

Epistemic Justice: Deconstructing Western Education Systems, Teaching African Histories, Values and Recognizing Indigenous Philosophies

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Epistemic Justice: Deconstructing Western Education Systems, Teaching African Histories, Values and Recognizing Indigenous Philosophies

Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how epistemic justice can be achieved in education systems in Africa and the Global South. The paper observes that the current education systems in Africa and the Global South raise epistemic injustices due to dominance of Western education systems, languages and philosophies. The paper argues that the use of Western education systems in Africa and the Global South undermines indigenous education systems, philosophies, values and languages which provide an effective approach for inclusive, responsive, ethical and culturally-appropriate education. In light of these concerns, the paper examines how epistemic justice can be realised in the education sector in Africa and the Global South by deconstructing Western education systems, teaching African histories, values and recognizing indigenous philosophies.

1.0 Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in the Sustainable Development agenda. It has been observed that education empowers people with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors to live in a way that is good for the environment, economy, and society¹. Education promotes competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, innovation and collaboration which are key in unlocking the environmental, social and economic facets of Sustainable Development². It has been argued that at the heart of creating a sustainable future for all lies education³. In particular, education not only enlightens individuals and societies about pressing environmental, economic, and social problems but also equips them with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to drive meaningful change towards sustainability⁴.

The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁵ recognises the fundamental role of education in fostering development. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all in order to promote Sustainable

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¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Education for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

² Education for Sustainable Development Policy for the Education Sector., Available at <https://www.education.go.ke/sites/default/files/2022-05/Education-for-Sustainable-Development-Policy-for-the-Education-Sector.pdf> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

³ Role of Education in Sustainable Development., Available at <https://icecd.org/blog/role-of-education-in-sustainable-development/> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

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Development⁶. It has been observed that SDG 4 places education at the centre of Sustainable Development since it recognises that education is the key that will allow many other SDGs to be achieved⁷.

Due to its fundamental importance, it has been correctly pointed out that education is a basic human right that is key in lifting people out of poverty, ensuring equality within and among nations and promoting Sustainable Development⁸. Education has been described as a key human right, a powerful driver of development, and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving human well-being by promoting health, gender equality, peace, and stability⁹. As a result, states have an obligation to protect, respect, and fulfil the right to education for all without any form of discrimination in order to foster Sustainable Development¹⁰.

Despite its key role as a driver of Sustainable Development, it has been observed that there are prevailing gaps in education systems all over the world with many children and the youth lacking access to quality education¹¹. Further, there are several financial, gender, capacity, and technical among other barriers that prevent many people including vulnerable and marginalized populations from accessing quality education¹². In particular, it has been pointed out that education systems are not inclusive and diverse with indigenous philosophies, knowledge systems, values, histories and languages often marginalized due dominance of Western education systems all over the world¹³. Consequently, it is imperative to foster epistemic justice by ensuring inclusivity and diversity in education in order to achieve Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how epistemic justice can be achieved in education systems in Africa and the Global South. The paper observes that the current education systems in Africa and the Global South raise epistemic injustices due to dominance of Western education systems, languages and philosophies. The paper argues that the use of Western education systems in Africa and the Global South undermines indigenous education systems, philosophies, values and languages which provide an effective approach for inclusive, responsive, ethical and culturally-appropriate education. In light of these concerns, the paper examines how epistemic justice can be realised in the education sector in Africa and the Global South by deconstructing Western education systems, teaching African histories, values and recognizing indigenous philosophies.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ United Nations., 'Goal 4: Quality Education' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/#:~:text=Education%20is%20the%20key%20that,and%20to%20reach%20gender%20equality> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'The Right to Education' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-education> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁹ World Bank Group., 'Education' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

¹⁰ Understanding Education as a Right., Available at <https://www.right-to-education.org/page/understanding-education-right> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

¹¹ Kuppens. L., 'Quality Education Means Empowerment' Available at <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/quality-education-means-empowerment> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Nwauwa. A.O., 'Western Education and the Rise of a New African Elite in West Africa' Available at <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-282?p=emailAULjLfsAt2ouM&d=/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-282> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

2.0 The need for Epistemic Justice in Education Systems

Epistemic justice is a concept that focuses on fairness in knowledge production, dissemination, and utilisation¹⁴. It has been observed that epistemic justice seeks to promote more inclusive knowledge creation with emphasis on marginalised voices¹⁵. At its core, epistemic justice appreciates diversity, inclusivity and different ways of knowing¹⁶. This concept challenges epistemic injustices which arise due to discrimination and inequality that relates to people as knowers¹⁷. Epistemic injustice means that some people are unable to participate equally in the production, dissemination and circulation of knowledge¹⁸. In addition, it has been observed that epistemic injustice refers to knowledge shaping by power relations and exclusion of marginalised groups from these processes¹⁹.

