

Teaching Methods for Promotion of Social Justice Competences in Religious Studies Among Students in Selected Leribe Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Many countries are revising their educational curricula to better address pressing global issues like social injustice and oppression. This includes incorporating social justice themes into Religious Studies classes to foster awareness and action among students. Despite this global trend, research on the integration of social justice into Religious Studies curriculum in Lesotho remains limited. This research, based on critical theory, investigates the influence of Religious Studies teaching methods on the development of social justice competences among secondary school students in Leribe, Lesotho. The study used a qualitative case study design. Six Religious Studies instructors from three church-owned secondary schools were specifically chosen. Data was collected through lesson observations and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that Religious Studies teachers use interactive discussions, group work, and contextual analysis, to significantly enhance critical thinking and inclusivity, thereby fostering social justice competences. However, challenges were noted, such as resource limitations in particular, a lack of Bibles in some schools, and inconsistent learner engagement, particularly in lessons relying heavily on recall-based questioning. To address these challenges, the study recommends integrating Religious Studies materials into government book-rental schemes and offering continuous teacher training to support innovative teaching methods. While the current pedagogical approaches present significant opportunities for developing social justice competences, addressing resource and engagement issues is crucial for maximising their effectiveness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global perception of social injustice has brought attention the crucial role of subject curricula, specifically Religious Studies, to cultivating social justice competencies. Social justice encompasses

equitable access to wealth, health, opportunities, and privileges and is significant in a variety of fields such as philosophy and sociology [1]. In the context of education, it entails eliminating unjust systems, integrating learning to students' real-life experiences, and stimulating reflection. Its

basic components include topic mastery, recognition of oppressive institutions, action for change, self-reflection, and appreciation for various groups [2], [3].

As a result, one could argue that confronting social inequalities is a key global challenge that necessitates feasible solutions, such as investigating the role of education curricula, particularly Religious Studies, in developing the social justice competencies required for a just and equitable world.

Social justice is widely recognised on a global scale, with groups such as the United Nations (UN) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) working to develop more egalitarian educational systems [4]. This has been supported by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that prioritise quality, inclusive, and equitable education for everyone [5]. Similarly, SADC aspires to promote social fairness. The SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020-2030 reflects this commitment, as it encompasses cross-cutting issues such as women and youth. Objective one, in particular, is to "enhance gender equality as well as women's empowerment and development, as well as the elimination of gender-based violence" (SADC, 2020, p.55). Religious studies could assist to accomplish this goal by highlighting social justice as well as developing social justice competencies.

Many countries across the world support social justice. In the United States of America (USA), there are situations of injustice when some students suffer educational disparities owing to conditions such as limited resources, teacher shortages, and overcrowded classrooms, notably in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with Black and Hispanic kids, as highlighted by [6], [7], on the other hand, note that initiatives consisting of the Boston Connects Program and Tools for Tomorrow seek to alleviate educational disparities caused by limited resources, teacher shortages, and overcrowded classrooms. Furthermore, the American education system is said to have the capacity to influence students' attitudes and

thoughts about equality since it incorporates social justice components, as demonstrated by [8] research. In England, official policies publicly endorse Religious Studies as an avenue of addressing societal challenges. According to [9], the 1870 statute permits Religious Studies teaching and learning in public schools. However, [3] emphasise the need to enable teachers to critically examine social justice-related educational goals to promote involvement of all students. In Zambia, [10] notes that Religious Studies is incorporated into the curriculum to tackle social issues. Nonetheless, the researcher advocates for a comprehensive revision of the curriculum to effectively promote social justice.

Similarly, Lesotho faces significant social issues, as evidenced by several studies. [11], [12], [13], [14] have all pointed out the prevalence of problems such as violence, bullying, and the lack of inclusivity in Religious Studies within the country's secondary schools. Notably, these challenges remain despite the efforts made by the Lesotho government to address them within the education system. To begin addressing these issues, Lesotho, as a member of proactive organizations like the UN and SADC, has acknowledged the need for social justice through its Education Sector Plan (ESP) for 2016-2026. A main goal of the Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2016-2026 is to provide superior learning opportunities while emphasising social justice ideals [15].

Furthermore, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy of 2009 (CAP 2009) was established to promote holistic growth via the development of numerous competences, particularly those connected to social justice [16]. Nonetheless, shortcomings in implementation led to the formation of the Lesotho Basic Education Curriculum Policy (LBECP) in 2021, which focusses on developing 21st-century competencies, including social justice competencies [17]. These initiatives undoubtedly symbolises education's critical role in fostering fairness and equality among students.

