

BRIDGING THE EPISTEMIC DIVIDE: A CONTEXTUALIST RECONCILIATION OF INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

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Abstract

The longstanding debate between internalism and externalism in epistemology centers on the nature of epistemic justification, whether it depends solely on factors accessible to the subject's conscious reflection or also on external conditions such as the reliability of the belief-forming process. Internalism emphasizes epistemic responsibility and rational transparency, while externalism prioritizes a belief's objective connection to truth. This dichotomy has produced a deep epistemological divide between the subjective accessibility of justification and the objective conditions for truth-conduciveness. This study proposes a contextualist reconciliation of the two positions, arguing that justification is best understood as context-sensitive rather than exclusively internal or external. The reconciliation is extended into the philosophy of education, where parallel tensions arise: should educators prioritize students' ability to articulate reasons for their beliefs, or ensure those beliefs are formed through reliable, truth-conducive learning environments? By showing how contextualism accommodates both aims, the article offers a pluralistic, theoretically unified model of justification that informs both epistemology and educational practice. This framework enables educators to calibrate epistemic expectations according to learners' developmental stage, stakes, and subject matter, preserving the normative rigor of internalism and the empirical strengths of externalism.

Keywords: Internalism, Externalism, Contextualism, Justification, Philosophy of Education, Epistemology

Introduction

The internalism-externalism debate in epistemology has long occupied a central place in contemporary discussions of knowledge and justification. The debate centres around the nature of epistemic justifiers, or factors that contribute to a belief's justification status. The distinction between internalism and externalism also concerns the question of what kind of factors contribute to the positive epistemic status of a belief. Epistemic internalists and externalists disagree deeply about this. The question is: is justification wholly determined by what goes on

inside and from the first-person perspective, or does how beliefs are caused, formed, and what relations subjects bear to their environment prove relevant to whether or not justification obtains? At first glance, the disagreement appears to be an abstract dispute among philosophers over the proper analysis of epistemic concepts. Yet beneath the surface lies a profound set of questions about human cognition, rationality, and intellectual responsibility. At stake is not merely the technical definition of “justification,” but the very standards by which we evaluate beliefs as rational or irrational, responsible or irresponsible, trustworthy or unreliable. Internalism insists that justification must be accessible to the agent’s cognitive perspective. A person is justified in believing *p* only if they can, in principle, access the reasons or grounds for *p* through reflection. In contrast, externalism maintains that justification depends not on what the agent can access, but on whether the belief arises from a truth-conducive process. Internalism privileges transparency and accountability, while externalism privileges reliability and connection to truth. When this is transposed into the philosophy of education, this distinction becomes more than theoretical. It directly influences pedagogical priorities, curriculum design, and assessment practices. It borders on the question whether we should measure students’ epistemic success by their ability to justify beliefs through explicit reasoning, or whether we should evaluate educational outcomes based on whether instructional processes reliably lead students to true beliefs (externalism). Each approach resonates with core educational ideals, that is, critical thinking on one side, trust in expertise and structured learning on the other. These, however, face limitations when applied rigidly (Siegel, 1988; Pritchard, 2014).

Laurence Bonjour (1985), proposing an internalist position, argued that epistemic justification requires accessible reasons. In consonance with this, a belief counts as justified only if the believer can, at least in principle, bring to awareness the grounds that support it. The emphasis is on reflective access, and this resonates strongly with educational traditions that value metacognition, critical thinking, and intellectual autonomy. The well-educated student is not simply one who holds true beliefs but one who can defend them with reasons, respond to objections, and situate them within a wider framework of knowledge (Paul & Elder, 2014). In contrast, Alvin Goldman (1979, 1986, 1999) articulated an externalist vision through reliabilism, which measures justification by the reliability of the processes that produced the belief. According to Goldman, a person may be justified even without reflective access to reasons, provided the belief-forming process is dependable in yielding truth. When it comes to the terrain

of education, Goldman's insight legitimises much of how students acquire knowledge in early and intermediate stages: through testimony, expert instruction, and structured pedagogical processes. A child can be justified in believing that the Earth orbits the Sun without being able to produce astronomical calculations; it is enough that her belief arises from a reliable instructional environment.

