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Navigating Citizenship Education: LO Teachers' Pedagogical and Emotional Experiences Fostering Social Cohesion in Western Cape Schools

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Abstract
Social cohesion remains a contested and inadequately realised goal in post-apartheid South Africa, despite its centrality to Citizenship Education (CE) within the Life Orientation (LO) curriculum. While existing scholarship foregrounds structural and curricular constraints, insufficient attention has been given to the lived pedagogical experiences of teachers who enact CE daily. This study explores how LO teachers interpret and enact social cohesion in CE, and the complex relationship between their teaching, curriculum implementation, and social cohesion. Drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework, reinforced by Ubuntu, a qualitative, interpretivist case study was conducted with 16 purposively selected LO teachers across four Western Cape secondary schools — two public and two independents — characterised by socio-economic inequality and cultural diversity. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Four key findings emerged: teacher identity functions as a determinant of CE pedagogy; a persistent misalignment exists between curriculum expectations and classroom practice; teachers adopt adaptive and experiential pedagogies to bridge this gap; and teachers operate as moral agents of social change. The findings reveal that CE is not a neutral curriculum process but an emotionally mediated, identity-driven practice. The study recommends teacher development, context-responsive curricula, and greater inclusion of teachers as stake-holders in policy processes.

Introduction
Citizenship Education (CE) in Life Orientation (LO) is expected to play a significant role in fostering democratic values, a sense of social responsibility, and civic awareness amongst learners within the South African post-apartheid educational context (Arendse & Smith, 2019). This context was marked by socio-economic disparities and increasingly influenced by the accelerating pace of globalisation. Within this environment, the subject LO was designated to promote nation-building and to advance social cohesion across South Africa's culturally and linguistically diverse communities. However, previous research on this subject indicates that teachers encountered a range of challenges in implementing CE effectively (Arendse & Smith, 2019). These included the constraints of a prescriptive

curriculum and the external pressures of a post-apartheid, democratic society, many of which were further complicated by the influence of a technologically driven culture.

Teachers' diverse cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shaped their conceptualisations of CE and influenced how they guided learners in adopting civic values associated with active citizenship. The theoretical framework of Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy provided guidelines for the analysis of the qualitative study. This article foregrounds the lived pedagogical experiences of LO teachers, arguing that social cohesion cannot be understood through curriculum analysis alone, but through how teachers interpret, negotiate, and emotionally inhabit CE in practice (Tonkens, 2012). It focused specifically on the challenges that they faced and the adaptive strategies that they employed to cultivate civic awareness and encourage meaningful engagement amongst their learners. A case study approach was adopted to understand the way LO teachers teach this subject. A discussion of the four key findings is presented and discussed, followed by recommendations for the consideration of teacher education and professional development.

The objective of the article is to investigate the teaching of LO regarding social cohesion and nation-building to support stronger and more proactive civic engagement in South Africa. According to the literature, CE proves most effective when individuals embrace democratic values and take tangible action to uphold human rights, promote shared values, build social cohesion, and protect the democratic principles of their country (Banks, 2015).

The South African Constitution (RSA 1996) aims to heal the social, political, and racial divisions created by apartheid and assigns schools a critical role in developing proactive citizens (RSA, 1996). However, teaching CE remains a complex challenge, as teachers are required to balance prescriptive curriculum demands with the difficult lived realities of their learners. Persistent challenges, particularly generational and cultural gaps between teachers and learners, often hinder meaningful classroom discussions around democratic participation. These tensions are further intensified by the increasing involvement of young people in social media activism and digital movements, which are seldom reflected in formal CE lessons. Although CE was designed to promote positive change, it often fails to address issues such as deteriorating race relations (DoE, 2000).

South Africa's carefully charted path towards rebuilding a strong democracy, as outlined by Wolhuter et al. (2020), could only be realised if schools are genuinely committed to advancing CE, an area that remains marginalised and undervalued within the national curriculum. Simultaneously, the Constitution (RSA, 1996) mandates schools to instil core democratic values displayed in learners' behaviour. This mandate is increasingly challenged by major developments such as student protests, racial tensions in schools, and widespread social unrest, all of which are supported by the digital environment, which has become part of the learner's culture, as reported on social media (Mabuyane, 2021).

