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# Retheorising distributed leadership through epistemic injustice

**Meng Tian and Graham Nutbrown**

**Abstract**

Existing distributed leadership (DL) theories tend to focus on distributing financial, material and human resources in order to enhance school performance. However, their impact appears controversial. Critical scholars assert that using DL to promote trust and democracy can be a self-fulfilling prophecy orchestrated by few formal leaders. When being misused as a managerial tool, DL can reinforce epistemic injustice in school. In this conceptual paper, we retheorise DL through the lens of epistemic injustice. Drawing on the concepts of testimonial, hermeneutical and systemic injustice, we analyse how DL practices potentially marginalise, silence, and reject individuals as knowledge contributors due to their deflated credibility, the lack of concepts or language, and systemic discrimination. To build epistemic justice and reciprocity into DL, we propose three moves: building trust and self-trust; re-distributing epistemic resources; and reconfiguring relational justice. This paper makes a theoretical contribution by explicating why and how epistemic injustice is done to disadvantaged individuals in DL. It also serves as the theoretical foundation for future empirical investigations.

**Keywords**

Distributed leadership, epistemic (in)justice, testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, systemic injustice, knowledge, power

## Introduction

Recent review studies have confirmed that distributed leadership(DL) and its impact on school performance is one of the most researched themes since the 2000s (Tian and Huber, 2019; Bolden, 2011; Gumus et al., 2018). Azorin et al. (2019: 11) assert that DL is effective because it is 'mainly concerned with interactions rather than actions, with capacity building rather than control, with empowerment rather than coercion'. Findings from a few large scale quantitative studies also suggest that supported by a democratic school culture and committed teachers, DL indirectly but significantly enhances students' learning (Halverson, 2018; Malloy and Leithwood, 2017; Mascall

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et al., 2009; Rikkerink et al., 2016). Drawing on these findings, some scholars believe that DL is a desirable leadership model for 21st-century schools (Bush, 2013, 2018; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016).

Critical scholars discover that power tensions and micropolitics can be magnified in a distributive setting (Tian, 2016; Flessa, 2009; Piot and Kelchtermans, 2016). For example, school leaders can give unwanted tasks to compliant teachers or form their inner circles through favouritism (Harris et al., 2013; Lumby, 2013; Schyns and Schilling, 2013; Torrance, 2013). Not just school leaders, teachers also employ DL to lobby for extra resources for their own interest groups (Tian, 2016; Corrigan, 2013). Because school leaders and teachers carry various and sometimes opposing personal goals, which either align or misalign with the school goals, micropolitics and power tensions emerge in DL (Brosky, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2007). When the personal goals of leaders and teachers align with the school goals, they appear to co-create more resources and to exercise more agency through DL. By contrast, when misalignments take place, leaders and teachers tend to experience a loss of agency and an escalation of conflicts (Tian, 2016; Lumby, 2013). So far, these phenomena have been observed in DL studies (e.g. Brosky, 2011; Flessa, 2009; Lumby, 2013; Piot and Kelchtermans, 2016), but it remains unclear why and how power tensions and the consequent injustice take place. To fill this gap, our paper aims to re-theorise DL through the lens of Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice. We focus on epistemic injustice in particular because it is a form of social injustice done to individuals in a relatively intangible way. Schools are knowledge-intensive organisations. When leadership is distributed more widely in school, we need to ask questions such as 'Whose knowledge is more powerful?', 'Who are denied as knowers in leadership work?' and 'Whose voices are silenced by the system?'

The term 'epistemic injustice' was coined by Fricker (2007) to illustrate, firstly, unfairness related to the degree of credibility accorded to another person's narratives or knowledge claims (testimonial injustice), and secondly, unfairness connected with an individual or group's capacity to articulate or comprehend their own experience due to a lack of relevant concepts (hermeneutical injustice). In this paper, we first outline Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice, incorporating additional ideas from Medina (2012), to explicate three major types of injustice. After that, we critically examine existing DL studies to highlight their negligence of epistemic injustice issues. Third, we discuss four scenarios in which epistemic injustice can occur in DL. Lastly, we propose a retheorisation of DL, reorienting it towards epistemic justice and reciprocity.