The debate, however, cannot be resolved by choosing one side and dismissing the other. As critics of internalism such as Plantinga (1993) and Alston (1989) observe, requiring universal reflective access imposes unrealistic cognitive demands, especially on children and novices. Conversely, one could argue that an education that merely transmits reliable beliefs without cultivating reflective capacities risks producing intellectually passive learners vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation. There then comes an impasse: Which of the divides do we stand on? This is where contextualism comes in and seems to provide a way forward. Thinkers such as Lewis (1996) and Cohen (1999) argue that the standards for justification are context-sensitive: what counts as knowledge in everyday contexts may not suffice in high-stakes or sceptical contexts. In the field of education, this would mean that epistemic demands should vary with developmental stages, subject matter, and stakes. In early learning, reliable belief-formation may suffice; in advanced study, accessible justification becomes essential. This mirrors Wood, Brunner and Ross's (1976) pedagogical principle of scaffolding, in which learners are gradually guided toward greater independence and reflective capacity by a teacher or parent.

This paper pursues a dual aim. First, it provides a critical exposition of internalism and externalism in the wake of Gettier and explores their philosophical merits and limitations. Second, it extends the debate into philosophy of education, showing how contextualism can serve as a pedagogical bridge between epistemic responsibility and reliability. By staging an intellectual dialogue among Bonjour, Goldman, Anderson, Lewis, Cohen, and Vygotsky, the paper develops a robust account of justification that is both philosophically rigorous and educationally practical.

2.0 Post-Gettier Epistemological Impulse and Educational Parallels

The modern trajectory of epistemology cannot be understood without reckoning with the impact of Edmund Gettier's (1963) challenge to the classical tripartite analysis of knowledge, that is, knowledge as justified true belief. This account of knowledge is called the standard analysis. It is thought to provide the conditions that are necessary and jointly sufficient for a case of knowledge

to be established. This account of knowledge stipulates that for a case of knowledge to be established, what is claimed must be true, the knower must believe it and be justified in believing it. For me, it seems right to expect that if I claim to know the proposition that “There is a dog in Mr. Toluwa’s compound” (P), it must be true that such a fact obtains. This, as Dada (2015) explains, “shows that knowledge excludes error. ...[and] in advancing a knowledge claim, I express my commitment to the truth of some propositions and also present myself as epistemically entitled to this commitment” (p. 26). I think it is also right to expect that if I know that P, I must believe that P. This shows as Dada also argues “that knowledge excludes ignorance. It amounts to non-congruity and inconsistency to claim to know what one does not believe (2015, p. 26). The third condition is the evidence condition, which deals with the question of justification. What this requires is that knowledge requires evidence for what one claims to know. Consequently, there is a difference between believing what is true and knowing what is true. It is the justification aspect of knowledge that gives credence to it and prevents epistemic luck. For centuries, philosophers had treated the JTB account as the gold standard. If a belief was true, sincerely held, and justified, it seemed sufficient to call it knowledge. Gettier’s two-page paper overturned this consensus by presenting scenarios in which these conditions were met, yet knowledge was still absent. What this means is that even when the JTB account is satisfied, a case of knowledge may not have been established.

In one of Gettier’s cases, a man believes that “the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket,” based on strong evidence that Smith will be hired. Unknown to him, Jones will actually get the job, and Jones also happens to have ten coins in his pocket. The belief is true, justified, and sincerely held, but intuitively it is not knowledge. The problem is epistemic luck: the truth of the belief is too accidental to count as knowledge. Gettier’s challenge forced epistemologists to rethink justification. Internalists like BonJour doubled down on the need for accessible reasons; externalists like Goldman shifted focus to the reliability of processes. The “post-Gettier impulse” thus set the stage for the modern internalism-externalism debate.

2.1 Internalism’s Post-Gettier Response

BonJour (1985), a staunch defender of internalism, interpreted the Gettier problem as a call to refine and intensify the demands of justification. He argues that the weakness of the JTB account lies in its willingness to grant knowledge without ensuring that the believer can *access* and *reflect* on the grounds for the belief. Bonjour and Sosa (2003) think that a person is justified

in believing a proposition only if the person is in a position to know what his justification is; that is, the justifying reason for any belief must be “cognitively available to the believer himself, within his cognitive grasp or ken” (24). This is to say that justification consists in or depends on factors that are internal to the agent’s perspective, that is, internal to his mind and accessible on reflection. In other words, it must be within his cognitive grasp. The germane question now is what does it mean for something to be “accessible on reflection”? This would mean, according to Lemos, for instance, in the case of beliefs or perceptual experience, that “I can direct my attention to them and tell through introspection whether I do in fact have those beliefs or perceptual experience” (2007, 109). In this model, justification is not a hidden property lodged deep within cognitive processes but a normatively accessible condition, something the epistemic agent must be able to introspectively access and articulate if queried. Without this accessibility, for BonJour, we drift into a form of epistemic irresponsibility: beliefs may be true but are held in the dark, insulated from rational scrutiny.