A central issue is the demanding yet often overlooked role of teachers as exemplars and drivers of social change (Sayed & Novelli, 2016). Many LO teachers view themselves as agents of transformation, striving to equip learners with the critical thinking skills and democratic values needed to engage with pressing societal issues, including inequality, corruption, and human rights abuses. However, their efforts are frequently constrained by inadequate professional development, limited support for cross-disciplinary collaboration, and an education system that prioritises rigid standardised assessments over enquiry-based, transformative learning approaches.

In light of these challenges, this study seeks to examine how LO teachers in South African schools experience, understand, interpret, and navigate the complexities of teaching CE. It explores how their

values, pedagogical strategies, and institutional constraints shape their instruction of democratic principles in the classroom. By focusing on the lived, pedagogical experiences of teachers, the research aims to illuminate the critical yet underappreciated role that LO teachers play in fostering civic responsibility and social cohesion within the emotional dimension – connecting feelings to change (Tonkens, 2012). Against this backdrop, the study aims to respond to these questions:

- How do teachers interpret and enact social cohesion in CE, and why do they teach as they do?
- What is the relationship between the mediation of LO teachers' teaching, curriculum implementation, and social cohesion?

Conceptualising Social Cohesion in Citizenship Education

It was only after 2009 that the term 'social cohesion' materialised and appeared more frequently in official policy statements, becoming increasingly vital in nation-building through CE in South African schools. Social cohesion may be understood as the degree to which members of a society trust one another, share common values, and participate willingly in civic and communal life (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). In a classroom context, its presence is evident when learners engage respectfully across differences, collaborate toward shared goals, and demonstrate a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility; its absence is marked by exclusion, disengagement, intergroup hostility, and the breakdown of trust between learners and their teachers. The focus on education provides an important context to promote social cohesion in schools, although the development of interventions and programs in CE is complex. However, the current literature lacks a specific overview of the assessment of social cohesion (Veerman & Denessen, 2021), and the construct remains multi-dimensional and contested. The broader scholarly field has largely foregrounded structural limitations and learner outcomes, while insufficiently addressing how teachers' identities, emotional investments, and lived experiences affect their teaching pedagogies. Emotional labour, as defined by Hochschild (1979), is the work of managing and regulating one's own feelings and outward expressions to meet the emotional demands of a job. Barolsky (2013) and Desai (2015), notably, offer foundational critiques of the social cohesion construct itself rather than straightforward accounts of its implementation. This creates a critical gap in understanding CE as not merely a policy construct, but as an enacted, relational, and emotionally mediated practice. While scholarship recognises structural and pedagogical challenges in CE, it remains limited in accounting for teachers' emotional labour, moral agency, and identity-driven decision-making in contexts of social fragmentation. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding teachers' voices and examining how they navigate the tensions among curriculum demands, social realities, and the imperative to foster social cohesion.

Understanding social cohesion in good citizenship encompasses civic virtues such as helping others, advocating for justice, and fostering economic and social cohesion and well-being. Biesta (2011) posits that citizenship should be understood as participatory and proactive engagement in society. In South Africa (SA), LO teachers play a central role in CE instruction, serving as both curriculum transmitters and moral agents (Alsubaie, 2016; DBE, 2010b). Despite often being blamed for the shortcomings of CE, many teachers lacked the necessary political backing and pedagogical resources to implement social cohesion effectively.

Teacher Identity and Pedagogical Practice

Teachers' identities and worldviews also significantly influence CE delivery (Davids, 2018). Barolsky (2013), Desai (2015), and Sayed et al. (2017) argue that open, critical dialogue is essential in CE classrooms to confront inequality and racism. A socially cohesive classroom, they suggest, should prioritise trust, inclusion, and critical engagement with educational materials and identity-related

issues. Moreover, it needs to be responsive to learners' lived realities and promote context-driven learning (Sayed et al., 2017).

Accordingly, LO teachers are seen as essential to the implementation of CE, serving as the life force and purveyors of curriculum change (Alsubaie, 2016). Despite supplementary strategic initiatives introduced to support them, teachers' voices are rarely included in curriculum planning. This oversight leads to increased teacher demotivation, with many teachers feeling overwhelmed by continuous curriculum reform and the lack of systemic support (DBE, 2010b). To foster critical reflection and social change, CE requires pedagogical approaches that include open debate, enabling learners to critically examine contemporary issues such as inequality and race relations (Barolsky, 2013; Sayed et al., 2017).