Epistemic justice is therefore a key ideal that appreciates different forms of knowledge. Epistemic justice is particularly important in education. In the context of education, it has been observed that epistemic justice recognizes that education systems have for a long time favoured the transmission of predominantly Western education and knowledge systems, generated in former colonizing nations, that were and are imposed on a large part of humanity at the cost of the loss of knowledge and ways of knowing (epistemologies) generated by indigenous peoples and local communities especially in the Global South²⁰. Since epistemic justice focuses on who generates knowledge and how certain perspectives and forms of knowledge can be negated or marginalized by dominant conceptions of valid knowledge, this concept is fundamental in the education sector since it challenges the dominance and overreliance on Western education systems at the expense of other forms of knowledge including indigenous knowledge systems and philosophies²¹.

It has been observed that epistemic injustices are prevalent in education systems²². Epistemic injustice is a negative phenomenon that significantly impacts students' access to knowledge and their experiences in learning environments²³. Epistemic injustice in education occurs when students are unjustly and unfairly treated or excluded based on their social identities, including race, language, gender, origin, or

¹⁴ Duchkova. H., & Leventon. J., 'Epistemic justice: How can diverse forms of knowledge improve policy making?' Available at https://sshcentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/01-Literature-Briefs_SSH-and-epistemic-justice.pdf (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Kilungu. N., 'Pluriversalism and Artificial Intelligence in Africa: Toward a Decolonial Epistemic Reconstitution' Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/pluriversalism-artificial-intelligence-africa-toward-mwelu-kilungu-g-oqi1f/> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

¹⁷ Epistemic Injustice: What Is It and How Does It Relate to Poverty?., Available at <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/epistemic-injustice/> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Duchkova. H., & Leventon. J., 'Epistemic justice: How can diverse forms of knowledge improve policy making?' Op Cit

²⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Epistemic justice and the knowledge commons for lifelong and lifewide learning' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/epistemic-justice-and-knowledge-commons-lifelong-and-lifewide-learning> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

²¹ Balarin. M et al., 'Exploring Epistemic Justice in Educational Research' Available at <https://zenodo.org/record/5502143/files/FINAL%20epistemic%20justice%20paper.pdf?download=1> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

²² Omodan. B.I., 'Unveiling Epistemic Injustice in Education: A critical analysis of alternative approaches' *Social Sciences & Humanities Open.*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2023

²³ Ibid

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socioeconomic status, resulting in the devaluation or dismissal of their unique knowledge and perspectives²⁴. It has been correctly observed that education systems across the globe have for a long time incorporated and reproduced approaches to knowledge that have often resulted in disqualifying other forms of knowledge and knowing²⁵. For example, in the Global South, indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, philosophies and values are usually excluded from education policies undermining quality education²⁶. In particular, it has been observed that the introduction of western education systems in Africa has undermined traditional African education systems and philosophies which have been practiced in the continent for many centuries²⁷. Most school systems in Africa and the Global South reflect Euro-centric curricula which alienates indigenous cultures and knowledge systems²⁸.

Further, it has been observed that the use of Western languages fuels epistemic injustices by undermining access to quality education in the Global South²⁹. United Nations notes that due to westernization of education, many learners are taught in languages they do not fully understand undermining their ability to learn effectively, express themselves and reach their full potential³⁰. It is estimated that approximately 37 per cent of learners in low- and middle-income countries are not taught in the language that they best speak and understand with this figure rising up to 90 cent of learners in some countries³¹. In particular, indigenous youth in the Global South are often taught in foreign languages that they do not fully comprehend setting them apart from their culture and impacting their self-development³². It has been observed that languages especially indigenous languages have throughout history evolved with their environment, meaning that they often have words and concepts specifically adapted within the geographical location of the indigenous or local community³³. The use of European languages including

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Balarin. M et al., 'Exploring Epistemic Justice in Educational Research' Op Cit

²⁶ Mart. C.T., 'British colonial Education Policy in Africa' *Internal journal of English and literature* Vol. 2(9), pp. 190-194, December 2011

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Available at <https://www.msingiafrikamagazine.com/2022/01/the-history-and-development-of-education-in-afrika/> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

²⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Epistemic justice and the knowledge commons for lifelong and lifewide learning' Op Cit

³⁰ United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/mother-language-day#:~:text=Ensuring%20that%20education%20systems%20support,engagement%2C%20and%20critical%20thinking%20skills> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

³¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Make languages count for Sustainable Development' Available at https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/12/imld-2025-cn-en_0.pdf (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

³² United Nations., 'Importance of Indigenous Education and Culture Highlighted, as Permanent Forum Continues Second Session' Available at <https://press.un.org/en/2003/hr4674.doc.htm> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

³³ United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security., '5 Ways Languages Contribute to a Safer and More Inclusive World' Available at <https://unu.edu/ehs/series/5-ways-languages-contribute-safer-and-more-inclusive-world#:~:text=Languages%20are%20libraries%20of%20information,adaptive%20capacity%20as%20a%20species> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

English, French, Spanish and Portuguese in education systems in Africa and the Global South therefore undermines access to quality education fueling epistemic injustices³⁴.

In light of the foregoing concerns, it is imperative to foster epistemic justice in order to ensure access to quality education in Africa and the Global South for Sustainable Development.