This concern, as articulated by BonJour, carries unmistakable educational resonance. In a mathematics classroom, for instance, a student may arrive at the correct solution to an algebraic equation purely by guesswork or by mimicking a peer’s work without comprehension. From an internalist perspective, such a belief, though correct, is epistemically deficient because the learner cannot demonstrate the reasoning that led to it. In BonJour’s educational analogue, knowing *that* something is the case is insufficient; one must also know why it is the case and be able to articulate it. If we imagine BonJour addressing a room of educators, his warning would be clear: “If your students leave your classroom with correct answers but without accessible reasons, you have failed them epistemically. Their beliefs may be true, but they do not count as knowledge in the fullest sense.” This view resonates strongly with pedagogical traditions that prize critical thinking, debate, and reflective self-awareness. Socratic questioning, for instance, insists on accessible reasons, pressing students beyond correctness into justification and coherence. Likewise, Deweyan pragmatism prizes reflective inquiry over static recall, treating education as the cultivation of dispositions toward thoughtful problem-solving rather than the accumulation of correct outputs. And in contemporary pedagogy, the move toward “teaching for understanding” reflects the same anxiety: correctness without reasoning risks producing students who can perform well on standardized tests but cannot navigate novel, messy, or ambiguous situations.

2.2 Externalism's Post-Gettier Reorientation

In contrast, Alvin Goldman (1979, 1986) responded to the post-Gettier crisis by reframing the very meaning of justification. Goldman proposed reliabilism, according to which a belief is justified if it is formed by a cognitive process that tends to produce a high proportion of true beliefs. Reflective access, in his account, is not a necessary condition for justification. For Goldman (1986), the justificatory status of a belief is determined by how it is produced, not by what the subject can tell about its production. The appeal of Goldman's approach lies in its recognition of human cognitive limitations. Much of what we know, for instance, the chemical composition of water, the existence of distant galaxies, or the historical reality of past events, is grounded in testimony, perception, and memory. For most of these beliefs, we cannot reconstruct the full justificatory chain, yet we remain justified in holding them if they were produced by processes that are reliable.

In education, Goldman's model would legitimise the reality that learners, especially at early stages, acquire much of their knowledge by trusting reliable sources rather than by engaging in exhaustive reasoning. A Year 3 pupil who believes that "the Earth orbits the Sun" because her teacher said so in a well-designed science lesson is, on the externalist account, justified despite being unable to produce the astronomical evidence herself. Goldman would remind educators: "Do not underestimate the legitimacy of testimony. To demand that every belief be independently verified by the learner is to misunderstand both human epistemic practice and the educational enterprise."

Elizabeth Anderson (2011) extends the discussion by foregrounding the social dimensions of justification, particularly the role of epistemic trust. She warns that in complex societies, individuals must often rely on expert testimony, but such reliance is only justified when the social systems producing and transmitting knowledge are themselves reliable. Anderson's analysis resonates powerfully in education, where almost all student beliefs are acquired via testimony. She reminds us that reliability is socially contingent: curricula can be biased, teaching can be incompetent, and resources can be outdated. In such cases, the epistemic standing of students' beliefs is compromised, despite their diligence. Anderson's critical point introduces urgency into the externalist project: epistemic reliability cannot be taken for granted; it must be institutionally safeguarded.

Let us take this to the educational terrain. Consider two classroom scenarios. In the first, a group of primary school students learns the phases of the Moon through direct instruction, guided observation, and reliable visual aids. Here, externalist criteria dominate: the students' justification rests on the trustworthiness of the instructional process, not on their ability to calculate orbital mechanics. In the second scenario, a group of postgraduate astronomy students prepares to defend their theses. Here, internalist demands are paramount: students must be able to articulate the empirical and theoretical grounds for their claims, respond to counterarguments, and critically evaluate their own reasoning. Contextualism (Cohen, 1999; Lewis, 1996) captures the shift between these two scenarios: the justificatory threshold rises with the stakes and the sophistication of the inquiry.

