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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Shallow pedagogies as epistemic injustice: how uncritical forms of learning hinder education's contribution to just and sustainable development

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This paper draws on findings from the JustEd study to discuss the shallow pedagogies that have emerged in Peru in the context of learner-centred and outcomes-based reforms that have been poorly implemented in a context with many limitations in terms of policy orientations, resources, and teacher training and support. These pedagogies promote little to no critical thinking, are disconnected from students' experiences and do not encourage them to problematise reality nor to grasp complexity. Such pedagogies constitute a form of epistemic injustice in that they do not help to develop students' capacity to participate as equals in the consumption and production of knowledge. Through this, these pedagogies also limit education's potential contributions to justice, peace and sustainability. Our discussion of shallow pedagogies leads us to articulate some more positive elements of what rich and just pedagogies might entail.

**Keywords** education • pedagogy • epistemic justice • sustainable development

### Key messages

- Educational reforms that emphasise outcomes and results, rather than process and purpose, can lead to shallow pedagogies.
- Shallow pedagogies are a major form of epistemic injustice.
- Shallow pedagogies limit students' ability to participate as equals in the consumption and production of knowledge.

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## Introduction

Being able to participate as equals in the production and consumption of knowledge is the very definition of epistemic justice. While education systems are not solely responsible for achieving this form of justice, they clearly play a key role in this, as knowledge is ‘the essence of education’ (Kotzee, 2017: 348). When schools do not fulfil their role in helping students to develop the epistemic capability to access, participate and contribute to knowledge production and consumption, they fail not only students, but also their responsibility towards the development of socially and environmentally just futures.

The opening paper in this special collection showed how, in order to contribute to the justice aims that are part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, education itself needs to be a space in which justice is practised. There are important organisational and structural elements to this – ensuring that schools are places free of violence where children feel safe, for instance – but less attention has been paid to the relational and pedagogical aspects of education, especially to the role of knowledge and the epistemic capabilities it demands.

This paper focuses on the *shallow pedagogies* and the equally shallow forms of learning that are often found in schools in the Global South, which we see as a major form of epistemic injustice in and through education. The ideas we present have been developed through the JustEd study – which explored how education systems in such contexts are contributing to justice and sustainability.<sup>1</sup> The shallow pedagogies we discuss were common in the three countries where the study was conducted – Peru, Uganda and Nepal – but in each case, they were the result of somewhat different processes. In Uganda the issue of language and the prevalence of crowded classrooms considerably limited children’s full participation in education; in Nepal, the predominance of teacher-dominated pedagogies limited students’ participation and engagement in learning; while in Peru the movement towards narrowly defined outcomes and the discontinuities in teacher-training reforms have led to a ‘displacement of knowledge’ from curricula and practice (Balarin and Benavides, 2010). In all three cases, however, the disconnect between school knowledge and students’ daily experiences, the lack of engagement with complexity, and the absence of critical thinking limited students’ participation in knowledge consumption and production.

Our discussion focuses on findings from the Peruvian case. Apart from helping us explore and substantiate the concept of shallow pedagogies, this case provides an empirical basis for critiques of the narrowly defined outcomes-based model of education that the opening paper in this collection suggests limits the contributions of education to justice and sustainability (Balarin and Milligan, forthcoming). We begin with a discussion of the broad context of constructivist and outcomes-based reforms and how they may lead to shallow pedagogies, especially among marginalised populations. The second section presents the methodology used in the JustEd study to explore pedagogic practice and students’ knowledge and understanding of justice-related issues. This is followed by a discussion of key findings from the Peru case with a focus on substantiating the concept of shallow pedagogies and the kinds of learning and thinking it gives rise to. The paper closes with a series of reflections on why shallow pedagogies are a form of epistemic injustice and how this limits the contributions of education to just and sustainable futures.

## The emergence of shallow pedagogies in the context of learner-centred and outcomes-based reforms

Towards the late 1990s, [Levin \(1998\)](#) discussed the ‘epidemic’ of education reforms that had taken hold of education systems across the globe. Common ideas and diagnoses about the crisis of education and the recipes for educational improvement – from privatisation to curricular and pedagogical reforms and standardised assessments – spread through very different social, economic, cultural and political country-contexts. Reforms were often based on critiques of predominant teacher-centred pedagogical models that relied on rote work and the unidirectional transmission of discrete knowledge ([Schweisfurth, 2011](#); [Biesta, 2016](#); [Hoadley, 2018](#)); and incorporated ideas from constructivist theories of learning that shifted the emphasis from teaching to learning, highlighting the importance of ‘active teaching methods’ to promote ‘knowledge assimilation’ and ‘learning to learn’ ([Ducret, 2001](#)). Reforms sought to influence what Elmore refers to as ‘the core of educational practice’, by which he means ‘how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student’s role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and classwork’ ([Elmore, 1996: 2](#)). This is very much our working definition of pedagogy, which [Alexander \(2009: 928\)](#) similarly defines as ‘the act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence and justifications’. Pedagogy, then, is not just the simple act of teaching, but it also reflects the broader social and cultural values in which learning relationships are embedded ([Shah and Campus, 2021](#)) – an idea that opens the need for critical pedagogies as developed by [Freire \(1973\)](#) and [hooks \(1994\)](#) that seek to articulate and explicitly deal with such values.