It is critical to acknowledge that the primary goal of basic education in Lesotho is

to "provide learners with a moral and religious/spiritual foundation for developing a character that is socially and culturally inclusive and capable of embracing diversity and the values essential for national unity" [17]. Without a doubt, Religious Studies is a pertinent subject to accomplish this goal. [18], [19] emphasise that Religious Studies has a 'spiritual' dimension that extends beyond the development of information or abilities. Instead, they emphasise its emphasis on the inner aspects of ethics and morality, which are critical in developing an individual's growth, including social justice capabilities.

Despite worldwide acceptance and local policy efforts for integrating social justice competencies into education, there is a significant gap in empirical research on the teaching strategies used in Religious Studies classes at select secondary schools to promote these competencies among students. Existing research and policy documents highlight the prevalence of social issues such as violence, bullying, and discrimination, while also acknowledging the inclusion of social justice goals in educational frameworks such as the Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2016-2026 and the Lesotho Basic Education Curriculum Policy (LBCEP) of 2021 [11], [12], [13], [14], [15]. However, there is a paucity of study about how these issues might be effectively handled by the adoption of applicable teaching approaches in Religious Studies.

Previous research has underscored the necessity of using suitable teaching methods for the promotion of 21st-century competences, including social justice [20], [21], [22]. Yet, there is a paucity of context-specific studies exploring this within Lesotho's secondary Religious Studies. This study aims to address this vital research gap by analysing how Religious Studies teaching methods are consistent with the objective of developing social justice competencies in secondary schools in Leribe district, Lesotho. It seeks to provide concrete findings and practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers for ways to enhance the efficacy of Religious Studies towards creating an equitable and just society.

The study hinges on the following research questions:

1. How do Religious Studies teaching methods affect the development of social justice competencies among secondary school students in Leribe?
2. What are the unique challenges and opportunities associated with implementing relevant teaching methods pedagogy to promote social justice competencies in Religious Studies in Leribe secondary schools?

This study is structured to include an introduction, an examination of the theoretical underpinning, and curriculum's role in developing social justice competencies. It reviews existing research on the importance of Religious Studies in promoting social justice competences, teaching methods aimed at promoting social justice competences, and identification of challenges in integrating social justice competencies in Religious Studies. Furthermore, it describes the research design, sampling strategy, participant selection, data collecting methods, data analysis techniques, study rigour, and ethical issues. Finally, it presents key findings, discusses the implications, and identifies areas for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The Underpinning Theory*

This study adopts a critical theory approach to investigating the teaching methods utilised in Religious Studies to build social justice competencies among students. Critical theory's emphasis on resolving issues of power, inequality, and the quest of social justice motivates its application in this study [12]. Critical theory advocates for an educational approach that empowers learners to question and transform societal norms and structures [7]. The study will analyse how teaching methods like group work, critical pedagogy, and multicultural pedagogy help develop social justice competences. Additionally, critical theory will guide the uncovering of systemic barriers faced by teachers and learners, as

well as the potential for transformative educational practices.

The critical theory framework, rooted in the works of scholars like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas, primarily aims to critique and change society by addressing power structures and social inequities [7]. It highlights education's function in promoting critical consciousness and equipping people to perceive and fight oppressive structures [23]. This theoretical lens suggests that Religious Studies curriculum should recognise students' diverse cultures and perspectives to prevent the perpetuation of social dominance. It also stresses the need of including students in discussions to foster the development of social justice competencies. The study's use of a critical theory framework would potentially influence the selection of data collecting methods to record specific interactions, teaching methods, and learner responses in terms of inclusiveness, participatory nature, and development of social justice competencies. The analysis will seek to understand how different teaching methods and challenges facilitate these outcomes.

2.2 *The Contribution of Religious Studies to Promote Social Justice Competencies*

The literature suggests that Religious Studies can play a significant role in developing social justice competencies. Various studies have explored this intersection of Religious Studies and social justice competences. [8] assessed curriculum in several different nations, including South Africa, Canada's Québec area, Sweden, Namibia, and the US state of California. The data demonstrate that these curricula entail social justice-related content, such as educating students to societal diversity, including religious affiliations and gender.

Furthermore, [12] research underscores that the Religious Studies curriculum in Finland has been upgraded to address themes of oppression and injustice, confirming Religious Studies'

significant function in establishing social justice competencies. All of these competencies are becoming increasingly important in dealing with today's prevalent socioeconomic concerns. In a similar vein, [24] reported that Religious Studies encourages civic participation among students by providing an opportunity for them to express their views on oppression and injustice. [25] also argues for a social justice approach in religious contexts, emphasising the necessity of defining social justice, accepting Biblical principles, and adopting clear views on current social challenges. In areas like Lesotho's secondary schools, Christian religious Studies had been adapted to combat socioeconomic injustices [12].