Following a national teachers' union conference, the Continuing Professional Development (CPTD) program was introduced to address inequality in education, with a specific focus on teachers' role in promoting social cohesion through CE (Raanhuis, 2021). Later, violent protests and debates over racism and discrimination in schools across South Africa came to the forefront (Christie and McKinney, 2017). These events emphasised the need for a transformative shift in teacher preparation and CE delivery. As a result, both CE and CPTD programs were introduced to better equip teachers.

Scholars broadly agree that CE should empower learners to become informed, ethical, and proactive participants in a democratic society. A robust CE framework needs to include civic rights, political knowledge, and participatory engagement skills (Osler et al., 2015). In South Africa, CE is further tasked with addressing historical inequality while contributing to the building of a democratic, inclusive society (Waghid, 2009). Although the LO-CAPS curriculum aims to incorporate CE components, its rigid and prescriptive format can limit the development of critical thinking skills.

Iwuanyamwu (2023) concurs with Mpisi and Alexander (2022) that South African teachers need to understand their learners' cultural backgrounds to deliver CE effectively. In this regard, education policymakers are responsible for ensuring that schools implement creative and globally inclusive strategies that provide equitable learning opportunities, irrespective of learners' socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, critics argue that the LO Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (LO-CAPS) curriculum remains abstract and disconnected from learners' lived experiences (Waghid, 2009). While teachers play a vital role in shaping learners' moral attitudes and civic education according to Sanderse (2013), many LO teachers lack formal CE training and face systemic constraints (Samuel, 2016).

Arendse (2014) contends that meaningful CE reform needs to originate at the classroom level, with teachers at the centre of how CE is taught and interpreted. Without robust support, CE risks becoming an empty policy rather than a transformative learning experience. Teachers face multiple obstacles, including inadequate professional development, and many LO teachers lack specialised CE training and struggle to navigate complex social and political discussions (Samuel, 2016). In this study, many teachers are assigned LO as a 'filler subject,' without any relevant preparation or training.

Subsequently, according to the DOE (2000), teachers are not merely neutral knowledge transmitters; their pedagogical choices influence learners' ethical development. Waghid (2009) supports this view, advocating for social cohesion in CE rooted in open dialogue, critical thinking, and Ubuntu — a philosophy centred on shared humanity and responsibility. Ubuntu, understood as a marker of human dignity, is a form of African moral enculturation, as Letseka (2012) argues, claiming that integrating the concept of Ubuntu into CE could help mitigate moral decay.

While existing scholarship provides valuable insight into the structural, curricular, and pedagogical challenges to fostering social cohesion in CE, it remains analytically insufficient to capture the lived realities of teachers operating within contexts of social fragmentation. The literature has largely privileged structural limitations and learner outcomes, often overlooking the complex, affective dimensions of teaching that underpin classroom practice. Limited attention has been given to teachers' emotional labour, their negotiation of moral tensions, and how identity informs pedagogical decision-making in morally contested environments.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore LO teachers' experiences of teaching social cohesion in CE within complex and socially fragmented contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Grounded in an exploratory framework, the study seeks to understand how teachers make sense of their pedagogical practices, particularly in relation to their emotional labour, moral agency, and identity formation. An interpretivist approach is appropriate as it privileges subjective meaning-making and recognises that teachers' practices are shaped by their lived realities, contextual constraints, and value systems.

Working within the interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that people have subjective and unique experiences of the world according to Gichuru (2017), I sought to understand the meaning that teachers attach to understanding CE, and how the curriculum makes provision for the implementation of this complex aspect of CE in LO. The interpretivist approach does not focus on independent and dependent variables, but rather on human experiences and sense-making within their circumstances. The four case studies selected for the study produced rich and meaningful data for analysis and application of the Freirean Critical Pedagogy (CP) theoretical framework, namely conscientisation.

CP strives to foster new forms of knowledge by emphasising the dismantling of traditional disciplines and encouraging the creation of interdisciplinary insights (Freire, 1970). As Freire (1970) states, another important citizenship value is humanisation, serving society and liberating the oppressed and always considering transformation. To ameliorate the current lack of social cohesion in SA, learners and teachers need to develop critical skills by reflecting on their own social standing and engaging with the plight of the less privileged through heightened conscientisation and active participation (Wolhuter et al., 2020).