Critiques of traditional models of schooling highlight how teacher-led models of knowledge transmission did not enable students to develop the capacity for deep learning and critical thinking. Interestingly, though, contemporary critiques suggest that the move towards an outcomes-based model of education may have led in a similar direction. This has happened through a contradictory movement: on one hand the installation of a constructivist language that emphasises the importance of ‘learning to learn’ and learner-centred pedagogies opened up the scope for practice ‘without asking what the learning was supposed to be *about* and, more importantly, without asking what the learning was supposed to be *for*’ ([Biesta, 2022: 60](#), original emphasis). On the other the establishment of outcomes-based standardisation and assessment practices ([Labaree, 1997](#)) led to a measurement regime that unintentionally but systematically, narrowed down the real curriculum and gave rise to performativity in teaching practice ([Ball, 2003](#)).

While there is a difference between constructivism as a theory of knowledge and constructivism as a theory of learning and teaching, the former influences the latter, so ‘what many hold are the educational commitments of constructivism – student-centeredness, active learning, attention to ‘learning styles’, etc. – are taken to flow from an underlying skepticism about ... the very possibility that people may come to know much about the world that we inhabit’ ([Kotzee, 2010: 178](#)). It is not the focus on learning per se that is problematic, but the way in which it can sideline teaching and blur the important distinction between justified and unjustified knowledge claims ([Siegel, 1985](#); [Fricker, 2015](#)).

The introduction of constructivist pedagogies has often been paired with a shift towards outcomes-based curricula that replace the traditional focus on disciplinary content with a focus on developing competencies ([Schweisfurth, 2011](#); [Hoadley, 2018](#)). If constructivist ‘active pedagogies’ were already ‘much harder to put in practice

than the traditional approach' (Ducret, 2001: 159), outcomes-based curricula add a further layer of complexity to teachers' work, as they need to select and develop the content that they will work on – with only broad curricular orientations to guide them. Amid the scepticism about knowledge that Kotzee referred to, this has often had the unintended effect of 'hollowing out' knowledge from the curriculum (Young, 2007), with particularly negative effects for students from disadvantaged backgrounds with more limited means to access knowledge in other ways (Wheelahan, 2007).

There is a further point to make about what happens when such reforms are introduced in contexts with high levels of precarity – understood in the general sense that includes weak state institutional capacity, social and economic precarity, as well as precarity with regards to the education system (in terms of infrastructure, resources, quality of processes and outcomes, among others). All of these elements act as important mediators of how pedagogical and curricular reforms are implemented and how they shape educational practice. In the 1990s, when pedagogical and curricular reforms began in Peru, the country's economy was broken after years of violent conflict, hyperinflation and mounting corruption. The education system was likewise on the brink of collapse: teachers were among the worst paid in the region, per-capita student spending was extremely low, schools received no materials and infrastructure was crumbling (Ministerio de Educación, 1993).

The mid-1990s saw the beginning of a series of quality improvement reforms that followed many common recipes. These included a shift towards a new student-centred pedagogical approach, the emphasis on active pedagogies to promote student involvement in the classroom, and an outcomes-based curriculum focused on developing competencies (Ferrer, 2004). As is usually the case in Peru, and not only in the education sector, the implementation of such reforms was marked by high levels of policy discontinuity that led to important gaps and much confusion among teachers (Balarin, 2006; Balarin and Saavedra, 2023) – especially because they often expressed competing understandings of what reforms were for (Oliart, 2011). To begin with, reforms were not accompanied by necessary changes in initial teacher training, and several teacher in-service training programmes were partially implemented and abandoned over the following decades, and slow progress in the development of a fully renewed national curriculum (Balarin and Saavedra, 2023). The secondary curriculum, especially, went through a turbulent and protracted period when different versions coexisted (Neira and Rodrich, 2008). A key problem throughout was that teachers had not been proficient in the previous pedagogical model, and the training they received as part of these reforms focused on new methodologies without strengthening their content-knowledge nor the research strategies needed to prepare their lessons (see Hunt, 2004).

After a decade of reforms, Hunt noticed that while important changes had been made, especially a greater awareness on the part of teachers about 'the importance and benefits of encouraging children to participate actively in their own learning', teachers still knew very little about teaching (Hunt, 2004: 18). Researchers have also shown the scant learning opportunities that students encounter in Peruvian schools (Cueto et al, 2016); how teachers tend to deal with subject-matter knowledge in narrow and superficial ways, with many inconsistencies and factual errors (Balarin and Benavides, 2010); and how in spite of positive changes in classroom organisation and student participation, teachers' 'active' teaching strategies are limited to asking questions with pre-specified answers, and do not provide students the opportunity to analyse, create or critique ideas (González et al, 2017).