2.3 *Teaching Methods for Promoting Social Justice Competencies.*

According to [26], teachers have a critical role in curriculum implementation as they are the implementers of reforms and are responsible for achieving educational goals. In Lesotho, the objective of promoting Religious Studies is to foster social justice competencies [17]. Consequently, it is the responsibility of teachers to facilitate this promotion. To this end, [27] identified several specific teaching strategies that are particularly effective in advancing social justice competencies. These strategies include critical pedagogy, multicultural education, equity pedagogy, and experiential pedagogy.

2.4 *Critical Pedagogy*

[28] stresses that critical pedagogy, rooted in critical theory and popularised by Paulo Freire, aims to create a more equal and just society. This teaching method challenges traditional educational models like the "banking model" that renders students passive absorbers of knowledge. Freire's approach, known as "problem-posing," encourages active participation in the learning process, fostering critical thinking and engagement with social issues [29], [30]. Furthermore, Freire's

critical pedagogy emphasises concepts such as critical consciousness, dialogue, humanisation, praxis, oppression, and liberation [31]. It is apparent that these highlighted principles underpin a teaching and learning method that encourages teachers to facilitate transformative learning experiences. [32] indicate that through dialogical pedagogy, teachers can engage students in critical reflection and action, developing a comprehensive understanding of social realities and fostering empowerment. In the context of promoting social justice competencies through Religious Studies, this method could involve raising awareness about the challenges faced by marginalised groups and exploring potential solutions [33]. Critical pedagogy seeks to foster a more fair and equitable society by equipping individuals and communities with understanding of oppression and options for change.

2.5 Equity Pedagogy

Another method that Religious Studies teachers might use to develop social justice competencies is equity pedagogy. [22] point that equity pedagogy focusses on providing students with opportunities to understand and navigate the power dynamics within social systems, equipping them with the competences necessary to challenge oppressive structures. [22] emphasise that, in this scenario, a teacher's role is to assist learners in acquiring social justice competences that enable them to critically examine and question prevailing structures. In the context of Religious Studies, this approach underscores the importance of promoting skills like critical thinking and problem-solving to empower students to address complex social issues effectively [34]. The key idea behind equity pedagogy is that all learners have the potential to succeed, and education should provide the necessary opportunities and support for them to do so. This includes helping students understand systemic power

dynamics and developing the skills to critique and challenge oppressive structures [12]. In Religious Studies, equity pedagogy could be instrumental in nurturing students' abilities to critically examine and question prevailing structures, preparing them to address social injustices effectively.

2.6 Experiential Approach to Learning

Experiential learning, as promoted by educational theorists such as Freire, Vygotsky and Dewey, highlights the significance of integrating learning into learners' daily experiences [35]. The method of instruction challenges conventional approaches to teaching that regard students as passive consumers of information, instead encouraging them to critically reflect on their own experiences [36], [37], [38] both underscore the need for education to be emancipatory and democratic, focussing on aligning learning with students' real-life situations and experiences [39]. By incorporating experiential learning in Religious Studies, teachers could create a learning environment that values students' lived experiences and encourages active engagement in analysing religious practices and their relevance to everyday life [40]. Furthermore, [41] emphasises that experiential learning in Religious Studies seeks to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical application by allowing students explore religious concepts by means of their own life experiences. One would support [42] that the experiential learning method not only makes learning more relevant and engaging but also equips students with the skills, respect, teamwork, and collaboration among students which are essential for cultivating social justice values.

2.7 Challenges In Incorporating Social Justice into Religion Studies.

Recent research by scholars such as [3], [10], [12], have identified challenges in using unique teaching methods in Religious Studies class to cultivate social justice competences among students.

Resistance to change, a lack of school resources, insufficient teacher training, and evaluation gaps are among the most commonly mentioned problems. These challenges are discussed in details below.

2.8 *Resistance To Change*

According to the research, there may be challenges in integrating and fostering social justice competencies within religious studies. [43] stresses how opposition to change may be a substantial impediment to achieving social justice measures, particularly in educational contexts. According to [44], this reluctance may stem from conventional views that emphasise doctrinal teachings above social justice components, generating fears that including social justice themes may dilute religious teaching and learning. [45] go on to explain how misunderstandings and cultural orientations can contribute to resistance to social change, with Religious Studies stakeholders concerned that broadening the curriculum to include social justice topics will take away from the faith's core teachings. Furthermore, [46] notes that teachers who are used to old doctrinal techniques may be resistant to embracing new methods that integrate social justice principles. Similarly, [47] remark that teachers may be hesitant to deviate from doctrinal teachings, possibly hindering students' social justice competencies. It is thus necessary to study if resistance to change is one of the barriers to successful promotion of social justice capabilities through Religious Studies in Lesotho secondary schools.

