



TACKLING SOCIAL INJUSTICE THROUGH DEVELOPING EPISTEMIC LITERACY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Findings and recommendations from an empirical study

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BIG QUESTIONS
in Classrooms



What is epistemic literacy, and what aspect of social injustice can it tackle?

UNESCO's definition of literacy evolves in response to our fast-changing world. Accordingly, our definition of epistemic literacy cannot be static. Building upon [UNESCO](#) and [Stordy \(2015\)](#), and at the time of writing this briefing, we define epistemic literacy as

Evolving and responsive competency and proficiency in the identification, interpretation, understanding, questioning, navigation, creation and communication of knowledge, in the context of a world facing novel and complex environmental, social justice, digital and informational challenges.

Social justice requires that all are enabled and expected to develop epistemic literacy as a lifelong capability.

Social justice and injustice are multifaceted – schools can't promote the former or tackle the latter alone. That said, they are well-placed to contribute to tackling an aspect of social injustice that pertains to knowledge and knowing – that is, to tackling what Miranda Fricker ([2007](#)) refers to as “epistemic injustice”. Fricker describes epistemic injustice as the wronging of someone “specifically in their capacity as a knower” ([Fricker, 2007, 1](#)) and explains that epistemic injustice can be “testimonial” or “hermeneutical”.

“Testimonial injustice” happens when what someone has to say is not believed because of who they are – this could be, for example, because of their upbringing, gender, class, religion, age, or ethnicity. “Pre-emptive testimonial injustice” is when this person (or group) is not even asked their view in the first place. “Testimonial silencing” is when an individual or group knows they won't be believed so does not offer their view.

“Hermeneutical injustice” results from “hermeneutical marginalization”, where a group or individuals with a particular identity (or identities) are not included in our shared knowledge. Importantly, where schools are concerned, this results in gaps in the curriculum and therefore poses a serious challenge for epistemic (social) justice. This leaves some students and their families feeling like their perspectives and experiences do not matter or are less important than those of others.

About the research



Our research is on the distinctive contribution that Religious Education can make to tackling epistemic injustice through the development of epistemic literacy. We wanted to find out how knowledge is used and understood by students and teachers in RE classrooms. What we found points to a correlation between “epistemic haves and have-nots” and other forms of social inequity. Those who are epistemically advantaged (able to confidently navigate and articulate a range of knowledge and ways of knowing) seem to be advantaged in other (for example, socio-economic) ways ([Stones and Fraser-Pearce, 2021](#)).

We conducted interviews with RE teachers and Key Stage 3 students, observations of Key Stage 3 RE lessons, and an online RE teacher survey. Participating schools included: rural, suburban and urban schools; boys, girls and co-educational schools; schools of religious character and ‘common schools’; independent, grammar and comprehensive schools; and schools from a range of English counties. We were concerned with how knowledge is handled in RE in relation to the big questions that religious and non-religious worldviews seek to answer and feature in the RE curriculum. Examples of big questions include:

- How did the universe begin?
- How do we know what is right and wrong?
- What happens when we die?



Findings

- A large number of the students we spoke to not only conflated knowledge, belief and opinion but were also reluctant or seemed unable to critically engage with opinions of others. The data suggests that the prioritisation of students' opinion in RE results in a well-intentioned, but ultimately erroneous understanding of the purpose of RE. In the words of one of the students:

“RE is there to teach you to respect other religions and their beliefs.”

To be clear, this is a misunderstanding of RE.

- Precision of language is crucial. Conflation of terms such as “knowledge”, “belief” and “opinion” hinders epistemic literacy, whereas being able to use them in their distinctive ways enables a higher quality of knowledge, understanding and communication. For example, asking students how the universe was “designed” or “created” (rather than the more neutral “how did the universe begin?”) hinders understanding and obstructs the development of epistemic literacy.
- For most of our student participants, to respect is to refrain from questioning knowledge claims, including opinions. This can result in an “anything goes” classroom situation, in which RE is a subject lacking in challenge and consisting simply in the sharing of opinions.
- The multi-disciplinary nature of RE, which incorporates a range of arts, humanities and social science disciplines, risks oversimplification of each discipline and a blurring of lines between different kinds of knowledge.
- Simplistic polarisation of views in popular discourses can easily lead to binary, either/or perspectives. This can feed into classroom practice when students are asked to “be sure to include both views”, or to decide if they are “for or against”.
- Some students we spoke to expressed the view that the same knowledge claim could at once be accepted in an RE lesson and rejected in a Science lesson. This suggests compartmentalised thinking due to subject delineation in schools.

Recommendations

Classrooms and schools should be epistemically just spaces. RE should equip learners with epistemic literacy to enable lifelong capabilities for navigating personal, substantive and disciplinary knowledge (Ofsted, 2021) relating to big questions that religious and non-religious worldviews seek to answer. Teachers should select, present and respond to knowledge claims in epistemically just ways. Students should be enabled to develop the ability to do the same.

- We advocate for a framing of respect which enables students to critically engage with others' knowledge claims. We should respect others because they are fellow human beings, rather than because we agree with them, or are similar to them (Barnes, 2009).
- Teachers and curriculum makers should be explicit about the kinds of knowledge and knowledge production used in the classroom. As such:
 - We recommend the pedagogical metaphor of “showing the strings” of different kinds of knowledge sources, forms, disciplines and methodologies.
 - Students should be enabled, encouraged and expected to identify, select and apply appropriate kinds of knowledge and disciplinary approaches.
- Teachers should create activities and use language which resist polarised positions and support young people in understanding pluralities and nuances of religious and non-religious worldviews.
- Teachers should use language precisely and enable young people to do so.
- Teachers and curriculum makers should consider what RE has to add to the knowledge young people gain from life outside school (Young, 2015).
- RE should provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own epistemic positionality as an aspect of their metacognition.
- RE should enable and encourage students to recognise and critique simplistic, sanitised and essentialist representations of religion and worldviews (Smith, Nixon & Pearce, 2018).



- Teachers and curriculum makers should consider potential implications of their own epistemic biases. The teacher's development of their own epistemic literacy is a necessary precursor to providing RE which aims to develop students' epistemic literacy (see [Stones and Fraser-Pearce, 2022](#)).
- Neither knowledge claims nor big questions should be presented in isolation nor in the abstract. Students should be enabled to explore and grapple with them in context and in relation to the knowledge, communities and sources of authority underpinning them.
- At the earliest stage possible, RE should endeavour to contextualise various relationships between religion and science in a range of contexts that raise new questions for students. This mitigates over-simplistic and erroneous perceptions of science and religion in inevitable competition and opposition. Medical ethics and artificial intelligence, for example, provoke discussions about the nature and value of life, questions around what it is to be human, and critical engagement with the urge for progress.
- Teachers should recognise there is a duty of care towards students with, for example, creationist beliefs who must be (and should also feel) included in school. Creationism is most likely to be discussed explicitly in RE as a religious worldview and therefore must be recognised as a protected characteristic ([Equality Act 2010](#)) with implications for inclusion.
- To counter compartmentalised thinking, RE teachers might consider planning with colleagues across different curriculum subjects and with epistemic literacy in mind.



Further Information

Knowing Well in Religious Education, project report

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