These findings coincide with similar observations made throughout a number of developing-country contexts, about the unintended consequences of learner-centred reforms and outcomes-based curricula. In South Africa, [Hoadley \(2018: 25\)](#) shows how such reforms may be associated with neoliberal education policies of human capital development, with their focus on skills and competencies, that lose sight of how ‘self-actualization and high-level skills development may be epiphenomena of the learning of subject content knowledge’ (see also [Allais, 2014](#)). Constructivist learner-centred and outcomes-based reforms led to much content being ‘removed and replaced with themes, generic outcomes or broad competencies and strategies’ ([Hoadley, 2018: 25](#)). This is exactly the case in Peru, where the new national curriculum, whose first complete version was sanctioned in 2008 and revised in 2016, seems to have pushed content-knowledge out of the picture.

In her exploration of learner-centred pedagogies, [Schweisfurth \(2011\)](#) extends some of these arguments through the analysis of a broader range of country cases in the Global South. Her inquiry questions not only the conceptual soundness of such reforms, but also their practicability, as they often are misunderstood. Like in Peru, many teachers wrongly assumed that the new pedagogical and curricular orientations meant that content-knowledge was not really important and that teaching should draw pre-eminently on students’ prior knowledge. Reflecting on some of the examples she includes in the book, [Schweisfurth \(2013: 361\)](#) shows how ‘unsuccessful attempts’ at learner-centred education ‘either from lack of understanding, lack of experience or lack of practice – are no better than, and can certainly be worse than, well-worn teacher-centred education’. She is careful to emphasise – and we agree – that this should not be taken as an argument to go back to teacher-centred education, but rather as a call to consider the problematic understandings of learner-centredness. Like [Hoadley \(2018\)](#), who speaks of ‘pedagogy in poverty’, Schweisfurth is intent on highlighting the particularly negative effects that such badly understood or formulated reforms may have on the most marginalised and poor. These critiques, and we coincide, also highlight how, beyond conceptual soundness of reforms, contextual mediators – from generalised poverty, lack of resources, precarious infrastructure, and the state’s institutional capacity to conduct reforms over time – play a central role in shaping how pedagogical reforms are put in practice. Such mediators have certainly played a crucial role in the emergence of the shallow pedagogies that we encountered in Peru.

Whether the problems emerging from constructivist learner-centred pedagogies can be redressed, and how, is an important question. Some would argue that their epistemology, which inevitably leads to relativism, makes them unsalvageable ([Kotzee, 2010](#)); while others appear to suggest that there is a chance to bring teaching back into the constructivist classroom, through a stronger focus on both purpose and pedagogical process ([Biesta, 2022](#)); or through a stronger grounding on specialist or disciplinary knowledge ([Hoadley, 2018](#)). We will offer our own contributions to this debate in the final part of the paper, after discussing our findings from the Peru case of the JustEd study. We will argue about the usefulness of looking at the shallow pedagogies and equally shallow forms of learning as a key form of epistemic injustice. Doing this not only opens a compelling argument as to why we should pay attention to such problems but also offers a way forward that is not simply that of ‘bringing knowledge back in’ ([Young, 2007](#)) or correcting misunderstood

interpretations. A focus on epistemic justice also helps show how the predominance of shallow pedagogies, especially in the Global South, limits the potential contribution of education to the development of just and sustainable futures.

Education is intimately associated with the production and reproduction of epistemic (in)justices both at the level of individual interactions and institutional dynamics (Anderson, 2012), which can, knowingly or not, reproduce exclusionary knowledge regimes. This can lead to the dismissal of certain knowledges and perspectives, hindering access to the knowledges that can help one make sense of the world and of one's position in it, and thus one's possibility of making meaningful contributions. This perspective recognises the 'value of epistemic diversity' in a way that does not lead to relativism (Robertson, 2013). Ensuring that we are all able to participate as peers in the production and consumption of knowledge (Hall et al, 2020), requires that individuals have access to necessary epistemic resources, and can develop epistemic capabilities, including epistemic virtues such as critical thinking, 'epistemic humility' and a 'critical openness to the world of others' (Fricker, 2007: 66). We will return to this discussion at the end of the paper.

### **Approaching pedagogical practice through the JustEd study**

The JustEd study approached educational practice and experience through a participatory qualitative methodology through which secondary school students and their teachers for relevant courses were engaged in a series of individual interviews, group discussions and participatory exercises. Our research design for this stage had originally meant to include ethnographic visits to schools, for a combination of observations, interviews and participatory activities. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the long school closures in Peru meant we had to replace observations with activities that enabled us to reconstruct classroom practice through students' and teachers' accounts and activities. While this was not ideal, it challenged our team's creativity to come up with suitable strategies to promote discussion, and we were fortunate to have been given the opportunity to work within schools' premises at a time when they were just preparing to reopen their doors. While our findings will have certainly been impacted by the pandemic and what it meant for students who were mostly locked indoors for two years, existing knowledge about school practice in Peru, already discussed, backs our interpretations.