2.9 *Inadequate School Resources*

According to the current research, a shortage of school resources poses a substantial impediment to successful teaching and learning of a variety of courses, including social justice ideas in Religious Studies. [48], [49], [50] emphasise that a lack of essential resources such as desks, textbooks, and materials can impede teachers' ability to incorporate social justice principles into their teaching practices, lowering the

quality of education provided to students. In the setting of Religious Studies, [51] notes that delays in obtaining and distributing textbooks might have a detrimental influence on teaching and learning, thereby impeding effective topic delivery. Lesotho's Ministry of Education and Training has also highlighted obstacles, including a lack of suitable resources, in implementing the 2009 Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) framework (MoET). The shortage of resources, particularly textbooks and teaching materials, might limit the complete teaching of social justice ideals in Religious Studies. Understanding these specific resource shortages and their influence on the promotion of social justice ideals in the Religious Studies curriculum is critical so that teachers may devise solutions to address this difficulty.

2.10 *Lack of Teacher Training*

According to the literature, insufficient preparation for teachers is a key barrier to properly teaching Religious Studies to promote social justice competences. [52] specifically states that insufficient training limits the incorporation of social justice principles into teaching practices, which may lead to a reluctance to engage in discussions about complex social issues and connect religious teachings with contemporary social justice concepts. [53] have similar worries. In Lesotho, [12], [26] indicate a lack of curriculum implementation training programs, which severely impacts the effective teaching of many disciplines, including Religious Studies [54]. [22] underscores that the effectiveness of teaching Religious Studies is influenced by several factors, including curriculum relevance, teacher qualifications, and motivation. He notes that the absence of comprehensive training programs can impede the broader implementation of the curriculum. This lack of training may lead to teachers feeling unconfident in facilitating discussions on social justice issues, which could restrict meaningful

discourse and limit critical thinking opportunities for students [55]. Therefore, it is crucial to explore whether the deficiency in teacher training is a significant factor obstructing the effective teaching of Religious Studies aimed at advancing social justice competencies in secondary schools in Lesotho.

2.11 Assessment and Evaluation Challenges

According to the literature, assessment in Religious Studies is critical for measuring students' growth and comprehension of diverse religious concepts. According to [12], [56], assessments in this subject are of several forms, including formative, summative, benchmark, and cumulative tests, all of which are aimed to collect data on student improvement and performance. They emphasise the relevance of tests that focus on students' capacity to integrate knowledge from many sources rather than just measuring factual memory, especially when it comes to developing social justice abilities. Similarly, [3], [12] believe that the major goal of Religious Studies is to acquire social justice competencies, emphasising the need of evaluations designed expressly to promote these skills. However, [57] raise concerns that traditional assessment methods may not effectively evaluate the essential competencies needed in the twenty-first century. In a similar vein, [12], [58] highlight challenges associated with conventional assessment approaches, noting that these methods struggle to adequately monitor students' progress in developing social justice competencies. The lack of focus on alternative evaluation methods, such as performance assessments, reflective assignments, portfolios, and project assessments, further impedes the accurate measurement of social justice competencies. In Lesotho, this issue is compounded by ambiguity in curriculum statements regarding assessment, which led to revisions in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) of 2009 [17]. Consequently, this ambiguity may

contribute to the ongoing reliance on traditional assessment methods by teachers. This scenario may impede the development of competences, especially those pertaining to social justice. As a result, it is critical to find evaluation procedures that properly evaluate students' comprehension and application of religious beliefs in the context of social justice.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Paradigm

The study used an interpretivist framework to investigate the teaching strategies used in Religious Studies classes to promote social justice capabilities. This paradigm is based on the premise that knowledge is subjective and complex, rejecting the idea of a single, universal truth [59]. Instead, it proposes that people might perceive their circumstances in different ways. This technique is consistent with the study's aims since it allows the researcher to analyse teachers' lived experiences and acquire insights into how the Religious Studies curriculum might be used to develop social justice competencies. The emphasis is on understanding how teachers use the curriculum to enhance certain abilities, rather than looking for a single, objective fact.