## Theoretical framework: Epistemic (in)justice

Our theoretical framework is Fricker (2007) and Medina's (2012) epistemic injustice theory. Fricker (2007, 2015) approaches the concept epistemic justice using a failure-first methodology. She argues that to understand what epistemic justice is, we should first examine what epistemic *injustice* looks like (Fricker, 2007). Understanding why and how injustice is done to people can shed light on how to build a just system that is 'structured around resistance to dysfunction' (Fricker, 2015: 2).

In Fricker's (2007) original formulation, epistemic injustice is a form of discrimination against someone in their capacity as a knower. Fricker (2017: 53) subsequently elaborates that 'epistemic injustice is primarily a distributive injustice, meaning someone's receiving less than their fair share of an epistemic good'. We can extend the scope of the concept to refer not just to the person's capacity as a knower but to his/her capacity to contribute to the wider

epistemic community on equal terms with others. One makes an epistemic contribution by sharing not only knowledge and information but also one's beliefs, ideas, challenges, doubts, arguments, interpretations, hypotheses, and opinions. A society or an organisation which ignores or constrains one's capacity for making an epistemic contribution perpetrates epistemic injustice.

Fricker (2015: 21) claims that epistemic contribution is a central human capability because human subjectivity is constructed on the basis of 'functioning not only as a receiver but also as a giver of epistemic materials'. Hence, it harms the individual by isolating him/her from the full range of the beneficial consequences of epistemic justice: the wise, creative, truth-conducive, ignorance-busting contributors of knowledge and experience. From the perspective of epistemic justice, E. Anderson (2012: 172) defines democracy as a 'universal participation on terms of equality of all inquirers'.

Epistemic justice does not require the abolition of organisational hierarchy, but it does require that leaders with decision-making power recognise – and trust themselves to recognise – other people whose voices deserve to be heard because they are in a position to speak from knowledge and experience or to make an epistemic contribution. This is particularly important in schools because future citizens of the society observe and learn about democracy, equality, and social justice from school members' social interactions. If epistemic injustice is done repeatedly to people without reflection and correction, it will exert a long-lasting negative impact on teachers, students, the school, and the society at large.

Under the umbrella concept of epistemic injustice, Fricker (2007) identifies two types of discrimination: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. In our re-theorisation of DL, we also include a third type of discriminatory injustice caused by the system: systemic injustice.

## *Testimonial injustice*

Testimonial injustice is the injustice done to someone who communicates information – asserts, assures, confesses, etc. – but is not listened to or believed because he/she is not accorded the credibility he/she deserves (Fricker, 2007). The hearer makes a prejudiced misjudgement of the speaker's credibility, based on some aspect of who or what he/she is.

To comprehend the harm done by testimonial injustice we have to appreciate that testimonial speech acts, where speakers implicate by the nature of the speech act that they speak from knowledge, that they can be trusted for the truth, are constituted in part by the norms and reactive attitudes they bring into play. Speakers and hearers in the information exchange have their respective commitments and responsibilities. Speakers implicate by a speech act such as assertion or assurance that they speak sincerely and from a position of knowledge. If this is not the case, other speech acts, such as speculation, which convey a doubt or invite a degree of scepticism, but which nevertheless make an epistemic contribution, would be more appropriate. In other words, by choosing different vocabularies and tones, by exercising linguistic conscientiousness in their choice of words, speakers convey a nuanced understanding of the epistemic status of their knowledge claims, and they expect competent and conscientious listeners to recognise the implications and expectations of their utterances. Someone who asserts expects to be believed, or at least to be accorded a fair hearing.

## Hermeneutical injustice

Hermeneutical injustice happens when the individual is the victim of an intelligibility deficit rather than a credibility deficit (Fricker, 2007). For example, speakers lack the concepts or language with which to make their experience intelligible to themselves or to others. One of Fricker's (2007) examples involves the concept of sexual harassment. Without this concept women had lacked the means to make the harassment they experienced intelligible. It could more easily be passed off as 'banter', 'just a bit of fun', or 'harmless flirtation'. These were concepts at the disposal of the perpetrators. So, the inequality in conceptualising and expressing a common experience was, at least to some extent, rebalanced by the arrival of the concept of sexual harassment. Awareness raising of many kinds relies on similar conceptual innovations, just as power imbalances and abuses rely on their suppression and the perpetuation of the forms of ignorance concerned.