The CP approach of Freire is complemented by Ubuntu, understood as a marker of human dignity and a form of African moral enculturation, which is used to analyse the study, as Letseka (2012) posits that integrating the concept of Ubuntu into CE could help mitigate moral decay. This aligns with Freire's (1970) distinction between the "banking model" of education, in which teachers deposit fixed knowledge into passive learners, and problem-posing education, which positions teachers and learners as co-investigators engaged in dialogue, critical inquiry, and the development of critical consciousness. Waghid (2009) supports this view, advocating for social cohesion in CE rooted in open dialogue, critical thinking, and Ubuntu, a philosophy centred on shared humanity and responsibility.

The CP approach corroborates fittingly with the problem-posing method, which appears to be particularly well-suited for analysing the challenges that both teachers and learners encounter in the context of real-world issues and comprehending CE. In this dynamic, the teacher's role is consistently cognitive, while the learner's role is inherently reflective. Over time, the learners come to see themselves as committed and transformative individuals (Freire, 1970). This qualitative study was conducted in the post-apartheid educational context with 16 LO teachers from four schools, two public schools and two independent schools.

Sample and Context

The study was conducted in four selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa, a context characterised by socio-economic inequality, cultural diversity, and ongoing challenges related to social cohesion. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2014). The sample consisted of 16 LO teachers with experience teaching CE across different school environments, including public and independent schools. Variation in teaching experience and school context was considered.

The selected teachers operate within classrooms shaped by diverse learner needs, including exposure to social issues such as violence, inequality, and digital influences. This diversity enables the study to capture how teachers navigate competing demands and interpret social cohesion in CE within their specific institutional and social contexts. The schools' identities are protected by using pseudonyms.

Table 1: Sample of 16 LO teachers for the study

School	Type	Sample
Fairdale High School	Public school	4 LO teachers Senior and FET phase
Grassland High School	Public school	4 LO teachers Senior and FET phase
Two Seas High School	Independent school	4 LO teachers Senior and FET phase
Orion High School	Independent school	4 LO teachers Senior and FET phase

Fairdale High School and Grassland High School are public schools, and Two Seas High School and Orion High School are independent schools. The participants in this study, specifically teachers, were purposively selected from these four diverse schools: two independent schools located in affluent areas and two public schools situated in sub-economic regions. This selection of research sites and participants aimed to gather varied teaching experiences that could enhance the CE component of the LO-CAPS curriculum. The inclusion criteria were meticulously defined rather than applied randomly and focused exclusively on senior and FET phase LO teachers, as they were deemed most capable of providing rich and relevant information pertinent to the study.

Profiling the LO Teachers

The study drew on LO teachers across four schools, two public and two independent, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 37 years. At Fairdale High School, a public school, four LO teachers had between 13 and 34 years of experience. One was also a registered life coach and mathematics teacher; another had trained as a MOT counsellor through a Norwegian NPO's Life Skills program. The other two took on extracurricular responsibilities such as gardening and sports coaching outside school hours.

At Grassland High School, a public school, teaching experience ranged from 3 to 35 years. While these teachers held informed views on CE, they reported limited resources for teaching it effectively. The department head, a veteran teacher who began his career during apartheid, was succeeded by a younger, technologically proficient colleague who described CE as disconnected from curriculum content, grounding her teaching instead in personal experience and the belief that good citizenship requires active civic participation.

At Orion High School, an independent school, teachers had between 15 and 37 years of experience. Many were religious and active in community humanitarian work, with a strong moral orientation. One teacher, reflecting on the shift from apartheid-era prescriptiveness to post-apartheid freedom of

choice, described this transition as a source of confusion for both teachers and learners in navigating CE.

At Two Seas High School, an independent school located near a lower-income residential area, the faculty was small and linguistically diverse. The LO teacher, a white South African with 32 years of experience and a B. Com degree, had originally taught Business Economics before being assigned LO as an additional subject. A committed human rights activist, she had transitioned from teaching at a historically White school to one serving a coloured community, and remained an advocate for women's rights and civic responsibility throughout her career.