3.0 Towards Epistemic Justice in Education in Africa and the Global South

The use of Western education systems in Africa and the Global South has led to marginalisation of valuable approaches to knowledge including indigenous values, knowledge systems, languages and philosophies raising epistemic injustices. According to epistemic justice, every person has the right to their own knowledge including ways of generating, legitimizing and valuing it³⁵. It has been observed that in the context of education, epistemic justice includes the right to know about one's history, culture and values, and the right to learn in one's native language³⁶.

It is therefore imperative to deconstruct Western education systems in Africa and the Global South in order to promote epistemic justice. It has been observed that Westernization of education in the Global South particularly in Africa has led to the exclusion of African culture, histories, languages and indigenous knowledge systems undermining the quest towards quality, inclusive and appropriate education in Africa³⁷. For many centuries, communities in Africa have had their own unique and rich indigenous education systems, philosophies, values and practices³⁸. Education in African societies was based on oral literature that took various forms including folktales, myths, proverbs and songs³⁹. It is therefore necessary to reinvigorate indigenous education systems, values and philosophies in Africa towards inclusive and quality education in the continent for epistemic justice and Sustainable Development.

In particular, it is imperative to teach African histories towards epistemic justice. It has been observed that history plays an important role in education systems by giving people a sense of identity and connecting them with their past⁴⁰. By teaching African histories, it is possible to foster Afrocentric narratives that have long been sidelined by the current Western education systems⁴¹. It has been observed that education about the history of Africa in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings continues to be dominated by Eurocentric perspectives, which has led to imbalanced and inaccurate representation of Africa's history and preconceptions⁴². According to the African Union, teaching of African histories provides the necessary paradigm shift with the core theme of the entire education curriculum being a

³⁴ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

³⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Epistemic justice and the knowledge commons for lifelong and lifewide learning' Op Cit

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Mart. C.T., 'British colonial Education Policy in Africa' Op Cit

³⁸ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ The Importance of History Education in the 21st Century., Available at <https://online.ewu.edu/degrees/education/master-arts-history/history-education-in-21st-century/> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁴¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Mainstreaming the General History of Africa into education systems: The curriculum pathway' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mainstreaming-general-history-africa-education-systems-curriculum-pathway> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁴² Ibid

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strong affirmation of Africa's rich, diverse and dynamic history⁴³. It is therefore imperative to teach African histories towards epistemic justice.

In addition there is need to embrace indigenous philosophies and values in education systems in Africa. It has been observed that indigenous education systems and philosophies in Africa and the Global South emphasize core values including cooperation, a sense of community, tolerance and co-existence⁴⁴. For instance, the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* can transform learning since it focuses on interconnectedness, harmony, community and collective growth⁴⁵. By recognizing indigenous philosophies including *Ubuntu*, it is possible to build holistic, ethical and culturally-appropriate education systems in Africa which unlock the capacity of learners to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality⁴⁶.

Fostering epistemic justice in the education systems in Africa and the Global South also involves teaching learners in indigenous languages. By including and harnessing all languages in education, it is possible to foster a deeper connection between education and culture, contributing to more inclusive and equitable societies for Sustainable Development⁴⁷. In particular, it has been observed that teaching in indigenous and local languages in Africa can enhance the quality of education by ensuring that students are taught in languages they fully understand and comprehend while also ensuring that education fits to local needs and circumstances in the continent⁴⁸.

Through the foregoing, it is possible to achieve epistemic justice in education systems in Africa and the Global South.

4.0 Conclusion

Westernization of education systems in Africa and the Global South fuels epistemic injustices by undermining indigenous histories, knowledge systems, values, languages and philosophies. Consequently, there is need to promote epistemic justice in education systems in order to achieve quality, appropriate, inclusive and responsive education towards Sustainable Development⁴⁹. Achieving this goal involves deconstructing Western education systems by teaching Africa histories, values and recognizing the role of indigenous philosophies and languages in education.

⁴³ African Union., 'Teaching of African History Pathways to Africa's Renaissance and Integration' Available at <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20240530/teaching-african-history-pathways-africas-renaissance-and-integration> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁴⁴ The History and Development of Education in Afrika., Op Cit

⁴⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Ubuntu in education: Special issue of IRE explores the philosophy of connectedness' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ubuntu-education-special-issue-ire-explores-philosophy-connectedness> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁴⁶ Ubuntu in Education: Towards equitable teaching and learning for all in the era of SDG 4., Available at <https://www.norrageducation.org/ubuntu-in-education-towards-equitable-teaching-and-learning-for-all-in-the-era-of-sdg-4-by-chiedza-a-chinhanu-and-seun-b-adebayo/> (Accessed on 24/06/2026)

⁴⁷ United Nations., 'International Mother Language Day: 21 February' Op Cit

⁴⁸ United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security., '5 Ways Languages Contribute to a Safer and More Inclusive World' Op Cit

⁴⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Epistemic justice and the knowledge commons for lifelong and lifewide learning' Op Cit

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