In George Orwell's ([1949] 2004) *1984*, power is exercised through the Party's control of language and deliberate erosion of conceptual distinctions. In a famous essay Orwell ([1946] 2013) points out that an impoverishment of language creates an impoverishment of thinking. It enables those in power gradually to extend their ability to manipulate the powerless. Medina (2013) adds another perspective to hermeneutical injustice. Due to the lack of awareness of their own arrogance and closed-mindedness, perpetrators actually put themselves in a disadvantaged position by closing off avenues to useful knowledge and experience. Medina (2012) reminds us that hermeneutical and testimonial injustices are often intertwined. On the one hand, because some speakers are less intelligible, they are deemed less credible; on the other hand, due to testimonial insensitivity, some hearers fail to interpret the intended meaning or to comprehend the unfamiliar concepts articulated by the speakers (Medina, 2012).

## Systemic injustice

Beyond the individuals, there are systemic factors contributing to epistemic injustice. The primary effect of epistemic injustices is to dishonour individuals by dismissing their credibility or intelligibility. The secondary effect is to erode their confidence as knowers, testifiers, and thinkers. Such harm can be done by one individual to another as well as by a system to the individuals in it.

Systemic dishonouring and undermining have a damaging effect on the harmony of the individual's being, creating self-doubt on one's epistemic judgements, intellectual autonomy and epistemic virtues (e.g. dispositions such as open-mindedness and integrity) one has sought to exercise as a conscientious speaker and audience (Dotson, 2011; E Anderson, 2012).

Being exposed to epistemic injustice for a long time can erode a person's intellectual confidence. Individuals rely on the intellectual dispositions of others who see them as generally stable and trustworthy characters (Fricker, 2007). This epistemic dependency is reciprocal. When some individuals' intellectual and linguistic dispositions are undermined by the system, they lose, or perhaps never fully develop, the capacity to construct factual beliefs. They are the victims, therefore, not only of injustice as individuals with a contribution to make, but also of injustice as a marginalised group whose experience remains inchoate: experience that would otherwise be formulated and incorporated into a coherent body of communicable ideas and beliefs (Dotson, 2011, 2012).

To sum up, the primary harm of epistemic injustice is that one lacks the means to make oneself understood by others or is perceived, without justification, as lacking epistemic credibility (Fricker, 2017). The secondary harm is the psychological, economic, and political consequences

one suffers due to the epistemic injustice done to him/her (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012). Beyond individual level, a group of people who share similar epistemic disadvantage can be marginalised by the system. Hence, epistemic injustice is a product of unequal power. To eradicate such injustice, we should go beyond empowerment on the individual level and start to re-configure structures and power relations that yield powerlessness in the first place (Fricker, 2007). It is important to underline that although epistemic injustice is pervasive in various types of social interactions, our focus in this paper primarily falls on how epistemic injustice can be perpetrated through DL in schools, and on how can we re-orientate DL towards epistemic justice and reciprocity.

## Methodology: Conceptual research for DL retheorisation

Our proposals for retheorising DL are based on conceptual research. This is a powerful tool for re-examining the conceptual descriptions, typologies, and underlying values of existing theories (Meredith, 1993). Unlike empirical studies, that rely on first-hand data from the field, this conceptual paper seeks to explicate the inadequacies and biases in mainstream DL studies and to suggest a new theoretical lens for future DL research. Following Aven's (2018) principles of conceptual research, we employed a four-step research process: differentiation, identification, refuting and advocating.

We started with reviewing and differentiating five popular models used in DL research during the past two decades. The literature review revealed a research gap, the lack of discussion of epistemic injustice in the DL. In the refuting stage, we analysed four scenarios that reproduced inequality and marginalisation in DL through the theoretical lens of epistemic injustice. Lastly, we advocated three approaches for enhancing epistemic reciprocity in DL.

## Models applied in DL research

Scholars have proposed numerous analytical and normative models to conceptualise, analyse, and characterise DL. We reviewed five prominent models in terms of their rationale, key findings and limitations in addressing epistemic injustice issues in DL.

### *Leader-plus model*

The leader-plus model sees leadership as being extended over multiple individuals, including both formal and informal leaders (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2008). This concept of DL is sometimes used interchangeably with shared or collective leadership (Abrahamsen and Aas, 2016; Akin Kösterelioglu, 2017; M. Anderson, 2012). Spillane et al. (2008) conducted a social network analysis to map formal and informal leaders in American schools. Findings revealed that position-based school hierarchy did not truly mirror the real-life leadership distribution. More than half of the pedagogical leaders were informal leaders without leadership titles. These informal leaders emerged from their day-to-day interactions with teachers and exercised more leadership than formal leaders (Spillane, 2006). Importantly, this leader-plus model acknowledges the interactive and emergent nature of DL. However, it does not explain why some informal leaders' knowledge has been transformed into leadership resources and how their informal leadership can be legitimised epistemically.