Our choice of a participatory design responded to a concern with reducing 'hierarchy and power differentials between participants and researchers' (Brown, 2022: 204), which was especially appropriate in the context of the JustEd study, where questions of epistemic justice occupied a central place. Participatory methods helped us address the ethical imperative of conducting a research process that could be enriching to participants, generating opportunities to reflect and learn – rather than simply assuming an 'extractive' approach to getting information (Chambers, 1996). This approach was also consistent with our understanding of qualitative research as an 'active' process in which researchers need to generate an appropriate context for participants to elaborate on different themes (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Our previous experiences doing participatory research with young people (Balarin, 2011; Balarin et al, 2017; Alcázar et al, 2020), had also reaffirmed our belief that involving participants in producing different forms of work (such as drawings and photographs) was essential to enable them to reflect and elaborate ideas around

the research topics. Time, space and iteration were key if we wanted to engage participants in rich conversations.

We worked for two weeks in each of four selected schools in urban-marginal areas of the cities of Ayacucho and Pucallpa, and in the districts of Huaycán and San Juan de Lurigancho, in Lima, where we conducted individual and group discussions with students and teachers (separately) in a sequence of two individual and two group meetings in each case. This allowed for a progressive development of discussions, starting with initial explorations of participants' understanding of (in)justice, to then discuss how they learned about this in and out of school, and their experiences in relation to different forms of justice. We resorted to different tools, from visual prompts to stimulate discussions to a PhotoVoice exercise (Wang and Burris, 1997), in which students used images to express their ideas, and an exercise in which students were asked to write a letter from the future proposing necessary changes to the country's current authorities. This allowed us to explore their views on priorities, actions and those responsible for changes leading to sustainable futures. We also conducted individual and group interviews with teachers, and in order to make up for the lack of classroom observations, we engaged them in a 'Classroom Reconstruction Exercise' in which they had to develop a lesson on a relevant topic which we then discussed. This enabled us to analyse their approach to teaching different topics. We conducted 56 meetings with 24 students and 45 meetings with 18 teachers from the last two years of secondary school.<sup>2</sup>

Our understanding of shallow pedagogies in Peru is based on our triangulation of what students and teachers told us about classroom practice; what we observed about this in the way they approached different exercises and discussions; what we had found in our analysis of policies, curricula and school materials; and the findings from other studies of pedagogic practice discussed earlier. The latter, including our own previous experiences researching classroom practice, have offered particularly useful guidance when interpreting the findings from this study.

We selected courses on the basis of their relevance in addressing different forms of justice – epistemic, transitional and environmental – considered important for sustainable development.<sup>3</sup> The initial stages of the study had focused on critically analysing policies, curricula and textbooks around intercultural education, gender equity, environmental education, and memory and peace. This yielded a number of important points that helped shape the qualitative inquiry into young people's experiences of (in)justice and how school practices shape both their knowledge, attitudes and potential actions in relation to the justice and sustainability. The final stage of the study consisted of the application of a large-scale survey that sought to establish the relation between knowledge, experiences and potential actions (Shields and Muratkyzy, forthcoming).

Our analysis of Peru's policies and curricula showed that, since the early 2000s, the country's education policies had incorporated justice concerns, addressing important questions of equity and rights – especially around cultural diversity and gender. This approach had weakened in recent years as part of an anti-reformist movement where interested private parties and conservative groups coincided and led to the dismantling of what were perceived as more progressive policy agendas. Our analysis also showed that policies, curricula and school materials tended to avoid the more political dimensions inherent in many topics. Intercultural education in mainstream schools, for instance, focused on the celebration of cultural diversity,

without discussing its links with deeply rooted forms of social exclusion or the need for change in this respect. The recent history of violent conflict in the country was considered particularly thorny and was hardly addressed. Similarly, gender equity issues had become a no-go area after a series of public disputes led by conservative groups.

An important point about our findings about shallow pedagogies has to do with the contexts where we worked. The schools selected for the qualitative study were located in what are known as urban-marginalised areas (typical of countries like Peru, where cities have grown through informal settlements), with high concentrations of poverty and insecurity, and a lack of basic services and infrastructure. Currently, almost half of the country's population lives in such areas, which also concentrate a majority of public schools (Cánepa et al, 2019). These are areas where families have no access to resources such as books, and where, like in most of the country, there are no public libraries or other spaces where students and teachers could access educational resources. This reminds us of Hoadley's (2018) poignant idea of how poverty may influence or mediate pedagogical practices.

### **Shallow pedagogies in practice**

In our initial meetings with students, we asked them to share their thoughts on the concept of 'justice'. They mentioned things such as: 'fairness', 'equality' or 'that everyone receives his or her due' in a given situation, be it retribution or punishment. However, when we inquired about how 'justice' manifests in their daily lives, students only provided examples of *injustice*, whether in their homes, neighbourhoods, schools or witnessed in the media. When we pointed out this contradiction, they were puzzled and shared that they were not used to this type of discussion. As we continued the study, we realised that this is what learning looks like in their schools, where pedagogies rarely connect the abstract and normative narratives of the school to the students' nuanced and complex lived experiences – which echoes Portocarrero and Oliart's (1989: 177) idea that Peruvian education in schools works in 'abstract', without 'relating to events of vital importance in the country'. In the upcoming pages, we will discuss this and several other characteristics of the 'shallow pedagogies' that we found in Peru.