3.0 Externalism and Educational Reliability

Externalism emerged as a formidable response to the perceived limitations of internalism, particularly in the wake of the post-Gettier crisis. Where internalism insists that justification depends on factors accessible to the believer's reflective awareness, externalism relocates epistemic value in the reliability of the processes that generate belief. Within this framework, justification is not a matter of what the subject can *access* introspectively, but of whether the belief originates in a process that tends, objectively, to produce truth. This reorientation carries immense implications for educational philosophy. Schools and universities are institutions designed to transmit knowledge. But what kind of epistemic environment must they provide for students to emerge as justified believers? Externalism offers one answer: reliable cognitive and social processes. The externalist insists that the justification of a learner's belief does not require reflective transparency, but rather dependable mechanisms of instruction and assessment that are properly truth-conducive.

3.1 Goldman's Reliabilism: Justification without Transparency

Goldman's reliabilism (1979, 1986) is perhaps the most influential externalist theory. According to Goldman, a belief is justified "if and only if it is produced by a reliable cognitive process," that is, one which typically yields a high ratio of true to false beliefs (1979, p. 10). Crucially, the subject need not know that the process is reliable. By this token, epistemic justification is best understood as a matter of causal connection to truth. If a student believes that water boils at 100°C because she was taught this fact in a science class based on accurate materials, her belief

is justified—even if she cannot articulate the principles of atmospheric pressure or reproduce the experiments that establish this claim. The justificatory status of her belief depends on the reliability of the teaching process, not on her reflective grasp of it. Goldman (1986) was explicit about the radical nature of this move: “The justificatory status of a belief is determined by how it is produced, not by what the subject can tell about its production” (p. 230). Reliabilism, thus, legitimises the vast amount of testimony-based knowledge we all rely upon. In educational terms, Goldman could be seen as defending the legitimacy of the common classroom reality: most learners acquire knowledge without being able to reconstruct the entire justificatory chain. A primary school child is epistemically justified in believing that dinosaurs once roamed the Earth, even if she cannot personally evaluate the fossil record. Her belief is produced by processes that are themselves considered reliable, namely, science education, curated textbooks and the testimony of experts.

Imagine Goldman addressing a group of teachers: “You must understand that your students’ justification does not hinge upon their reflective sophistication. If your instructional methods are well-designed and truth-conducive, then your students are justified in holding the beliefs you impart. Do not despair when a ten-year-old cannot articulate the epistemic underpinnings of heliocentrism. If the belief arises from your reliable teaching, it is knowledge.” This perspective is refreshing for educators frustrated by the unrealistic cognitive demands sometimes implicit in internalist expectations. It allows teachers to see their role not merely as facilitators of reasoning but as builders of reliable epistemic environments.

3.2 The Educational Risks of Pure Externalism

While externalism accommodates the reality that much knowledge is non-reflective, critics raise serious concerns about its educational application. One of such concerns is the risk of producing epistemically passive learners. The problem is that if justification requires only reliability, students may acquire vast quantities of true beliefs without the capacity to interrogate or defend them. Imagine two students graduating from secondary school. Both know many scientific truths. Student A can explain the reasoning and evidence behind them; Student B cannot, having acquired them through rote learning or testimony. In stable environments, their epistemic status might seem similar. But in a world rife with misinformation, Student A is far better equipped to resist falsehoods. Bonjour (1985) warned that externalism, if untethered from internalist

demands, risks hollowing out epistemic responsibility. Educationally, this translates into a danger: externalist systems may produce factually informed but intellectually fragile learners.

However, the point made above is not to say that externalism does not have any place in education. For all it is worth, externalism provides a powerful lens for understanding justification in education. It acknowledges the legitimacy of testimonial and non-reflective learning, thereby legitimising much of what happens in classrooms. It also shifts attention to the reliability of educational systems, reminding us that epistemic responsibility rests not only with learners but with institutions. Yet externalism alone is not sufficient. Without internalist safeguards, learners risk becoming epistemically passive. Without contextualist calibration, educators risk misapplying epistemic standards. The enduring value of externalism lies in its insistence that much of what we know is mediated through reliable processes. Education must therefore focus not only on cultivating critical reasoning but on safeguarding the reliability of its institutions. When combined with internalist ideals and contextualist flexibility, externalism contributes to a holistic epistemic pedagogy that is both realistic and normatively robust.