Fieldwork was conducted over one month, from 15 July to 15 August 2025. Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews with LO teachers across the four participating schools, following ethical clearance (Ref: 2023/04/12/43566448/13 am) and approval request from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED).

Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. This triangulated approach enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings by capturing multiple dimensions of teachers' practices (Yin, 2014). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and pedagogical strategies. The flexible nature of the interviews enabled the researcher to probe emerging themes, particularly those related to emotional labour, moral dilemmas, and identity-driven decision-making. Classroom observations were conducted to gain insight into how CE is enacted in practice. These observations focused on teachers' pedagogical approaches and how sensitive or contested topics were addressed. Observational data provided an important counterpoint to self-reported practices, revealing the complexities of teaching in real time. Document analysis included curriculum materials, lesson plans, and relevant policy documents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Together, these methods generated a rich, multi-layered dataset that supports a comprehensive analysis of CE teaching.

Sixteen face-to-face interviews were conducted to explore LO teachers' pedagogical experiences regarding the everyday challenges they faced in teaching social cohesion in CE. Four teachers at each school were interviewed to uncover not only the challenges but also the rationale behind their teaching approaches. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour.

Four classroom observations served as a method to address the sub-question aimed at understanding the strategic implementation of teaching practices and their reasoning. Observations of the LO lessons were conducted as planned with the teachers at each of the four schools involved in the study. According to Denzin et al. (2017), observation in qualitative research falls within two distinct categories: complete observation and non-participant observation. Among these, non-participant observation constituted the most commonly used method in the social sciences. In this particular study, the focus was on how teachers delivered and implemented their CE lessons to learners. A standardised tool called the Classroom Observation Protocol (COP) was utilised, providing a structured and systematic approach to observing and recording instruction, thereby ensuring both consistency and trustworthiness in the findings.

The COP process consisted of three cohesive steps, which were outlined as follows: Pre-observation: Before the observation, a meeting with the teacher was set up to discuss the goals of the lesson observation from a non-participant perspective. Observation: During the observation, consent was obtained to spend time observing the teachers' delivery of CE. Post-observation: After the observation,

a meeting with the teacher was held to provide feedback and discuss areas for improvement, taking detailed notes on various aspects of the observation.

Document analysis was utilised to examine lesson plans and CE resources such as the Manifesto on Values Education (Department of Education, 2000). This analysis sought to investigate the interplay between theory and practice, specifically addressing how LO teachers implemented CE in their classrooms. Gichuru (2017) asserts that thoroughly examining these strategies could reveal how the curriculum facilitates the incorporation of CE within the LO framework. Bowen (2009) notes that source documents possess a significant advantage over interviews in that they do not exhibit reactivity; interviews necessitate consideration of participants' consent, behaviours, feelings, and attitudes. The documents that were reviewed for this study included: (i) LO-CAPS lesson plans on social cohesion in CE; (ii) LO learning materials; and (iii) the National Development Plan Vision 2030.

Data Analysis

The coding process was initiated manually after data was transcribed into segments and the information was categorised inductively to develop themes. By adhering to the qualitative approach, all transcriptions were printed, with similar quotations related to the research questions labelled and organised in thematic order (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The hidden quality of coding became apparent as the analysis became more interpretive, an aspect noted by Braun and Clarke (2006) as being particularly intriguing. The focus then shifted to the teachers' perspectives, which helped to develop central themes relevant to addressing the research questions. Recognising that thematic discourse analyses often overlap, Braun and Clarke (2006) caution that it is essential to interpret deeper levels of meaning and significance while remaining mindful of the key aspects of thematic discourse that are vital to the study. The six phases of data analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) served as a guide to analyse the data.

Phase One: Familiarisation with the data – In qualitative analysis, the familiarisation phase was crucial, as it involved not only listening to interview recordings before transcribing, which required concentration and active listening, but also taking notes after listening to the interviews a second time.

Phase Two: Generating initial codes – The process of coding can be described as the application of interpretive labels that are vital to the relevance of the study, producing succinct explanations of the information provided by participants. It was a non-prescriptive process regarding how data was segmented and itemised for coding, allowing for adjustments as needed. Adhering to the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2006), it was determined that once the dataset was fully coded and the codes collated, there was sufficient depth to investigate patterns within the data.