#### *Pedagogies that do not promote analysis, reflection and critical thinking*

During the initial discussion groups, students were often unable to express critical ideas on the topics we presented. As we moved along, it was evident that their knowledge about most topics was somewhat insufficient and vague. Even in the best cases, like during our discussions on environmental issues, an area with which students felt at ease, they did not really seem to grasp the complexity, interrelation and extent of problems. Their knowledge, like in other instances, was limited to some basic facts. In some cases, like during our discussions about cultural diversity and discrimination, students' ideas were rather loose; while their knowledge about the country's recent violent conflict was sketchy, with some even describing it as 'an incomplete puzzle' that they had put together mostly through hearsay.

Even more noticeable than the incomplete nature of students' factual knowledge was their difficulty in engaging in reflections and analyses of the causes and outcomes of different problems. In many cases, students were not bothered by the apparent



contradiction between formal school knowledge about justice and rights and what they learned through their everyday experiences and through the media. Moreover, as neither schools nor other institutions offered guidance to navigate these out-of-school learning spaces, the trustworthiness of different sources was never questioned by either students or teachers.

These limitations in terms of knowledge and critical thinking translated into an absence of problematisation and a limited grasp of the complexity of different social problems. The natural and social reality was presented as a matter of fact, without attention to the nuances, contradictions and tensions that characterise it. For example, some students from Huaycán (Lima) shared that even though the issue of discrimination is discussed in classrooms, and students are instructed not to discriminate, this is done without problematising the root causes that lead to discrimination and its consequences. Instead, students are given what seem like simplified instructions or slogans against discrimination, which, although important in their message, do not allow for a deeper and critical understanding of the issue. Similarly, some teachers shared how the topic of ‘gender equity’ is overly simplified in their classrooms (if discussed at all) and not incorporated as a transversal approach to all courses, as suggested by the national curriculum. According to teachers, this is because they lack a clear and common language about what a ‘gender focus’ means and how to approach it in schools and because of ongoing disputes over gender in education. The narrow, simplifying ways in which social issues are taught limit students’ grasp of ideas and the possibility of linking what they learn in the classrooms with their daily experiences.

*Pedagogies that do not enable connections between school knowledge and students’ everyday experiences*

The disconnection between school knowledge and students’ social realities and everyday experiences, is another characteristic of the shallow pedagogies we found. At the beginning of the section, we explained how students’ understanding of ‘justice’ was formal and abstract. However, when asked to ‘document’ examples of different forms of justice, students were much more engaged, and they recognised problems that they felt were close to them. When questioned about this, students said teachers rarely acknowledge or create a space to discuss such experiences and to connect them with the work they are doing in class. Many students encountered quite salient contradictions between what they learn in school about different topics and their experiences with related issues in their daily lives, but it was as if they felt comfortable with holding such contradictory ideas side by side.

Several students said they often found ‘more real and complex’ ideas about different issues in the news or social networks than in their schools. In Peru, a country where seven out of ten women have experienced violence from an intimate partner in their lifetimes (INEI, 2021), some students, especially the women, said that those ‘real’ and raw stories they see on the news are not discussed properly inside classrooms, and that schools do not acknowledge the reality and violence women experience in the country. Another student from Ayacucho, who experienced racism and linguistic discrimination for speaking Quechua,<sup>4</sup> challenged the ‘celebratory’ approach to cultural diversity that schools promote, but this was done in the context of our discussions and the student said his school did not open spaces for such discussions

to emerge – which also shows that achieving this kind of thinking is possible when the context allows for it.

These examples show that while school instructions directly clash with some students' lived experiences, the contradictions they identify do not permeate into knowledge-making in schools. It was clear that little or no space was made to support young people to understand or articulate such ideas. While these contradictions were often quite salient and students recognised them, they rarely raised questions about school knowledge or articulated these parallel knowledge spheres themselves. There was a clear and well-assumed separation between school knowledge and experience, which they seemed to take as natural. As we will explain in the following section, this can be understood as a form of epistemic injustice, as school knowledge does not enable students to understand themselves and the realities they inhabit. It comes as no surprise then that students feel disengaged from knowledge-making in schools. Some of them noted how what they learned in school did not make them 'feel' in the same way as when they talked about their experiences. They reflected on how school knowledge often felt less significant and close to them. Other students shared that the social science courses were 'pure theory', with one student from Pucallpa mentioning that because of this, these courses are 'easy' but not interesting or engaging. It is striking that these are precisely the courses where citizenship-related issues, such as discrimination, participation and aspects of sexual education are taught.