4.0 Contextualism as a Pedagogical Bridge

As already noted, internalists emphasise accessible reasons and reflective responsibility; externalists stress reliable processes and truth-conducive faculties. While both positions capture important insights, neither, when taken in isolation, seems sufficient. Internalism risks overburdening learners with unrealistic cognitive demands, while externalism risks producing epistemically passive believers. However, when contextualism is brought into the debate, it seems to provide a bridge and offers a way forward. The crux of contextualism is that epistemic standards shift depending on context. This allows us to reconcile the core insights of both internalism and externalism. In education, contextualism provides a powerful framework for calibrating epistemic expectations across developmental stages, subject domains, and stakes. In this section, we argue that contextualism functions as a pedagogical bridge, enabling educators to balance the virtues of internalist responsibility with the efficiencies of externalist reliability.

David Lewis (1996) introduced contextualism through his influential essay “Elusive Knowledge”. He argues that the standards for knowledge vary depending on conversational and practical context. Lewis compared epistemic standards to the rules of a game: just as what counts as “in bounds” depends on the sport being played, what counts as “knowledge” depends on

contextual factors such as what alternatives are salient and how much is at stake. Stewart Cohen (1999) advanced a similar view when he stressed that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions shift with context. In low-stakes conversations, saying “I know where my car is parked” may be justified even if one cannot rule out skeptical possibilities (e.g., car theft). But in higher-stakes contexts, for instance, when giving testimony in court, the same claim requires stronger justification. Lewis might tell educators: “The epistemic scoreboard changes with context. Your Year 3 student need not meet the same justificatory standards as your graduate researcher. The word ‘knows’ is context-sensitive, and so should be your pedagogical standards.” Cohen would add: “Indeed. Standards rise with stakes. It is not inconsistency, but an implicit contextual calibration already built into our epistemic practices.” Thus, contextualism does not collapse into relativism; rather, it recognises that epistemic standards are sensitive to legitimate contextual factors. The challenge for education is to apply this sensitivity responsibly.

4.2 Contextualism in Classroom Practice

There is no doubt about the fact that educational contexts are inherently diverse. In a primary school science class, externalist criteria suffice: students justifiably believe scientific facts taught by reliable teachers and resources. They cannot, and should not, be expected to independently verify these claims. This is because primary school children are at a developmental stage where they do not yet possess the cognitive maturity, methodological training, or background knowledge to independently evaluate scientific claims. By contrast, in advanced university study, internalist demands dominate: students must not only hold true beliefs but also be able to defend them with reasons and evidence. At this stage, it is no longer sufficient to simply trust authority; they must be able to access and articulate reasons for why their beliefs are justified. Consider two scenarios:

1. Primary Classroom: A teacher tells students that penguins are birds. The students justifiably believe this, not because they can articulate taxonomic criteria, but because the belief arises from a reliable pedagogical process.
2. Graduate Seminar: A zoology doctoral student defends a thesis on avian evolution. Here, the justificatory bar is much higher: she must provide evidence, respond to objections, and critically engage with counter-arguments.

Contextualism reconciles these scenarios. Both the primary school child and the doctoral candidate “know,” but under different standards calibrated to context.

Contextualism aligns strikingly with Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky, learners progress most effectively when instruction targets tasks just beyond their current competence, supported by scaffolding from more knowledgeable others. Translated into epistemic terms, contextualism can be seen as a form of scaffolding for justification. In the early stages, learners are provided with reliable information without the burden of reflective access. As they mature, the justificatory demands are gradually increased until they are capable of independent rational defence. If Lewis, Cohen, and Vygotsky were in dialogue, Vygotsky might say: “What you philosophers call shifting standards, I call developmental readiness. The role of the educator is to calibrate epistemic expectations in tandem with cognitive growth.” This convergence suggests that contextualism is not merely a theoretical position in epistemology but a principle with profound pedagogical utility. Without contextualism, internalism risks imposing inappropriate burdens on learners. Imagine a history teacher requiring ten-year-olds to provide archival evidence for every historical claim. The students may become frustrated, disengaged, or overwhelmed. On the other side, unqualified externalism risks producing students who accept authority uncritically, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation. Contextualism mitigates both risks by recognising that epistemic demands should vary with context. Standards must rise as stakes and competence increase, but they must not be prematurely imposed. This balance allows for the gradual cultivation of intellectual autonomy without sacrificing early epistemic reliability.