Phase Three: Generating themes – Phase three involved interpreting the significance and relevance of a theme after all datasets had been coded and compiled, marking the beginning of the examination of meaning and meaningfulness.

Phase Four: Reviewing potential themes – Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a series of key questions that the researcher should address when reviewing potential themes, including: Is this a theme (or just a code)?

Phase Five: Defining and naming a theme – The detailed data analysis of the thematic framework was captured manually to link where each theme and sub-theme was elucidated coherently in relation to the research questions.

Phase Six: Producing the report – As noted by Creswell (2013), the final stage of writing a qualitative report of findings was an iterative process that continued throughout the study. Changes were

documented during this process via informal notes and memos. In the final interpretive phase, the meanings of the cases were presented, drawing from both the issues within the cases and insights gained from unusual or unexpected situations encountered (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). The case study of the independent schools versus the public schools revealed insights into how post-apartheid marginalisation affected LO teachers' pedagogies of teaching social cohesion in CE and independent schools, and how teachers faced policy demands.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations, as defined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), concern the study's purpose and significance, as well as the protection of the integrity of both the researcher and the participants beyond physical interactions. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review body, the University of South Africa (Ref: 2023/04/12/43566448/13 am). All research activities were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines and with the consent of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all identifying information was removed from the data. Consent forms were signed, and the classroom observations were conducted in the Grade 12 classrooms. Ethical reflexivity remained central throughout the research process, particularly in navigating power dynamics and representing teachers' voices with integrity. Data were securely stored on the computer with a password and were accessible only to the researcher.

Findings

The findings indicate that social cohesion in CE is not enacted as a neutral curriculum process, but as a contextually negotiated and emotionally mediated pedagogical practice. Teachers operate at the intersection of prescriptive policy demands and complex social realities, drawing on personal values, professional judgement, and lived experiences to navigate tensions between democratic ideals and classroom practice. Across all findings, a persistent misalignment emerges between curriculum intent and enactment, placing teachers in the role of both mediator and moral agent. The four findings are as follows: Teacher Identity as a Determinant of CE Pedagogy; Misalignment Between Curriculum Expectations and Classroom Practice; Adaptive Pedagogies and Experiential Learning; and Teachers as Moral Agents and Agents of Social Change.

In responding to the first research question, the findings of (i) teachers' identities as a determinant of CE pedagogy and (ii) misalignment between curriculum expectations and classroom practice, the data demonstrate that the challenges of fostering social cohesion within CE are not confined to curriculum limitations but are rooted in the complex, lived realities of teachers.

Teacher Identity as a Determinant of CE Pedagogy

The data highlight teachers' cultural identities and lived experiences of how social cohesion in CE is interpreted and taught. Teachers do not engage the curriculum as neutral actors; rather, their pedagogical choices are informed by their positioning within South Africa's socio-historical landscape. For example, a teacher from Orion High School reflected:

"We were disregarded as citizens in the apartheid era; now we have to teach the values of citizenship without any training."

This quote highlights how historical marginalisation continues to shape teachers' authority and confidence in delivering CE. Similarly, tensions with learners emerged strongly around generational differences, particularly regarding digital engagement. As one teacher from the two public schools, Grassdale High, noted:

"They'll share a hashtag about women's rights but won't help a female classmate who is being bullied. They want change, but they don't see the small, everyday ways to be responsible citizens."

There is a perceived disjuncture between performative digital activism and embodied civic responsibility. Teachers expressed frustration with what they viewed as superficial engagement with social issues, which required them to continuously recalibrate their pedagogical approaches. The exercise of civic responsibility is clearly reflected in learners' civic identity through the use of digital technology. From a Freirean (1970) perspective, these dynamics reflect the difficulty of sustaining critical, dialogic pedagogy within contexts where learners' understandings of citizenship are shaped by fragmented and often contradictory digital influences. Teachers are thus required to mediate not only content but also competing epistemologies of civic participation to encourage social cohesion.