It is worth noting that some teachers make an effort to incorporate reality into the classroom. Two teachers, from Huaycán and Pucallpa, were noticeable for this as they used reality either as a mirror to exemplify the theoretical topics they teach or as an example that would contradict the formal knowledge being taught. The teacher in Huaycán, for instance, commented that students' personal experiences can enrich learning in the classroom. He gave the example of how having students whose parents work in activities he was discussing in class provided valuable insights and perspectives in class discussions: 'Without this personal connection, some courses may be seen as purely theoretical or abstract, and may not hold as much significance for the students'.<sup>5</sup> However, in this case, reality is directly related to the fact that it contributes to students validating what the teacher says. His quest for students not to see the content 'as only theoretical' led him to look for reflections of his content in the real world.

The previous is an example of how real-world examples can be used to sediment knowledge and promote empathy among students in relation a social problem. However, the next teacher takes this a step further. She reported that when faced with the solution of 'banning all types of logging' in a session about environmental degradation, students expressed that this was an activity on which many families depended, including their own: 'I have a relative who works in a sawmill,' he says to me, 'he works with wood, that's how he lives, what are we going to do? So, I think, professor, that there should be another solution'.<sup>6</sup> The teacher picked up on this issue in order to promote student reflection on the problem and the different aspects of its solution, which led to a discussion on justice in sustainable development. These examples illustrate two different ways of approaching reality in classrooms. The first approach views reality as an example of taught knowledge, while the second approach acknowledges the contradictions inherent in reality, using them to build knowledge collaboratively with the students. Both approaches rely on students' input

to spot and articulate their experiences, but with different levels of involvement in the production of knowledge.

The role of students' experience in learning has been the subject of debate among scholars at least since Dewey's (1997 [1938]) *Experience and Education*. More recently, bell hooks (1994) has highlighted that integrating experience or 'experiential knowledge' in the classroom can improve learning. However, this must be done while being mindful of the power dynamics that may restrict or enable students' participation – particularly for those from marginalised groups – while also acknowledging that it is not the responsibility of minority students to bring their conflicting experiences into the classroom. This requires, rather, a theory of learning and pedagogical strategies that are open to such experiences but which are rare in Peruvian classrooms. Generally, it seems that teaching prioritises closed answers and solutions over contradictions, despite the potential of contradictions to amplify knowledge and understanding. As hooks (1994: 92) argues, 'collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together ... is also a way to know'.

*Pedagogies that do not enable students to grasp complexity and go beyond individual responsibility*

We have mentioned the lack of critical analysis and acknowledgement of contradictions in school practice. This translates into students' inability to reflect and analyse social problems, their causes and consequences, and the actors involved in them; and leads to an oversimplification of natural, symbolic and social realities that hinders understanding of the complexity and the systemic nature of different problems.

In Peru, this is evident in how the recent history of violent conflict and terrorism that fractured the country between 1980 and 2000 is discussed in schools (if discussed at all), where the past is oversimplified and translated into a binary of 'good' and 'bad' actors, simplistic causes and no consideration of consequences (Reátegui Carrillo et al, 2004). Despite the fact that the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión de Entrega de la CVR, 2008) points to the links between the deep-rooted racism and discrimination historically present in Peruvian society and the conflict,<sup>7</sup> this does not translate into the curriculum or texts. Paulson (2017) also argues that the educational resources incorporate a sanitised version of the internal armed conflict. However, as we shall see, even the development of such sanitised narratives does not ensure that a difficult or 'divisive' topic such as this will make it into classrooms (Lara-Steidel and Thompson, 2023).

Similarly, concepts like 'interculturality' are often taught in binary and simplistic ways. The general approach is to deal with them from a standpoint that celebrates cultural diversity without acknowledging the forms of exclusion, discrimination and racism to which such diversity is associated. It is especially relevant to emphasise that such content is taught to students in the last years of secondary school, who are of an age to have more nuanced discussions. A Social Science teacher we spoke with helps to illustrate this point through an example he gave of how he promotes interculturality and non-discrimination. He said he compared Peru to a 'cholo soup'<sup>8</sup> to represent the mixed racial nature of the Peruvian population. Like a soup, the country was portrayed as a mixture of different ingredients, such as original (Indigenous), forced (Hispanic) and African elements, among others, which converge in the Peruvian identity. Although this identity is presented as a product of different cultures, the final message was that

we are all the same so any form of discrimination would not make sense. This example seems to promote a narrative of ‘cultural hybridity’ – a notion which was originally meant to subvert essentialising understandings of cultural difference (Bhabha, 2012; Marotta, 2020), but which has often been popularised into uncritical narratives of how racial mixture may on its own resolve problems of exclusion and discrimination of racially and culturally distinct groups. The idea of a *cholo* soup ends up diluting all of these different cultures that exist in structures of domination and builds on the lack of contrast with the social reality we explained before.