### Practice-centred model

Spillane's (2006) practice-centred model proposes that DL should be analysed through the interactions of leaders, followers, and the situation. The roles of leader and follower can emerge and switch in different situations (Spillane, 2006). This model rejects the assumption of leadership being a zero-sum game (i.e. if one person possesses more leadership then others have less leadership). Instead, it suggests that the leaders-followers-situation interaction creates a greater synergy than the total sum of different individual's leadership (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2002).

Gunter et al. (2013) challenged the leader–follower binary relationship embedded in Spillane's practice-centred model. The role exchange between a leader and a follower, according to Spillane (2006), is determined by whose expertise is more relevant and desirable in a particular situation. In practice, however, there is little evidence showing this exchange really takes place or that the exchange process is socially and epistemically just (Gunter et al., 2013; Torrance, 2013). Unlike democratic leadership or inclusive leadership, DL does not have a clear goal of enhancing democracy or inclusion.

In fact, opposite evidence can be found in empirical studies. Blitz and Modeste (2015: 366) discovered that school leaders and teachers perceived DL differently in areas such as 'formal leaders as instructional leaders, collaborative school-wide focus on problems of teaching and learning, formative evaluation of teaching, school resources for student learning'. The surveyed leaders believed that they had offered teachers opportunities to participate in leadership work, while teachers reported insufficient involvement. Disagreements also manifested in how much financial resources and intellectual support the leaders provided to the teachers (Blitz and Modeste, 2015).

In a Scottish study, Torrance (2013) discovered that DL took place only when the principals purposefully enabled teachers' participation in leadership work and then incorporated DL in organisational routines. Hence, when the situation changes, the leader–follower exchange rarely takes place on its own. It requires principals' active initiation and maintenance. This leads to more epistemic injustice questions. For example, whose knowledge and expertise are recognised as relevant and by whom? What happens if multiple people possess relevant expertise? What if a formal leader refuses to be a follower in a particular situation? Spillane's (2006) practice-centred model has merits, but the leader–follower exchange idea may face formal leaders' resistance.

### Socio-cultural model

In their investigations of DL in different countries, scholars have observed the impact of socio-cultural contexts on DL practices. Based on survey data from 1232 school leaders, Hairon and Goh (2015) discovered the cultural appreciation of hierarchy and control made DL more restrictive in Singapore schools. School leaders felt more reluctant to share with teachers their decision-making power over their school's overall development. Teachers were only empowered to decide on teaching- and student-related issues under leaders' central supervision. Trust between leaders and teachers was built upon teachers' capabilities to maximise students' academic achievements. Hairon and Goh (2015: 709) summarised that, in Singapore, school leaders exercised DL only if it preserved 'their power and authority'.

Echoing that, Tian and Virtanen (2020) discovered that in Chinese schools, DL was used to enhance teaching effectiveness and to preserve the school hierarchy rather than promoting social justice. The existing hierarchical structure, in fact, compartmentalised leadership work. Survey

data revealed that principals set the school's vision and strategies, mid-level teacher leaders led teacher teams and coordinated different departments, and teachers led teaching and learning (Tian and Virtanen, 2020). Chinese teachers were not culturally expected to lead beyond their current positions or to challenge their superiors' decisions (Tian, 2016). Although leadership tasks are distributed, there is little space for leadership knowledge exchange and co-creation. An opposite example of DL can be found in Finnish schools, where equality, trust, and autonomy are celebrated (Tian, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011). DL in Finnish schools is fluid and trust-based rather than stagnant and hierarchy-based. Finnish schools often adopt a flat structure and a low power distance to allow leadership responsibilities being rotated among teachers (Tian, 2016).

This socio-cultural model further expands Spillane's (2006) situational dimension of DL by accounting for cultures, values, and social norms. It also explains why DL should go beyond altering organisational structures (Piot and Kelchtermans, 2016). Because societies and education systems largely influence school DL practices via social expectations and educational policies, school leaders and teachers have limited space to manoeuvre within these boundaries (Hairon and Goh, 2015). On the one hand, this model highlights the socio-cultural sensitivity of DL. The determinants of DL are not only rooted in the school but also reflect the prevailing characteristics of the society. What is considered socially just and culturally acceptable can vary from one context to another. On the other hand, due to various socio-cultural contexts, this model may give way to unethical manipulation of DL under the name of particular socio-cultural expectations.

