reconciliation and Nation Building' in 1998, described South Africa as a country of two nations, the second and larger being "black and poor ... [which] lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure" with "virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity" (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 1998).

The TAs, while working with the parents and community members, were aware that they could bridge the language issue by using some of the processes that we had modelled in the first phase of the project. Conscious that when we first met, we, the two researchers, were first-language English speakers (one with neither Afrikaans nor isiXhosa skills and the other only some Afrikaans) had developed strategies to overcome linguistic barriers in our meetings. Drawing on these, the TAs used visual methods such as collage with the parents. They also encouraged the parents to develop language (and numeracy) games around everyday activities such as cooking, housekeeping and shopping. Thus, parents and children could become co-learners.

The TAs were also able to act as effective mediators between parents and the school, having the linguistic skills to do so, and also being trusted by both. The role of the TAs, in providing translation between the parents and the school community, and in supporting the learning of both parents and learners, is therefore a small step towards enabling some participation in social and educational processes.

The second theme illustrates a way in which the work of the TAs enables a deeper engagement with relational social justice. Having communication skills is indeed a necessary part of engagement; however, if what is being said is understood (linguistically), but not valued, then engagement remains on a relatively superficial level.

Theme two: contextual awareness

Perhaps the most significant outcome from the project was the ways in which teachers began to change the way they thought about their teaching, and also about their relationships with the TAs. It was clear that, in addition to language competence, the TAs brought a wealth of knowledge into the school community. This knowledge was of two types. Firstly, they had deep knowledge of the lived experiences of the parents and community members. This was a life that they too shared. They understood the impact of poverty, lack of resources, and alcohol and drug abuse on families, and the sense of shame and hopelessness that can result from such deprivation. They knew at first-hand the difficulties of assisting a child with homework in a home with no electricity, or space to study, and where the homework was in an unfamiliar language, and dealt with unfamiliar concepts. Sharing this knowledge with the teachers in the school enabled teachers to better understand the context in which they were teaching and, supported by the TAs, they found ways to make their teaching more relevant and inclusive, and to reduce demands on family resources.

The questions used to elicit reflections from the teachers as the project was evaluated, provided a rich data seam in this respect. Four of the participating teachers provided responses (dataset a) to these questions:

1. How did you find working with TAs as partners in this process?
2. What did you learn?
3. What impact has it had on you as a teacher or personally? Has it changed your practice, and if so, how?

What was evident in all the teachers' responses was that working with the TAs had given them an insight into life in the community which they did not previously have:

Fruitful, because we learn also from them ... we do not understand their problems. (T1a)

It was very good working with TAs as partners. They are wise people and I really learned a lot from them. (T3a)

They know what is needed for the community at large. (T4a)

These insights enabled them to develop a greater empathy with the learners and their parents and become more respectful of them.

It taught me to be sensitive to others because you never know what challenges they have. (T3a)

Respect everybody and do not judge a person. They [the parents] love education and have pride in their children. Often, they didn't get a chance to have an education, but they still want and are able to help [their children]. (T4a)

They also became more willing to work collaboratively with the TAs in the classroom.

At times I was called out of the classroom the TA just took over my class doing things like counting, days of the week, weather, mental maths, etc. and TAs have very good ideas. (T3)

Communication and teamwork (with the TA) are very important. and You can get advice from one another. (T4a)

These changes in attitudes to the TAs, and the recognition of their work as co-educators in the classroom were significant. They also impacted, not only on actual classroom practice in how teachers deployed the TA, but also highlighted the issue of contextualising education to take account of their learners.

I must know the background of the child and also build relationships with the parents and the community at large. and I must give someone a chance to speak and give his/her views so that I can understand and respect other people. (T4a)

It was evident that teachers had begun to value the TAs as more than an extra pair of hands in the classroom, but valued the support they could provide for both them as teachers in their own learning, and also for learners, through helping teachers have an increased awareness and understanding of the backgrounds of their learners.

However, not all teachers in the school have worked with TAs. Some teachers refused to do so, and so a final dataset (set b) was generated by 20 teachers across the school, in response to the questions:

1. What is your view on using TAs?
2. What challenges/ benefits do you find when working with TAs?

These questions brought a range of responses, including the benefits of TAs for classroom administration, discipline, pastoral care for learners, supervision of groups in the classroom, and support for 'slow learners'. Several responses indicated a need for a policy in relation to what was or should be expected of TAs. One teacher indicated that *[respective] duties and responsibilities need to be clearly understood*, while another added that a real challenge was *not knowing the boundaries of the duties of a TA*. One teacher explicitly referred to the need for *a policy guiding the management of the TAs, their duties and roles*.

Clearly, different experiences in working practices impacted on the teachers' perceptions of the role that TAs could play. However, it was clear from those teachers who worked closely with TAs, that the connections and outreach they could facilitate between teachers, learners and parents and other community members, had the potential to develop and enrich their teaching by making it more inclusive and culturally relevant. Across the whole school, there was also a growing awareness of this latent, yet powerful resource. As one teacher expressed: *Benefits – bridge the gap between school, teacher and community. (T4b)*

Malebese (2019) suggested that the use of socially inclusive teaching strategies resonates with Freire's (1970) notion of critical pedagogy which locates teaching in the immediate context of students and their social environment. Perhaps more importantly, the TAs, in working with the teachers to develop a parenting programme, had encouraged the use of local folklore and other forms of local knowledge to include in the parenting manual. Literacy development could be supported through the use of local stories and folktales; likewise, life skills such as tenacity, patience, kindness and resilience were often a feature of these stories and could be used as a prompt for discussion in relation to family and social life.