Misalignment Between Curriculum Expectations and Classroom Practice

A central finding is the stark disjuncture between the formal CE curriculum and learners' lived realities. Teachers consistently reported that curriculum content is overly abstract, prescriptive, and disconnected from the socio-political contexts in which learners are embedded (Davids, 2018). Document analysis reinforces the finding of Arendse (2014) regarding the prescriptive nature of textbooks and curriculum expectations in CE, according to one of the independent schoolteachers from Two Seas High School, when she explained: "We receive all these flowery policies, ... e.g., the 'Bill of Rights', but we are not taught how to use it". This reflects a broader concern that policy provides normative ideals without pedagogical guidance. Classroom observations and document analysis further revealed that textbook representations of citizenship are narrow and procedural, emphasising compliance (e.g., voting, obeying laws) rather than critical engagement.

Classroom observations and document analysis further revealed that textbook representations of citizenship are narrow and procedural, focusing on compliance rather than critical engagement. For example, a senior-phase Life Orientation textbook describes responsible citizenship primarily as obeying the law, voting, and paying taxes, with participation in human rights limited to campaigns and events. It briefly mentions evaluating one's own views on discrimination and lists ways to discuss human rights issues, such as social media, radio, community talks, and engagement with government departments. Overall, the textbook presents citizenship as rule-following and participation in set activities, rather than critical or reflective engagement.

This overly prescriptive content may reflect the broader challenges of teaching CE, where teachers are expected to deliver content aligned with mandated outcomes yet lack the flexibility to adapt to local contexts or learners' lived experiences. The content of the textbooks tends to emphasise compliance and obligation, for example, 'must obey, must vote, must pay tax' rather than empowering learners to explore the broader ethical, social, and political dimensions of these responsibilities. Subsequently, this prescriptive content aligns with governmental mandates but restricts teachers to narrow pedagogical boundaries, limiting their instructional ability to engage learners with the wider educational concern of proactive CE.

The following data illustrate the complex relationship between the mediation of LO teachers' teaching, curriculum implementation, and social cohesion by presenting the findings of (i) adaptive pedagogies and experiential learning and (ii) teachers as moral agents and agents of social change. Generational and cultural differences between teachers and learners influence classroom engagement, often complicating the transmission of civic values in an era influenced by digital media and evolving norms.

Adaptive Pedagogies and Experiential Learning

Despite systemic constraints, teachers are challenged to demonstrate significant pedagogical agency by adopting context-responsive and experiential teaching strategies. These approaches aim to bridge the gap between abstract curriculum content and learners' lived realities. The finding illustrated below attests to the evidence that social cohesion is a microcosm of caring and connecting theoretical concepts with learners' everyday responsibilities, starting with the family. An example of this teacher's role at Two Seas High School, one of the independent schools, was when she presented social cohesion as a CE case-based lesson. For instance, she designed an experiential activity in which learners carried a 2.5-kg bag of flour for a week to simulate responsibility and hardship. The bag of flour represented a baby.

Similarly, another teacher from Fairdale High School, a public school, described attempting to contextualise a protest:

"I try to teach them about peaceful protest, but they say, Ma'am, even adults burn car tyres to protest and be heard."

The study illustrated that teachers' personal beliefs and day-to-day experiences strongly influence their approach to teaching social cohesion in CE. Some teachers embrace project-based learning, such as clean-up drives or social justice initiatives, as a means to maintain hope for civic transformation (Freire, 1970). For example, a teacher in the public schools brought the concept of community care to life through a food garden project inspired by the philosophy of Ubuntu (Waghid, 2014). Her learners collaboratively grew and harvested crops, and the initiative facilitated partnerships with other schools, motivating the learners towards social cohesion.

These findings suggest that CE becomes meaningful when it is embodied, dialogic, and situated, rather than abstract. However, the effectiveness of such approaches is uneven and dependent on teacher initiative, highlighting the absence of systemic pedagogical support.

Teachers as Moral Agents and Agents of Social Change

The following data highlight that teachers are moral agents operating under conditions of systemic contradiction, where they must simultaneously reproduce and critique the very system they work within. However, this role entails significant emotional and ethical strain. As one of the teachers from Grassdale High, a public school, expressed:

"I believe in democracy, but I also see its failures daily. How do I teach my students to trust in a system I'm starting to doubt?"

This reflects a profound tension between personal disillusionment and professional responsibility. Teachers are required to model democratic values even when their own views in these systems are contested. They guide their learners to question social injustices, reflect on their roles in society, and emulate those roles. Furthermore, frequent curriculum changes, coupled with inadequate support, have left teachers uncertain about how to implement new concepts, such as social cohesion.