### *School improvement model*

Scholars who applied the school improvement model believe properly designed DL can enhance school performance. Mayrowetz (2008) highlights one usage of DL is to enhance human capacity building. Harris and colleagues assert that by building teachers' professional learning communities and coaching teachers' leadership skills, DL can enhance teachers' commitment, and consequently, to improve students' learning (Harris et al., 2013; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016; Harris and Jones, 2010).

Leithwood et al. (2007) conclude that DL best serves school improvement when leaders' and teachers' personal goals align with the school goals. Both spontaneous and anarchic goal misalignments are harmful to school performance. Mascall et al. (2009) further investigated the relationship between the DL patterns and teachers' academic optimism. They found that teachers' capacity building and leadership opportunities were largely determined by their principals. The empowered teacher leaders appeared to demonstrate similar leadership traits as their principals (Leithwood et al., 2007). When leadership was purposefully planned and distributed to certain teachers, these teachers showed the strongest academic optimism and trust in their principals. By contrast, neglecting teachers' personal goals and distributing leadership ad hoc were, to different extents, negatively associated to teachers' academic optimism (Mascall et al., 2009).

Leithwood et al. (2007) and Mascall et al.'s (2009) findings seem to suggest a self-fulfilling prophecy. To make DL functional, principals must identify and empower teachers who share similar leadership traits and goals. Consequently, the empowered teachers feel more optimistic about their work and show more trust in their principals. Torrance (2013) calls this model a gift of the principals. Policymakers also endorse this model because it offers a 'more subtle and clever way to deliver standardised packages of government reforms and performance targets' (Hargreaves and Fink, 2008: 238–239).

The potential risk is that the school improvement model makes DL practices more homogenous. Teaching and leadership work that does not deliver immediate measurable results can be labelled as redundant or dysfunctional (Gunter et al., 2013). When teachers' epistemic contribution is determined by top leaders' judgement, epistemic injustice can be done to them, especially if these leaders lack awareness of their own knowledge limitations.

### *Knowledge–power model*

Critical scholars revisited the purpose, rationale, and power relations of DL and proposed the knowledge–power model (Gunter et al., 2013; Youngs, 2009, 2017). These studies juxtapose the dispositions of DL for school improvement with DL for knowledge creation. Some critical scholars follow Foucault's 1975 proposition (Foucault, 1975) of seeing knowledge as the central concern of power in social theory (Gillies, 2013; Mifsud, 2016). Foucault (1975) uses the concept of normalising power to illustrate a dominant social group (the powerful) using knowledge to make the dominated group (the powerless) believe certain behaviours and ideas are more acceptable and desirable in the society.

Applying the knowledge–power model, scholars have studied agency, power and micropolitics in DL (Tian, 2016; Gunter et al., 2013; Lumby, 2013; Piot and Kelchtermans, 2016). Hancock (2018) found individuals in school were often disciplined and subjectivised through leadership discourses and practices. Their know-what, know-how, and know-why are framed by the position-based hierarchy. In a hierarchical structure, individuals can feel disempowered due to their inferiority in the hierarchy or their inability rigorously to articulate the knowledge, leaving others with more positional prestige to accrue more power. Lunde et al. (2013) discovered that, surprisingly, in a relatively flat structure, individuals appeared to share a perception of disempowerment rather than empowerment. This was because creating an egalitarian structure did not resolve the asymmetry in knowledge. What should be further explored in this model is how to create epistemic reciprocity that enables knowledge exchange and co-construction in a structurally and culturally just school environment.

To sum up, many DL studies do not directly address epistemic injustice issues. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, empirical studies (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2007; Malloy and Leithwood, 2017; Mascall et al., 2009) tend to focus on successful stories featuring leaders' and teachers' goal alignment rather than how the two divert from each other. Secondly, researchers show more interest in leader–teacher interactions (e.g. Abrahamsen and Aas, 2016; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016; Hulpia and Devos, 2010), thereby neglecting the situations in which leaders dismiss or undermine teacher's knowledge contribution. This is why a re-orientation of DL towards epistemic justice is needed.