3.2. Research Design

The research used a qualitative case study (QCS) design. Qualitative case study research is a systematic analysis of an event or series of occurrences with the goal of characterising and understanding the phenomena of interest [60]. The fundamental reason for using the QCS design is that it allows the researcher to collect a large amount of data, allowing for a better understanding of the phenomena under investigation [61]. This design allowed for a detailed investigation of the teaching methods used in Religious Studies classes to enhance social justice competences, which aligned with the objective of discovering the unique approaches utilised by

Religious Studies teachers in the classroom. Using the QCS design and including multiple views on religious coping and social justice, the research attempted to deepen the knowledge of how Religious Studies can effectively foster social justice competencies in educational settings.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

The study employed non-participant observations. According to [62], non-participant observations involve an observer entering a setting with clear objectives, knowing exactly what to observe and why those elements are significant. This method enabled a focused and structured approach to data collection, ensuring that specific behaviors and interactions were systematically captured. In this study, narrative descriptions were primarily used as a recording technique during observations, allowing the researcher to document interactions in detail, including non-verbal communication and cues from the teacher [63]. Additionally, anecdotal records were utilized to make brief notes of significant observations throughout the observation sessions. These recording techniques facilitated a comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics and the promotion of social justice competencies. Overall, these methods provided a structured framework for data collection, ensuring that key aspects of interest were systematically documented.

3.4. Sampling

The study employed a combination of convenience and

purposive sampling techniques to select participants from three post-primary schools in the Leribe district. The schools were purposefully chosen due to their offering of Religious Studies, with two participating teachers selected from each school affiliated with different church organisations. Convenience sampling was also used to choose these schools in Leribe since one of the researchers lives in Leribe. The decision to opt for purposive sampling in selecting teachers from the three schools was based on the researchers' intention to include participants who possessed rich knowledge about Religious Studies teaching, aligning with the study's objectives. The sample size of six participants was chosen based on the notion of data saturation, which ensures that the data acquired is deep and rich while staying manageable in terms of participant count. According to [64], data saturation is a common target in qualitative research, where an adequate sample size is recommended to effectively address the research questions. Furthermore, the purposeful selection of participants from schools affiliated with diverse faith organisations increased sample variety, which enriched the study's findings and perspectives. The researchers chose individuals carefully using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, while also considering practical variables such as accessibility and information richness. Table 1 describes the six persons who took part in the observation.

Table 1. Biographical information of the participants

Teachers' Label	Sex	Age	Years of experience	Qualification	Specialisation	School	Affiliation
P1	F	49	27	B. Ed. Hon	English & Religious Studies	A	LECSA
P2	F	38	16	B. Ed.	English & Religious Studies	A	LECSA
P3	M	37	16	B. Ed.	English & Religious Studies	B	RCC
P4	M	30	3	B. Ed.	English & Religious Studies	B	RCC

Teachers' Label	Sex	Age	Years of experience	Qualification	Specialisation	School	Affiliation
P5	F	45	21	Dip Ed.	Sesotho & Religious Studies	C	RCC
P6	M	29	6	Dip Ed.	Sesotho & Religious Studies	C	RCC

Source: Processed primary data (2017)

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data was analysed using theme analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic six-phase process that includes familiarising oneself with the data, creating initial codes, looking for themes, evaluating and defining those topics, and providing a full report [65]. The researcher employed an inductive data analysis technique, enabling themes to arise directly from the data rather than being bound by existing themes from previous studies [65], [66]. This methodical technique allowed the researchers to uncover and describe key themes that captured the core of the data obtained. The theme analysis technique enabled the researcher to extensively explore the qualitative data and derive significant insights that addressed the study's aims. This analytical approach facilitated a deep understanding of the teaching methods employed in Religious Studies classes and their impact on fostering social justice competencies among students.

3.6. Study Rigour

To assure the study's credibility, the researcher used a variety of tactics. First, they used verbatim excerpts from the interviews to boost the study's credibility by correctly expressing the participants' experiences [12]. Secondly, the researcher outlined a detailed research process, including data generation and analysis methods, to enhance the dependability of the study [67]. They also cross-checked information on the data generation tools to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena, contributing to the confirmability of the research [5]. Lastly, the researcher presented a full description

of the research environment, participants, and techniques, allowing readers to assess the importance and application of the findings in other situations, hence increasing the study's transferability (Cope, 2014). Through these strategies, the researcher aimed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study on promoting social justice competences through the Religious Studies curriculum.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical issues were given the greatest consideration. The safety, rights, and secrecy of all participants were prioritised. Each participant provided informed permission and willingly opted to participate in the study [64], [68]. Participants were well informed about the research's goal, methods, possible dangers, and benefits, and they were guaranteed that they may withdraw consent at any time without consequence. To protect privacy and confidentiality, all personal information and data were maintained securely and utilised only for research purposes. Pseudonyms were employed during data analysis and reporting to maintain the anonymity of participants and their respective schools. The transparent and ethical conduct of this research not only ensured the credibility and validity of the findings but also upheld the ethical responsibilities the researcher have towards participants and the broader research community. The strong commitment to ethical standards throughout the research process demonstrated the researcher' dedication to protecting the rights and well-being of all involved.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The teaching methodologies used in Religious Studies in secondary schools in Leribe have a significant impact on the development of social justice competencies among students. The findings from the lesson observations show that a variety of strategies, including group work, critical pedagogy, and multicultural pedagogy, are used effectively to improve students' comprehension of social justice ideas and their implementation in real-life circumstances.