The literature is also consistent with the finding that policy emphasis on social cohesion often overlooks the historical roots of social inequality stemming from apartheid, which continues to affect race relations and hinder genuine respect and unity (Sayed et al., 2016). Ongoing poor race relations are reported in the media, claiming that democratic principles are misunderstood and not practised. Meanwhile, as Davids (2018) argues, teachers are expected to lead social cohesion in CE reforms without necessarily having the support, capacity, or tools to teach learners how to engage actively in a democratic society.

Collectively, the four findings illustrate that the persistent misalignment between curriculum content and practice underscores the limitations of prescriptive policy frameworks that fail to account for contextual variability and directly influence teachers' identities. Teachers emerge not only as implementers of CE but as civic role models and social change agents who embody and mediate democratic values, often under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. At the same time, these findings foreground the centrality of teachers' emotional labour, professional judgement, and identity-driven practice in sustaining social cohesion in CE. They point to the need for a shift beyond curriculum reform towards prioritising teacher development, sustained professional support, and the recognition of teachers' experiential knowledge within policy processes.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that warrant acknowledgement, as the sample was drawn from four secondary schools located within a single province, the Western Cape, which constrains the generalisability of the findings. The teachers' pedagogical experiences and identity negotiations documented here are situated within a specific socio-economic and post-apartheid context that may differ substantially from those in other South African provinces. Subsequently, the study draws on a purposive sample of 16 LO teachers, a methodologically appropriate choice for qualitative, interpretivist inquiry, though it does not support statistical generalisation. Transferability of findings to other school contexts, population groups, or national settings should therefore be treated with context-sensitive adaptation. The one-month fieldwork period, while sufficient to generate rich qualitative data, limits the depth of longitudinal insight into how teachers' practices and identities shift over time. Future research employing extended ethnographic engagement or longitudinal case study designs would substantially strengthen the evidence base for the claims made here.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings reveal that a lack of social cohesion remains a persistent challenge in post-apartheid South Africa, shaped by structural inequalities. The constitutional transformation aims to promote CE. However, the economic divide, particularly affecting marginalised Black communities, undermines these efforts. This qualitative study highlights that teachers in public schools experienced emotional strain due to historical marginalisation. In agreement with Fataar (2019), CE emerges as a critical domain for addressing these challenges, as teachers reported not being supported in developing a curriculum and pedagogy that would enable students to develop cross-cultural competence. CPTD for LO teachers as educational reform in the future of democratic South Africa. Ultimately, if CE is to contribute meaningfully to social cohesion and democratic participation in South Africa, it must be reconceptualised as a lived, context-responsive practice that centres both teacher agency and learner realities. Without this shift, CE risks remaining an aspirational ideal rather than a transformative force within education. This study contributes to the growing discourse on reimagining CE as a transformative pedagogy. Nonetheless, the research revealed the complex realities of teaching CE in post-apartheid South Africa. Teachers play a central role in navigating curriculum limitations, engaging learners, and promoting civic responsibility. The findings concur with Wolhuter et al. (2020) that education policy should prioritise teacher development, curriculum reform, and interdisciplinary collaboration to help CE reach its full potential.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to strengthen teacher support for implementing social cohesion within CE, understood here as a practice of critical consciousness-raising and communal becoming rather than mere content delivery. First, teacher education programs should prioritise pedagogies of dialogue that equip teachers to engage learners as co-investigators of their social reality, enabling them to interrogate sensitive issues such as race, inequality, and democratic participation through a

relational, Ubuntu-informed lens, one that affirms "I am because we are" rather than positioning citizenship as an individual, compliance-based obligation. Second, continuous professional development should strengthen teachers' capacity to move beyond banking-style instruction, developing the pedagogical content knowledge needed to translate abstract policy into praxis and action grounded in learners' lived realities and interdependence with others. Thirdly, curriculum reform should move towards greater flexibility, creating space for problem-posing approaches that draw on learners' lived experiences and local contexts as legitimate starting points for critical engagement, and that cultivate the communal values of respect, empathy, and shared humanity central to Ubuntu. Finally, policymakers should recognise teachers as key stakeholders and co-producers of curriculum knowledge, drawing on their experiential and situated knowledge to narrow the gap between policy and CE education.

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