*Pedagogies that are not prepared to deal with difficult or ‘divisive’ issues*

While oversimplification and sanitisation are common, there are some topics that cannot be sanitised enough and may, consequently, be partially or entirely excluded from classroom practice. In Peru, this is the case with the history of the recent violent conflict which has been a matter of dispute in the country and which teachers prefer not to discuss. Students had some factual information about the conflict, but it was incomplete and, on occasions, incorrect (regarding the historical moment, the actors involved and so on). In general, they did not have a minimally consistent narrative about the period. Their different, partial and contradictory stories also indicated the many versions of the conflict that students arrive at ‘by hearsay’ (they used phrases such as ‘I have heard’, ‘I have been told’). As they pointed out, this is a topic they rarely learn or discuss either at school or at home and about which they are informed sporadically, in a partial and fragmented ways, in the media, social networks and mainly through experiential accounts from relatives. Teachers also shared that this is a topic they prefer not to discuss with their students due to the lack of preparation and guidelines, because of its controversial nature, but mostly because they were afraid of possible reprisals<sup>9</sup> (Uccelli et al, 2017).

Similarly, the ‘gender approach’ is highly controversial in public debate and classrooms. The social transformations that gender equality seeks to promote – which are more overtly political in nature – together with the distortions that arise in the public debate on the subject and the lack of teacher training on the matter, impact teachers’ willingness to approach the topic, and most prefer not to deal with it.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, this overlooks that students have access to plenty of information on the internet about this topic. Thus, it seems that the contestation and politicisation of gender and armed conflict issues in public and political debate have contributed to confusion and fear among teachers, who prefer to avoid the issues. These examples reinforce the idea that schools are not prepared to handle complex social issues. The latter, however, are present in students’ daily lives, which leads them to construct incomplete puzzles about them.

Our analysis – together with that of policies, curricula and textbooks – showed how these different issues that seek to promote transformations towards more just and sustainable societies – and are therefore inherently political – are dealt with in a markedly depoliticised way. While some inherently political topics (such as conflicts and gender) are avoided in classrooms, others are included but cleansed of their political dimensions (such as environmental issues or the intercultural approach). We argue that this lies in the background of the different elements we have already discussed, such as the lack of complexity and problematisation or how conflict-generating elements and contradictions are avoided. Flinders and Buller (2006)

suggest these are typical elements of depoliticisation as a tactic – explicit or not – that aims to cleanse specific actions of their political implications. Furthermore, the depoliticisation of issues leads to the presentation of their solutions as individual responsibilities, such as avoiding environmental degradation simply by not littering or recycling, or limiting inequality by not discriminating. Even though schools seem to contribute to the development of some positive attitudes and dispositions among students, especially in relation to these themes, these ideas sometimes function as mere slogans that students incorporate without developing a full understanding of the issues at stake. The focus on these issues is also devoid of a justice approach in that it does not address the inequalities that structure different problems. The school then appears as a *neutral* place, where knowledge of the social world is not only simplified but also depoliticised and made distant from everyday experience.

Table 1 provides an overview of some of the main characteristics and consequences of the shallow pedagogies we have discussed.

### Concluding remarks: Shallow pedagogies as a form of epistemic injustice

The term ‘shallow pedagogies’ refers to the kinds of practices that give rise to the forms of learning and thinking discussed earlier, which arguably limit students’ capability to participate as equals in the consumption and production of knowledge. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between testimonial and hermeneutic forms of epistemic injustice. While the former occurs when one’s voice is disqualified because of one’s race, origin, gender or other factor, hermeneutic epistemic injustices occur when one is not ‘able to make sense of one’s own experience’ because one lacks the necessary interpretive resources to do so (Geuskens, 2018: 135). The two are related, but we believe that shallow pedagogies are an epistemic injustice mostly of the hermeneutic kind, as they specifically limit young people’s ability to access knowledge, and to understand how knowledge works and what is required to make a contribution. This, in turn, feeds into the discrimination that many young people face, especially those from marginalised communities. Teachers themselves experience this form of epistemic injustice – many of the teachers we worked with in the JustEd study directly alluded to this, comparing the open discussions and opportunities

**Table 1:** Shallow pedagogies: key traits and consequences

What do shallow pedagogies look like?	What are the consequences? What do they erode?
Promote very limited forms of thinking, superficial, unquestioning, with little attention to the importance of justification Do not promote problematisation – no articulation of contradictions Avoidance of topics considered complicated (no-go areas: history of violent conflict) Lack of connection to place and experience that might enable students to make sense of school knowledge and use it to problematise what they experience in their everyday lives (injustices) Individualisation of responsibility – lack of systemic thinking The depoliticisation of contents/knowledge	Sketchy, vague, ‘incomplete puzzles’ of knowledge around various issues Difficulty for expressing own ideas Superficial thinking and lack of critical thinking Opinion-based discussions without arguments and justification Limited epistemic capabilities Transformative action – involvement in changing reality Possibilities to contribute to justice and sustainability

for reflection during our work with the limited top-down ways in which they are trained in Peru; and reflecting on how they are rarely seen as producers of knowledge.