## Exposing epistemic injustice in DL

Fricker (2017) underscores the non-deliberate nature of epistemic injustice. She strictly separates malicious manipulation from ingenuous epistemic misjudgement. In our retheorisation, we include both intentional marginalisation and unintentional ignorance, lazy denial, failed communication or contextual constraints (e.g. lack of time) that perpetrate epistemic injustice. Through the theoretical lens of epistemic injustice, we analysed existing DL studies and exposed the implicit testimonial, hermeneutical and systemic injustice in four scenarios.

In the first scenario, some principals use positional power to impel favoured teachers into leadership positions and form an inner circle (Berkovich, 2020; Harris, 2008; Lumby, 2013). Teacher empowerment is used to disguise favouritism and to ignore the 'pervasive, persistent, and entrenched sources of disadvantage' (E. Anderson, 2012: 164). In a school, when the power centre consists only of like-minded leaders sharing similar epistemic privileges and personal traits, DL can cause pre-emptive injustice. This means teachers with different viewpoints or personal attributes are not given the same leadership opportunities in the first place. The embedded epistemic injustice only gets exposed when salient and catastrophic discrimination is publicised.

In the second scenario, DL can be used to empower teachers with desirable expertise, information, and networks that serve school's development. For example, teachers who are knowledgeable about student behaviours, curricula, and project management are often empowered to lead pedagogical and administrative work (Firestone and Martinez, 2007). The epistemic injustice issue here is that teachers' epistemic resources are only transformed into leadership if they serve the school. When teachers' personal priorities (e.g. family duties, health concerns, professional development needs) conflict with the organisational ones, they are asked to make personal sacrifices or be silenced by the system (Tian, 2016). Furthermore, this type of DL potentially rejects teachers' subjectivity as autonomous agents. Empowered teachers are expected to lead certain, sometimes unwanted, tasks rather than to decide and act on tasks that interest them (Lakomski, 2008; Lumby, 2013).

In the third scenario, formal leaders use DL to encourage teachers' democratic participation in school-level decision-making and then to only count in the views that align with leaders' own vision. This implies teachers' participation in discourses is permitted but their epistemic contribution is partially rejected (Fricker, 2007). A key feature of discursive practices is that they have to be heard or seen in order to be effective (Gordon, 2002). Without this visibility, a discursive practice will lose 'its power and may eventually disappear' (Gordon, 2002: 132). Teaches who are silenced in a pseudo-democratic participation face epistemic injustice because they are treated as information bearers not knowledge contributors.

In the fourth scenario, micropolitical strategies are used in DL to reproduce inequality. Ball (1994) underscores two dimensions of micropolitics. One is the competition for scarce resources, and another concerns the authority over organisational values and purposes. One fundamental micropolitical strategy is to use conflict and domination to gain favourable resources and privileges (Ball, 2011; Walls, 2020). For example, novice teachers are sometimes given more demanding students because they are disadvantaged by the lack of knowledge about the school. Experienced teachers, on the other hand, dominate the school social capitals and create more comfortable work conditions for their own interest group (Grissom et al., 2015). Because micropolitical tensions are different from genuine professional disagreements, disadvantaged teachers often find it difficult to render their experiences intelligible.

To mitigate epistemic injustice in DL, counting on an individual leader's virtue is not sufficient. This is because dysfunctions exist on both individual and system levels. On the individual level, epistemic injustice can be done intentionally and unintentionally, while on the system level, epistemic injustice is not only caused by structural inequality (i.e. unequal distribution of epistemic materials) but also by relational inequality (i.e. unequal epistemic participation and contribution). This leads us to the retheorisation of DL.

## Retheorising DL towards epistemic reciprocity

Lumby (2019) alerts us that if power relations in school remain undistributed, DL is merely a language trick to sell more leadership mythology and to disguise power abuse. The point of departure of our retheorisation is the knowledge/power model of DL according to which epistemic resources are powerful and can be utilised to serve leadership purposes. When individuals produce and transfer their knowledge, they also make a claim of power (Foucault, 1980; Lunde et al., 2013). As people possess different types of know-what, know-how and know-why, power relations built upon different individuals' exchange of knowledge can ignite doubt, self-doubt, resistance and struggles. Consequently, this knowledge exchange and power claiming process sometimes leads to consensus and compromise while sometimes results in disagreement and conflict. When knowledge–power is distributed, it naturally contains power tensions. As Foucault (1982: 142–143) described,

> Every power relationship implies, at least in potential, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused.