4.3 The Risk of Relativism and the Contextualist Response

Critics worry that contextualism verges on relativism. If standards can shift, does “knowledge” lose its normative force? Cohen (1999) insists the answer is no. Contextual variation is not arbitrary; it is governed by rationally relevant factors such as stakes, alternatives, and practical interests. In education, this means teachers cannot simply lower standards to excuse poor performance. Contextualism demands calibration, not abandonment. A Year 3 pupil is not expected to defend heliocentrism with astronomical calculations, but a graduate astronomy student is. Standards are adjusted to context but remain anchored in truth-conducive practices. Let us consider three illustrative cases.

Case 1: Low-Stakes Learning (Reliability Dominant). A Year 2 class learns that whales are mammals. The students justifiably believe this based on the reliable testimony of their teacher and textbook.

Case 2: Intermediate Learning (Mixed Standards). A Year 9 biology class investigates animal classification. Students must research evidence, present arguments, and justify claims. Here, both reliability and accessible justification play roles.

Case 3: High-Stakes Inquiry (Internalism Dominant). A postgraduate student defends a thesis in zoology. Here, justificatory demands are at their peak: accessible reasons, critical engagement, and anticipation of objections.

In all three cases, learners “know.” But what counts as justification varies with context. This flexibility is precisely what contextualism offers.

Contextualism carries significant implications for assessment. Early assessments can legitimately prioritise outcomes (externalist reliability), while later assessments should emphasise reasoning processes (internalist accessibility). Curriculum design can similarly reflect contextualist insights: lower stages stress reliability of content delivery; higher stages stress justification, critique, and debate. By making explicit which epistemic standards are operative at each stage, educators can avoid two extremes: demanding too much too early, or failing to demand enough as students mature. Contextualism, thus, becomes more than a theoretical reconciliation of internalism and externalism; it is a pedagogical principle that can be used to guide how educators calibrate epistemic expectations. Early education can rely on reliable processes; advanced education must demand accessible justification. Between the two, scaffolding ensures that learners are gradually prepared for epistemic autonomy. In this sense, contextualism transforms epistemology into praxis. It equips educators with a framework that honours both the reliability of educational systems and the responsibility of learners to reflectively justify their beliefs. The result is a philosophy of education that not only bridges the epistemic divide but also produces citizens capable of navigating a world where truth, justification, and context are constantly in play.

5. Reconciling Epistemic Divides, Educating for Epistemic Responsibility

The debates between internalism and externalism, sharpened in the post-Gettier landscape, are more than intellectual disputes confined to analytic epistemology. As this paper has argued, they cut deeply into the lived realities of education, shaping how we understand knowledge acquisition, curriculum design, teaching practice, and the very purpose of education itself. By juxtaposing internalist and externalist commitments with the demands of pedagogy, we have sought to reframe the debate in a way that is at once philosophically rigorous and practically transformative. What emerges from this inquiry is the recognition that neither internalism nor externalism, in isolation, can provide a satisfactory model of justification for epistemology or education. Internalism insists on accessible reasons and reflective responsibility, ideals that rightly resonate with the aspirations of liberal education to cultivate critical, autonomous thinkers (BonJour, 1985; Siegel, 1988). But internalism risks imposing cognitive demands that are unrealistic for novices or young learners, thereby disqualifying as unjustified many of the very beliefs that form the foundation of education.

Externalism, represented in Goldman's reliabilism (1986), Plantinga's proper functionalism (1993), and Sosa's virtue epistemology (1991), offers a needed corrective by emphasising that justification depends not on reflective access but on truth-conducive processes, proper function, or epistemic competence. This view aligns naturally with the realities of classroom learning, where most student beliefs are acquired through testimony and reliable instruction rather than independent verification. Yet externalism, if adopted without qualification, risks producing learners who are epistemically passive, unprepared to resist misinformation, and ill-equipped to take responsibility for their beliefs.

Contextualism enters as a reconciliatory force. By recognising that epistemic standards shift with context (Lewis, 1996; Cohen, 1999), it allows us to integrate the insights of both internalism and externalism into a flexible framework. Low-stakes, foundational learning can legitimately rely on reliable processes, while high-stakes, advanced inquiry must demand accessible justification. In education, this amounts to scaffolding epistemic expectations in step with learners' developmental readiness, a principle already anticipated in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. If epistemology aims to clarify what counts as justified belief and knowledge, then education provides the most vivid testing ground for its theories. In no other domain is the transmission and evaluation of belief so central, systematic, and large-scale. Here, the abstract debates of epistemology find concrete application.