Mathematics skills were explored through everyday actions such as folding and cutting, and through local craftwork. This validation, and valuing of local knowledge, is an important means of legitimising that knowledge, and of bringing it into the social and educational discourses. Moore (2016) reminded us that inequalities in knowledge reduce opportunities for

people to contribute to deliberate “on matters that affect them” (p. 192). He discussed the ways in which groups comprised of ‘experts’ and ‘public’ may (or may not) reach consensus in their negotiations. He argued that “active consensus” or “deliberative acceptance” (a form of dynamic agreement that combines unity and disagreement) is possible when “all participants have an *equal* [emphasis in original] opportunity to influence the outcome of the process” (p. 197). The concept of ‘equal opportunity’ is worth exploring here. We would argue here that, despite the moves to recognise and validate community knowledge, the systemic processes bedded in over generations, still make the two knowledge bases unequal. However, Fischer (2000) suggested the ways in which lay citizens are experts in relation to their own experiences, and thus bring a voice that is necessary to such ‘expert’ deliberations. While deliberative acceptance is unlikely to be achieved in situations of epistemic inequality, the public scrutiny and contestation of ‘expert’ authority brings “interests and perspectives that are unorganized, inarticulate, and latent in proportion to their presence in the larger public” (MacKenzie & Warren, 2012, p. 106).

Discussion

The work undertaken by the TAs and teachers in the school had been originally developed to help overcome some of the problems facing the school community in relation to what they perceived as a lack of support for children by their parents. While the production of their parenting programme and manual might be seen as a successful outcome of the project, what was more significant was the way in which the TAs became a conduit for linguistic and epistemic justice. Msila (2019) reminded us that the debates surrounding language in South Africa are complex and nuanced. There have been calls to increase the use of English for example, given its standing internationally. If South Africans are to become part of global discourses, then they must have the language which will facilitate that. Conversely, he presented the counter-argument that the greater use of indigenous languages would “redeem Africans from the throes of colonisation” (p. 100). He cited the author Chinua Achebe’s call for English to be used:

in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding. (p. 101)

This acknowledgement of English as one of the languages of post-colonial Africa (albeit in an Africanised form) raises the possibility of moving beyond linguistic imperialism, into what Msila (2019) described as a decolonised “kraal of ecology of languages in a way that would promote equality” (p. 105). In providing support materials for the parents in both English and isiXhosa, the TAs were also laying the foundations for the recognition of each language as valid, and for isiXhosa to be seen as a language through which children’s education could be improved. While the teachers were still constrained by the European/English-language educational medium (ELEM) policies, the knowledge that the pupils were also having learning support in their own language, and drawing on their own cultural knowledge, was an important outcome in enabling a more socially just understanding and practice of teaching.

Although we have presented two themes from our study which would appear to separate language and knowledge as social-justice issues, we will conclude the chapter by discussing the ways in which they are interrelated, and even more significant in combination than when

separate. Msila (2019) shared a story of a business meeting taking place in Eastern Cape among members of a Cultural Group (capitalisation in original), who were all isiXhosa speakers. A member of the group suggested that it would be appropriate to conduct the meeting in isiXhosa but won the support of fewer than half of the group members for the motion. There was a feeling among colleagues that isiXhosa was not an appropriate language for a business meeting. Using English was, he claimed, seen as a sign of progressiveness, while the use of isiXhosa was deemed to be backward. This attitude, a relic of colonisation, pervades social and educational structures and, thus, those who do not speak English feel disenfranchised and backward. How then is it possible for the isiXhosa-speaking community members to feel that they have anything to contribute to their children's education? What confidence can they have to become engaged members of society? As Mavesera (2009) articulated, "where a people lack confidence and respect of their cultural heritage there is bound to be frustration, alienation, cultural dominance and underdevelopment" (p. 76).

These types of situations occur in many ways and, over time, have marginalised (even ghettoised) both the language and the associated knowledges of indigenous people. The potential for loss is much greater than may be first thought. Gandolfo (2009) warned of the perpetuation of "the hegemonic influence of western languages and their corresponding forms of knowledge" (p. 321). The more oral-aural knowledge traditions of African languages embody not only communicative processes, but also cultural identities and epistemologies. Resonating with Achebe's notion that, even when English is used, it needs to be customised and contextualised in "full communion with its ancestral home" (cited in Msila 2019, p. 101). Chisenga (2002) hypothesised that, without indigenous languages, there can be no transmission of indigenous knowledges. Semali's (1999) description of indigenous knowledges as "collective epistemological understanding" (p. 17) reminds us that epistemologies should not be oppressive or impositional. If dialogic processes around epistemic work can be cultivated, then we can also develop what Semali described as "the rationalisation of the community" (p. 17). This "indigenous knowledge capital" of Africa (Msila, 2019, p. 108) is carried by the indigenous languages, and gives confidence to a people with respect to "their historical and cultural baggage" (Mavesera, 2009, p. 76). Indeed, Kaya and Nkondo (2016) identified a strong positive link between the use of indigenous languages and sustainable development claiming that they are channels of values, traditions and cultures, while Okafor and Noah (2014) indicated that the use of these languages impact positively on the worldviews of their users. Msila (2019) reminded us that societal change is stalled when the "language issue" (p.103) is avoided. Conversely, "when we resolve it we will move inches towards the resolving of many societal challenges" (p. 108).

Conclusion

The work that the TAs were involved in thus bridged both the languages and the knowledges of the two worlds. In the intersectional space occupied by them, epistemic bridges were built, giving each world an insight into the other and, from that, the possibility of growth and development for both the teachers and the community members. It would be naive to claim that in one small centre, the epistemic bridge-building of a group of TAs can change the world. However, we believe that it is possible for this work to be sustained and extended as planned; then it does go some way to making small socially just changes and enabling the conditions under which further change can happen.

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