Therefore, from the knowledge–power perspective, DL tends to destabilise the position-based power hierarchy in school. Heterogeneity, uncertainty, tension, and even conflicts are not dysfunctional parts that need to be mitigated. Instead, they can be seen as resources for knowledge–power transmission and creation.

To make DL in schools more epistemically reciprocal, we propose the following three approaches: building trust and self-trust, re-distributing epistemic resources, and re-configuring relational justice.

### *Building trust and self-trust*

The rationality of our trust in others depends on the rationality of our self-trust. More specifically, we trust in our own judgements, including our judgements of the trustworthiness of the testimony or knowledge contributions of others. Unless we are alert to the relative expertise (or knowledgeability) of others on the topic under discussion, compared with that of ourselves, and are prepared to recalibrate our trust accordingly, we are not in an ideal position to contribute with complete conscientiousness or integrity to discussion and decision-making.

To build trust and self-trust, we should detect and manage hermeneutical resistance and hermeneutical dissonance in DL. According to Medina (2012), hermeneutical resistance refers to one's defiance against mainstream discourses. For example, teachers may challenge the school structure and culture by which they have been marginalised. Hermeneutical dissonance is experienced by teachers when they try to internalise both dominant and resistant voices. A school leader can feel cognitively confused and frustrated by competing or conflicting views voiced by different interest groups in the school.

There are two epistemic gaps school leaders and teachers have to bridge in DL. When encountering divergent and conflicting voices, a school leader should be aware that a socially just system always permits heterogenous interpretations of diverse experiences. A leader should trust teachers when they try to 'make sense of an experience that is in their interest to render intelligible', even when the leader does not share the experience in question (Fricker, 2007:7). When experiencing a

high level of hermeneutical dissonance, the leader should continuously develop his/her interpretative practices and hermeneutical sensibility.

In a genuine epistemic exchange, the speaker is committed to a default position of trust. Because all things are epistemically equal, hearers are expected to accord speakers the credibility their testimony deserves. If a speaker lies or speaks in a recklessly inaccurate way, or if the hearer withholds trust for an epistemically invalid or irrelevant reason, the hearer is entitled to a reactive attitude such as resentment, and to recalibrate their trust in the other as a trustworthy speaker, at least as far as the particular topic is concerned. The operation of these norms and reactive attitudes is built into the nature of the speech acts and into the purposes of these forms of communication in DL. Therefore, we argue, to understand fully how leadership is distributed in schools, an appreciation of the relational and dynamic nature of trust in testimony is crucial. We need to be aware that throughout the interaction the speaker and the hearer are constantly recalibrating their understanding of each other's, and of their own, trustworthiness on the particular topic.

## *Re-distributing epistemic resources*

Many DL theories focus on how financial, human, and material resources are distributed, ignoring the distribution of epistemic resources. According to Shotwell (2017: 87), epistemic resources refer not only to propositional knowledge, but also to emotions, skills and social situation that people use to make sense of experiences. A leader re-distributes epistemic resources by giving teachers the permission and opportunity to articulate and disseminate 'nascent meanings' of their experiences in 'tentative expressions' that may not yet be conceptualised or accepted by the public (Medina, 2012: 209).

Theorists agree that DL does not intend to undermine formal leaders. Instead, formal leaders are expected to acquire new leadership skills other than making solo decisions and delegating tasks (e.g. Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2008; Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006). These new leadership skills include mapping and re-distributing epistemic resources. For instance, school leaders should consciously acknowledge teachers, students, parents and non-teaching staff as knowledge contributors and encourage them to use their informational and interpretive materials in school leadership work (Fricker, 2015). Sufficient time and an emotionally safe space should be provided for teachers to interact with each other as autonomous agents. To develop teachers' leadership capacities, training is needed to equip teachers with leadership concepts, critical thinking, analytical skills, and communication skills so that they can construct shared, mutually intelligible meaning of leadership work.

Understanding the ambivalence in the knowledge transmission and creation process is another new leadership skill to acquire. Formal leaders can explicate that consensus-building by finding an epistemic middle ground is not the only marker of successful DL. Constructive conflicts can also lead to disruptive changes in school. As knowledge/power is in a constant state of flux, the goal of DL is not to reproduce the power hierarchy, but to embrace the increasing variousness of epistemic resources.

## *Reconfiguring relational justice*

The foundation of epistemic justice is people's equal epistemic status as knowledge contributors; however, this is not to pretend that what we know is equal in relevance on every occasion, or that

there is equality of expertise on all issues. To understand the relevant nature of epistemic equality, we need to recognise both distributive and relational justice (Schemmel, 2012).