a. Research question 1: The influence of teaching methods in Religious Studies for promotion of social justice competencies among learners in secondary schools

Lesson observations across three schools revealed that different teaching styles had a substantial impact on students' acquisition of social justice competencies.

The observed session with P1 showcased a variety of successful teaching tactics that encouraged critical thinking and linked Biblical themes to real-world applications. P1 began the class by asking students, "What do you understand by the concepts of leadership and authority?" This topic produced a class discussion in which students offered their thoughts, which were posted on the board for further research. The teacher then led a conversation in which students were encouraged to actively engage and offer their various points of view. Students were separated into groups to talk. During the group work activity, P1 went between groups, facilitating discussions and giving assistance, creating a helpful learning environment. Moving on to the second observation, the lesson witnessed with P2 exhibits a variety of successful teaching practices that are consistent with the ideas of critical pedagogy, equitable pedagogy, and experiential learning. P2 opened the

session by offering a quick contextual study of Luke 7:11-17. This examination helps students better comprehend the socioeconomic disparities and prejudice that widows suffered during Jesus' day. This method is consistent with equity pedagogy since it guarantees that students grasp the historical and social settings that shape people's lives, promoting a greater understanding of societal disparities. P2 then started a debate by asking, "Can you clarify the lesson you received about Jesus' approach towards widows? This question is consistent with critical pedagogy since it encourages students to think critically about Jesus' acts, so creating a better understanding of empathy and its role in social justice.

P3 began a class by asking pupils why Jesus taught in parables, which prompted involvement and critical thought. Notably, P3 picked students from varied places within the class to ensure a wide spectrum of perspectives. Following a volunteer reading from Luke 15:11-32 about the prodigal son, P3 led a discussion about the parable's overall principles, highlighting the ideals of unconditional love and forgiveness. This pushed pupils to internalise these ideas and apply them in real-world circumstances.

In another class, P4 encouraged students to recognise many sorts of parables. Although just a few kids originally engaged, P4 guaranteed inclusion by randomly picking students from various portions of the class to respond. After introducing the lesson on the wealthy fool tale (Luke 12:13-21), P4 enquired, "What is the central message of the parable?" This question sparked a classroom debate, pushing pupils to think about the parable. In P5 class, the instructor used thought-provoking questions and discussions

to encourage students' critical thinking and introspection. To foster inclusivity, students were divided into groups so that they could all fully engage. P5 also fostered the application of Biblical principles to real-life situations, so establishing a supportive learning environment for the development of social justice competencies. P5 posed an intriguing subject that required students to compare the early church to modern congregations, so encouraging critical thinking and thought. The teacher also urged students to apply the concepts covered in the lecture to real-life circumstances.

In the second class, P6 asked a volunteer to read from the Bible. During the reading, P6 and other kids helped with pronunciation of difficult terms, ensuring that everyone understood the material. P6 encouraged students to reply to questions with simple affirmations, which demonstrated their recall as well as understanding of the material.

The research of Religious Studies teaching methodologies in the participating schools demonstrated more effective approaches for developing social justice competencies. Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 displayed a dedication to inclusive and engaging pedagogies that emphasised critical thinking, various views, and practical application. Participant 1 facilitated stimulating discussions and group projects, encouraging critical thinking and varied perspectives. Similarly, Participants 3 and 4 used inquiry-based methods and group discussions to promote active involvement and reflective thinking. Participant 5 used thought-provoking questions and real-world connections to improve critical thinking and diversity.

b. Research question 2: Unique challenges and opportunities associated with implementing relevant teaching methods to promote social justice competences in Religious Studies

The implementation of teaching methods and pedagogy aimed at promoting social justice competences in Religious Studies in Leribe's secondary schools presents both unique challenges and opportunities, as observed in the data.

The observed lesson with P1 noted that the teacher utilised interactive discussions and group work to engage students in critical thinking and real-life applications of Biblical concepts. This method created opportunities for inclusivity and equity, as it encouraged diverse perspectives and collaborative learning. Similarly, P2 employed contextual analysis and application-based tasks to deepen students' understanding of societal inequalities, specifically through Biblical passages like Luke 7:11–17. This approach provided the opportunity to connect Biblical teachings with real-world issues, enhancing critical thinking and practical application of social justice principles. Remarkably, there were no challenges observed in school A in the implementation of the highlighted teaching methods for promotion of social justice competencies.