These problems are certainly not inherent to any specific pedagogic model – and certainly, no model would intentionally aim at promoting shallow pedagogies. While we have discussed the emergence of shallow pedagogies in the context of constructivist and outcomes-based reforms, it could be equally argued that traditional teacher-centred and transmission-focused models can also lead to shallow pedagogies through a lack of consideration of students' diverse learning styles and needs, or by not connecting formal knowledge to experience – this is the case in Uganda and Nepal (Nuwategeka, et al, forthcoming; Paudel et al, forthcoming). There is a question, however, about the specific ways in which constructivist epistemologies and pedagogies may undermine deeper forms of learning and the development of epistemic capabilities through their debunking of knowledge and the central role of teachers (Kotzee, 2010). Adding to this, we have noticed, with Hoadley (2018), how place and context, including dynamics of poverty, precarity and marginalisation, bear strongly on pedagogical practice and on how pedagogical models are enacted.

In another paper (Balarin et al, 2021), we noticed how much of the educational literature that incorporates the concept of epistemic injustice has focused on questions of cultural diversity and inclusion. While this is crucial, we believe that the emphasis on addressing epistemic injustice of the hermeneutical kind is equally important because it points to the ways in which 'marginalised groups ... have not been party to the development of the available frameworks for the articulation of experience' (Robertson, 2013: 169). Shallow pedagogies lead to uncritical forms of thinking that also play against inclusive educational agendas, as they may lead students and teachers to embrace simplistic narratives that do not problematise nor point towards the complexity of many problems or to the web of responsibility that may lead to the changes that are necessary for a just and sustainable future.

Fricker (2015) argues that being able to make epistemic contributions – being able to participate in the production and consumption of knowledge to use the definition proposed earlier – is a necessary element for individual and societal well-being. She highlights how one of our most basic needs is to use our reason in order to discern the everyday facts and social meanings that condition, constraint, and make sense of our shared lives. This capacity to make epistemic contributions should be nurtured through education and through pedagogies that form young people's minds to help them grapple with knowledge, to help them understand how knowledge is produced, how knowledge holds, and how it can be questioned, how it can exclude or include; but also that it takes more than expressing personal opinions and views to make a contribution to knowledge.

It is important to note that even if we have recounted the gaps in students' knowledge and limitations in expressing their opinions, this does not imply that they are incapable of participating in discussions or contributing to knowledge-making. The project's methodology revealed that when the space was provided students were eager to reflect, analyse and even challenge the research team. We argue that the difference lies in the conditions that either enable or restrict this kind of exercise. One crucial element of an epistemically just pedagogy is to promote students' capacity for critical thinking, which is characterised by the capacity to analyse arguments and make inferences, as well as to judge and evaluate knowledge claims and make decisions or solve problems. Critical thinking, as Lai (2011: 42) shows, is not just a cognitive

skill, but involved a number of dispositions, attitudes or habits of mind, including ‘open and fair-mindedness, inquisitiveness, flexibility, a propensity to seek reason, a desire to be well informed, and a respect for and willingness to entertain diverse viewpoints’ – all of which can be described as ‘epistemic virtues’ (Kotzee, 2013).

We have shown, however, that the development of critical thinking requires pedagogies that make connections to students’ experiences and realities and that help them ‘problematise’ the natural, cultural and historical reality in which they are immersed, moving beyond simplistic descriptions and explanations of different phenomena, to promote knowledge and understanding of complexity. This is fundamental if education is to ‘empower’ students ‘to alter their relations with nature and social forces’ (Freire, 1973: ix). Shallow pedagogies lead to shallow codification of reality, oversimplifying complex phenomena and reducing the understanding of contradictions, which are inherent to social reality. As a result, they erode students’ knowledge, restrict their ability to make sense of the world that surrounds them and limit their access to epistemic resources that could help them transform it to achieve more just and sustainable futures.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/projects/justed/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Cuarto* and *Quinto de Secundaria* in the Peruvian school system.

<sup>3</sup> Selected courses included: Personal Development and Citizenship, Social Sciences and Science and Technology (respectively *Desarrollo Personal*, *Ciudadanía y Cívica*, *Ciencias Sociales* and *Ciencia y Tecnología*).

<sup>4</sup> Quechua is a family of Indigenous languages spoken in the Peruvian Andes and in several other regions in the country (such as Lima) and South America (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia and Ecuador). Despite its historical relevance and wide use, Quechua speakers have been a target of discrimination and racism because of the language’s Indigenous roots.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Teacher 1, Huaycán.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Teacher 2, Pucallpa.

<sup>7</sup> The CVR argued that discrimination and racism both gave rise to the inequalities in whose name the armed conflict originated, as well as to the atrocities committed against the rural peasantry, both by the terrorist movement Shining Path and by the police and the Armed Forces.

<sup>8</sup> The term *cholo* in Peru refers to the racial and cultural mixture of Indigenous and White populations. While it has often been used as a racial slur; in recent years, the term has been re-appropriated in a more positive way that values that racial mixture.

<sup>9</sup> Such as being charged with ‘apology of terrorism’, which is a criminal offence in Peru.

<sup>10</sup> We found an exception to this in the Ucayali school – a special case in that it was part of a programme implemented by an international cooperation agency that focused on secondary students’ life projects, promoted their rights in schools, and emphasised the importance of democracy and participation, sexual education, and other related aspects.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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