According to Schemmel (2012), an institution such as a school can treat its members in ways that produce unequal social relations. As abolishing the existing school leadership structure will lead to dysfunction, a better solution for restoring relational justice is to provide school members with structural and procedural protection 'against unjust treatment by other individuals' (Schemmel, 2012: 142). Fricker (2007) reminds us that both marginalised and privileged members can become hermeneutically disadvantaged. To reconfigure this privileged-versus-disadvantaged relationship, Medina (2012: 215) underscores that 'institutions and people in a position of power bear special hermeneutical burdens, but we all share the collective responsibility to facilitate the hermeneutical agency of communicators, especially if they have been marginalised.'

School leaders can start with investigating who have been silenced by the existing school structure and procedure. For example, some teachers' opinions and knowledge of leadership are never solicited. When leadership has been an exclusive knowledge and skill set belonging to few leaders on the top of the hierarchy, it is counterintuitive for leaders to consult the recipients of their power about how to lead; and it is equally uncomfortable for teachers to challenge their superiors' knowledge and decisions.

Another relational injustice in DL is misusing democratic procedure, such as teacher leader elections, to camouflage favouritism. For example, a principal can manipulate a teacher leader election by giving favoured teachers extra resources and making them the only eligible candidates for the leadership positions (Tian, 2016). Another example is when principals appoint their allies to occupy key leadership positions on the basis of mutual cognitive and affective trust (Berkovich, 2020). Because the formation of these inner circles is often legitimised by the election and promotion system, DL is open to manipulation. This reinforces the importance of examining its vulnerability to relational injustice.

Conducting a critical examination of the existing decision-making and leader election/appointment processes in their school, would help school leaders and teachers to identify and resist systemic discrimination. New plans can be drawn to specify which decisions can be made by a solo leader, a small group of leaders, or the whole school community. Multiple communication channels can be established to collect and share teachers' and students' experiences and allow periodical re-adjustment of work processes. When collective decision-making is needed, school leaders bear the responsibility to remove any language and conceptual barriers so that all teachers are equipped with the epistemic resources needed to make a contribution.

Lastly, we propose that DL should be designed and practised to achieve epistemic reciprocity. Hornsby (1995) perceives linguist reciprocity as a precondition of epistemic reciprocity. Linguist reciprocity is achieved when the hearer not only understand the speaker's words but also her intended meaning. In return, the speaker receives the signal that she has been heard. Hornsby's (1995) definition assumes that a speaker is in the vulnerable position because she cannot force an audience to 'hear' her but to 'meet him/her effort halfway in a linguistic exchange' (Dotson, 2011: 238).

When retheorising DL, we broaden the definition of epistemic reciprocity into individuals sharing an equal epistemic status and exercising agency to acquire, exchange, and create epistemic resources in a non-dominant way. Here, non-domination means restraining individual's and the system's use of power to interfere arbitrarily in people's life or to limit their choices (Bohman, 2012). This challenges the traditional view of leadership which automatically assigns a default privileged position to formal leaders as knowers as opposed to a disadvantaged position to followers as non-knowers. To achieve epistemic reciprocity in DL, we suggest re-configuring this knower versus non-knower

relationship. The reconfiguration highlights that in linguistic exchange and social interaction, both the speaker and the hearer share responsibilities to recognise each other as knower and to demonstrate testimonial competence (Dotson, 2011).

## Conclusion and future research

At the beginning of this paper, we introduced the theoretical framework of epistemic injustice and then synthesised five key models used in DL research. We pointed out their limitations in addressing epistemic injustice issues. To make DL more epistemically reciprocal and just, the knowledge–power model of DL can be further developed. Through the testimonial, hermeneutical, and systemic injustice lenses, we further analysed how formal and informal empowerment in DL potentially silence and marginalise disadvantaged groups in four scenarios. In response to these challenges, we proposed three approaches for enhancing epistemic reciprocity: building trust and self-trust, redistributing epistemic resources and reconfiguring relational justice.

Looking into the future, we see several new avenues for scholars to explore. For example, how can epistemically just DL practices contribute to social justice in a wider context? In addition to individual agency, how does collective agency in school shape DL and the knowledge/power creation? Knowledge is power. In a knowledge-intensive organisation such as school, the distribution of epistemic power is at the core of DL.

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