At School B, P3 introduced inquiry-based questioning to stimulate critical thinking and active participation. This method promoted inclusivity and allowed for a diverse range of viewpoints, creating an engaging learning environment. However, a challenge was the lack of Bibles for all learners, which hindered full participation. P3 addressed this by forming groups around available

resources, but resource limitations remained a barrier to achieving complete inclusivity. Similarly, P4 faced challenges related to unequal resource availability, as not all students had Bibles. This issue was mitigated through group discussions, which promoted collaboration and inclusivity. Despite these efforts, the challenge of ensuring that all students had equal access to resources persisted. P4's method of engaging students in discussions about different types of parables provided opportunities for deeper engagement with the material but was limited by resource constraints.

In School C, P5 used thought-provoking questions and group discussions to encourage critical thinking and inclusivity. This approach provided an opportunity to create a supportive learning environment and apply Biblical lessons to real-life contexts. Notably, there were no identified challenges in implementing the teaching methods highlighted. Similarly, P6 created an inclusive environment by assisting learners with difficult words during

Bible readings and encouraging participation through simple confirmations. While this approach supported understanding, it posed a challenge in fostering deeper critical thinking and analysis. The focus on recall-based questioning limited opportunities for developing more complex social justice competences, such as empathy and critical analysis.

In summary, while methods like interactive discussions, contextual analysis, inquiry-based questioning, and thought-provoking questions presented significant opportunities for promoting inclusivity, practical application and critical thinking challenges such as resource limitations and challenges in maintaining consistency in students engagement were prevalent in other teachers, being P3, P4, and P6. Addressing these challenges while building on the strengths of these teaching methods will be crucial for enhancing the development of social justice competences in Religious Studies. Table 2 below illustrates the summary of observation findings on research questions 1 and 2.

Table 2. summary of observation findings on research questions 1 and 2

Teaching Methods	Opportunities	Teachers	Challenges	Teachers
Interactive discussions and group work	Promotes active participation, inclusivity, collaboration and equity	P1, P3, P4, P5	-Relied on recall-based questioning -Lack of Bibles	P6 P3, P4
Critical pedagogy	Encourages critical thinking and diverse viewpoints	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	-Inconsistency in students engagement	P6
Reflective approach and questions and application based tasks	Enhances critical thinking and practical application	P2, P3, P4, P5	-Lack of Bibles -Inconsistency in students engagement	P3, P4 P6
Reading assistance and contextual analysis	Deepens understanding of societal issues and promotes application of social justice principles	P2, P6	Inconsistency in learners engagement	P6

Teaching Methods	Opportunities	Teachers	Challenges	Teachers
Recall-based questioning			Inconsistency in students engagement	P6

5. DISCUSSION

The lesson observations revealed that various teaching strategies significantly impacted the development of social justice competences among students. These strategies aligned closely with the critical theory framework, which emphasises addressing power dynamics, promoting equity, and fostering critical consciousness.

5.1. Critical pedagogy and critical thinking

The findings revealed that critical pedagogy, as witnessed in the courses of P1, P2, P3, and P5, is crucial in cultivating critical thinking and motivating students to question society norms and inequalities. This strategy entailed asking critical questions and leading provocative discussions to encourage students to think about religious teachings and their implications for social justice. This is consistent with [38] view of education as a practice of freedom in which learners take active roles. P2's discussion of social disparities through contextual interpretation of Biblical passages, such as Luke 7:11-17, illustrates Freire's problem-posing technique in action. [28], [31] suggest that encouraging critical thinking about social issues is crucial in fostering social justice competencies.

5.2. Equity pedagogy and inclusivity

The observations also highlight the importance of equity pedagogy in promoting inclusivity and ensuring all students have the opportunity to engage meaningfully. P2's lesson on understanding the historical and social contexts of Biblical passages reflects the principles of equity pedagogy, which focus on helping students navigate and critique power dynamics within society [22]. By creating an inclusive learning environment, teachers like P1, P3, and P5 enable learners to collaborate and share diverse perspectives, crucial for

developing social justice competencies [22], [69]. This approach is consistent with the critical theory framework, which advocates for educational practices that empower marginalised voices and promote social equity [12].