When Bonjour demands reflective access, he echoes every teacher who insists that students “show their work.” When Goldman defends reliabilism, he justifies the countless acts of testimony that undergird school curricula. When Plantinga stresses proper function, he reminds us of the institutional responsibilities that sustain education. When Sosa highlights epistemic competence, he articulates what teachers do when they cultivate intellectual virtues in students. And when Anderson (2011) warns of the fragility of epistemic trust, she draws attention to the social systems of education that must be continually safeguarded against ideological corruption. Education, then, does not merely provide examples for epistemology; it embodies epistemology in action. If a theory of justification cannot be squared with the realities of education, it risks irrelevance. Conversely, epistemological clarity can empower educators to make sense of their practice, calibrate expectations, and defend the intellectual integrity of their institutions. The dialogue between internalists and externalists offers not just content but an educational method. Just as epistemologists debate the conditions of justification, so too should students be encouraged to debate, contest, and defend their beliefs. The classroom becomes a microcosm of epistemology: a space where justification is not merely a condition but a practice. Perhaps the most significant contribution of contextualism is its ethical sensitivity. By recognising that epistemic demands must be calibrated to context, contextualism avoids the twin pitfalls of infantilisation and overburden. It respects learners as they are, while preparing them for what they must become.

In practical terms, this means that educators should not demand the justificatory rigour of advanced scholarship from primary students. But neither should they leave those students permanently reliant on authority. Instead, teachers must scaffold epistemic responsibility, gradually increasing expectations as competence grows. This is not relativism but educational justice: demanding neither too much nor too little, but what is appropriate for context. Here philosophy and pedagogy converge on a shared insight: epistemic norms are not one-size-fits-all. To insist otherwise is to misunderstand both knowledge and learning. In an age of misinformation, fake news, and epistemic polarisation, the stakes of this discussion are more urgent than ever. Externalist models remind us that learners are justified in trusting reliable educational systems. But the fragility of those systems—vulnerable to ideological capture, underfunding, or incompetence—shows that reliability cannot be taken for granted. Internalist ideals of reflective responsibility are therefore not luxuries but necessities, equipping learners to

critically evaluate testimony and resist manipulation. Contextualism charts the path forward: early reliance on trustworthy systems, followed by gradual cultivation of reflective autonomy. This dual strategy prepares students both to learn efficiently and to think critically. In a world where epistemic environments are increasingly contested, such a synthesis is not optional but essential.

The reconciliation offered by contextualism is not a shallow compromise but a principled synthesis. It allows us to affirm with Bonjour that reflective accessibility matters, without denying Goldman's insight that reliability is indispensable. It allows us to heed Plantinga's warning about institutional malfunction while celebrating Sosa's focus on epistemic competence and Anderson's insistence on trustworthy social systems. In education, this synthesis yields a vision of justification that is both philosophically robust and pedagogically viable: In foundational learning, externalist standards prevail. Students justifiably believe on the basis of trustworthy teaching, even without reflective access. However, as students mature, internalist standards rise. They must be able to defend their beliefs with reasons, evidence, and arguments. At all stages, epistemic virtues, such as intellectual courage, humility, and rigour, must be cultivated. The warrant of student beliefs depends on the reliability and integrity of educational systems. These must be protected from corruption. And finally, Standards must always be appropriate to context, neither overburdening nor infantilising learners. This reconciled vision honours both the philosophical debate and the educational mission.

Conclusion

The story of internalism and externalism is often told as one of division, opposition, and irreconcilable difference. Yet when viewed through the lens of education, the divide is not absolute but complementary. Education itself requires both internalist and externalist elements: reliable instruction and reflective responsibility. What contextualism shows is that these are not contradictory but sequential and complementary dimensions of a single process of becoming educated. Philosophers may continue to debate the finer points of justification, but educators cannot afford to wait. Every day, teachers decide implicitly whether to adopt internalist or externalist standards, whether to demand accessible reasons or to rely on reliable testimony. By making these choices explicit and grounding them in a contextualist framework, educators can better serve their students and better prepare them for the epistemic challenges of our time. In the

end, to educate is to bridge epistemic divides. It is to guide learners from dependence on testimony to independence in reasoning, from reliability to responsibility, from belief to knowledge. Contextualism provides the map for that journey. It reconciles not only internalism and externalism but also epistemology and pedagogy, showing that the two are not separate disciplines but mutually illuminating practices in the shared pursuit of truth.

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