5.3. Experiential learning and real-life application

The study's findings reveal that teachers mostly used experiential learning and real-life application to encourage critical thinking and inclusivity in Religious Studies classrooms. The adoption of experiential learning approaches, notably by P1, P2, and P5, improves the development of social justice competencies by linking classroom learning to real-life experiences. P1's facilitation of group conversations and P5's support of applying Biblical principles to current societal concerns show how experiential learning may bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application [37], [38], [40], [41] emphasise the importance of education aligned with learners' real-life situations, as it fosters critical reflection and active engagement. This approach is crucial for equipping students with the skills needed to address social injustices in their communities [42].

5.4. Challenges in fostering social justice competences

The challenges are discussed in details below.

5.5. Challenges in resource availability and learner engagement

The study revealed that the implementation of these pedagogies is not without challenges. Resource limitations, particularly the lack of Bibles in some schools, hinder the full participation of all students, compromising the inclusivity and

effectiveness of the lessons. This challenge is consistent with the findings of [48], [51], who identify resource scarcity as a significant barrier to the effective teaching of social justice principles in Religious Studies. Additionally, the observed reliance on recall-based questioning in one lesson highlighted a gap in fostering deeper critical thinking and engagement, which are crucial for developing social justice competences [45]. The issue of limited resources might be attributed to Bibles and Religious Studies textbooks not being included in the government's current book rental plan, as are materials for other courses. This leads to the unequal availability of Religious Studies materials in secondary schools, reflecting wider concerns about traditional teaching techniques' efficacy in cultivating the competencies required for social justice [46].

5.6. Challenges in sustaining students' engagement

The research study also found that not all teachers fully embrace critical pedagogy. Evidence suggests that some educators do not regularly engage their pupils. For example, Participant 6 focused heavily on affirming statements and recall questions, which emphasised memorisation over helping students to critically analyse Biblical passages and make reasoned judgements. This technique embodies [38] concept of the "banking model" of education, in which teachers serve as simply depositors of information, resulting in passive learners. Several reasons may contribute to these discrepancies. One key cause is instructor reluctance to change, which may favour old teaching techniques that emphasise rote memorisation and passive learning over encouraging active engagement and inquiry. This agrees with Gallo-Gómez's (2023) conclusion that such resistance is a significant obstacle in educational settings.

Another potential explanation is the insufficient teacher training available.

As highlighted by Selepe (2016), the limited number of training programs for curriculum implementation in Lesotho can undermine effective execution [70]. Supporting this view, Cownie and Bradney (2013) noted that a lack of training frequently leads teachers to revert to teacher-centered methods [47]. This inconsistency in fostering critical thinking among students may hinder the effective development of social justice competencies, as corroborated by [45]. This issue points to broader concerns regarding the effectiveness of traditional teaching methods in cultivating the skills necessary for promoting social justice.

5.7. Opportunities for promoting social justice competences

The observed methods of teaching, such as critical pedagogy, equitable pedagogy, and experiential learning, offer significant chances for building social justice skills. For example, Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 employ group work to promote collaborative learning, which is essential for developing empathy, respect, and collaboration among students [71]. This approach is aligned with the critical theory framework, which emphasises the need of inclusive educational methods and addressing social disparities [7]. Furthermore, Participant 2's emphasis on societal disparities via contextual analysis successfully incorporates social justice issues into the curriculum. This strategy supports critical pedagogy's goal of creating awareness and inciting action against injustice [33].

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to look into the teaching tactics used in Religious Studies programs to help students develop social justice competences. The findings show that different training techniques have a considerable influence on the development of these skills. Critical pedagogy, equitable pedagogy, and experiential learning were among the most effective tactics. Teachers

who used these strategies successfully engaged students in reflective conversations, group activities, and contextual analyses, creating an atmosphere that encouraged the development of social justice competences.

However, the study also identified substantial obstacles, such as limited resources and uneven student involvement. The lack of Bibles in certain schools hampered full participation, and certain teacher dependence on recall-based questioning and memorisation techniques limited possibilities for critical thinking. Despite these challenges, the observed instructional techniques provide great opportunity to improve social justice abilities. Techniques such as group collaboration, contextual analysis, and critical questioning are consistent with the critical theory framework, which emphasises the need of addressing power relations and fostering equity.

The current study provides recommendations for various stakeholders:

1. Lesotho's Ministry of Education should provide constant availability of Religious Studies teaching and learning materials by including them into the government's book rental program.

2. Teachers should obtain more training and professional development in creative teaching techniques and social justice education to increase their capacity to engage students on a consistent basis.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The research findings indicated that, while the teaching approaches utilised were effective, some obstacles arose. These issues included inadequate resources, such as the lack of Bibles in certain schools, as well as difficulty maintaining constant student involvement. One significant proposal for future study is to look at the influence of professional development programs on Religious Studies teachers' capacity to employ critical pedagogy that promotes social justice capabilities.

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