"Mending Bridges": English Teachers Teaching for Social Cohesion

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Abstract. This article explores English Home and First Additional Language (English HL/FAL) teachers' insights into social cohesion and what their understandings imply for teaching the language in diverse secondary schools in South Africa. Twenty-seven years into democracy, South African society remains beset with social challenges, such as increasing inequalities, poverty, and violence indicating intolerance and a general decline of moral fibre in society. Guided by the theory of social justice in education and supported by the notion that critical pedagogy has the potential to transform society, this qualitative case study explored English teachers' perceptions of a cohesive society, and the way they teach for such a society. This study explored whether their theoretical understanding of the concept improves teachers' positioning of education in diverse secondary schools, to achieve the broader objectives outlined in the national curriculum, and successfully foster social change in post-apartheid South African society. Conducted through the method a qualitative exploratory case study, data were elicited through semi-structured interviews and lesson observations of seven English HL/FAL teachers from three diverse secondary schools in Merafong City, in the Gauteng Province, in South Africa. Using content analysis to analyse data, this study found that teachers perceived a cohesive society as one of solidarity, respect, peace, humanity, and equal treatment. Interestingly, some teachers could not clearly link the concept with formal education, or in fact, English teaching, something which indicated that their pedagogic knowledge is limited, thus impeding the process of improving social cohesion in society.

Keywords: English Education; Social Justice; Social Cohesion

1. Introduction

Twenty-seven years into democracy, South African society remains beset with social challenges, which date back to the gross misdemeanours of the apartheid era. The country is considered one of the most unequal, intolerant, unstable and violent societies in the world (Sayed & Badroodien, 2016). Racism, increasing unemployment rates and poverty continue to divide South African society to an extent that endangers people's lives (Cloete, 2014), as the rise of unemployment

and inequality perpetuate crime and riots that are always harmful to people's lives (Meiring, Kannemeyer & Potgieter, 2018; Ratele, 2015). Impoverished people venture their social-related frustrations and anger on those vulnerable in society. Such behaviours and instances indicate that social cohesion in South Africa has not yet been achieved, and the society's moral fibre is declining despite the strategies put in place to improve the spheres that are aimed at bringing about social transformation. Although the education sector gets the biggest amount from the government's budget allocation in order to provide quality education that effectively address recent social issues such as inequality and fragmentation (Sayed, Badroodien, Omar, Ndabaga, Novelli, Durrani, Barrett, Balie, Salmon, Bizimana, Ntahomvukiye and Utomi, 2018), the post-apartheid South African society remains overwhelmed by the vestiges of colonialism and apartheid.

The main aim of this paper is to examine teachers' understandings of a cohesive society and how this may have empowered and enabled them to teach for the broader outcomes of the curriculum, including the improvement of social cohesion in the conflict-affected communities. Given the potential role of formal education in changing people's lives and the structure of society at large, this paper is rooted in the tenets of social justice, which accounts for equitable provision of quality education that develops learners' intellectual and ethical skills. The efficacy of social justice in education is also linked with teacher-competence given their role as key agents of social change. Therefore, teachers need to possess a great appreciation of socio-cultural and socio-economic differences, and of the impact this diversity may have on the success of teaching and learning practices. In short, teachers in diverse educational institutions of education need to be critical pedagogues.

2. Theoretical framework: Social justice and social cohesion

Social cohesion, as an element of social justice, is a concept which fosters unity, peace and tolerance by encouraging a sense of belonging and participation in society (Fonseca, Lukosh & Brazier, 2019; De Kock, Sayed & Badroodien, 2018), while social justice is the theory through which to develop the envisaged society. In a general sense, social justice is an instrument for developing a social structure (Rawls, 1999). As a theory, it assumes that "all people, irrespective of belief or societal position, are entitled to be treated according to the values of human rights, human dignity and equality" (Van Deventer, Van der Westhuizen & Potgieter, 2015, p. 1). Social justice is a crucial impetus for promoting humanity, peace, tolerance, and unity. In other words, a conflict-affected society has the potential to improve social cohesion by enacting social justice in institutions of public importance such as schools. Adams, Bell, Goodman and Joshi (2016) add that the theory is a social-oriented tool for reshaping society. For education that is aimed at improving social cohesions and cohesion, recognition of socio-cultural and socio-economic inequalities is essential as this has the potential to remediate injustices and learning barriers in South Africa's education. Thus, this paper argues in favour of Rawls' (1999) postulation that social justice is the primary course towards achieving a harmonious society, as it entails the regulation of social principles and fair treatment and distribution of social resources.

Being the fundamental principle of just social systems in society, social justice is grounded in honesty and impartiality insofar as the distribution of social resources is concerned. Rawls (1999, p. 3) highlights the principle of distributive justice as truth and fairness: "A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise, laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust." This means that the concept encourages accurate, reliable and transparent processes for fair and just social systems and practices. Fair and just practices are the most important social principles guiding the individuals' actions and allocation of social resources (Rawls, 1999).

A crucial aspect of social justice in education is enabling educational policies and practices to serve learners equally. For this reason, it is an instrument through which to examine, formulate, enact and monitor in order to ensure equitable distribution of the natural resources meant to improve society (Nieto, 2000). The theory constitutes "analyzing school policies and practices – the curriculum, textbooks and materials, instructional strategies, tracking, recruitment and hiring of staff, and parent involvement strategies – that devalue the identities of some students while valuing those of others" (Nieto, 2000, p. 183). This calls for teachers to be critical of curriculum content and pedagogies that they use to facilitate learning practices. This also entails examining the purpose of the content that is taught and the effectiveness of the pedagogies in enabling learners' equitable access into the curriculum. Therefore, fair and equitable teaching and learning can be achieved in South Africa's education if justice in education is effectively applied. In fact, this can possibly improve the schooling system and accelerate social cohesion, as according to Sayed and Badroodien (2016), social transformation is developed through quality and equitable education.
Social justice is rooted in three fundamental social bands, namely conducive place, fair practice or action, and unbiased principles. These social bands are intertwined. As Rawls says *[F]or even though justice has a certain priority, being the most important virtue of institutions, it is still true that, other things equal, one conception of justice is preferable to another when its broader consequences are more desirable."* (Rawls, 1999, p. 6).

Considering social justice according to the previous bands, this paper contends that education has the potential to improve social cohesion and teachers are key agents in the process. The school environment and classroom practices help prepare young people to take up adult roles in society. Any form of inequitable treatment may hinder the process, and hence, it can exacerbate social challenges such as inequalities, poverty and divisions. When learners are given proper support and appropriate resources, they develop better critical skills, which enable them to live responsibly (Bickmore, 2006). Besides, school is the place in which social differences are contested, negotiated and addressed (De Kock et al., 2018). Therefore, social justice is imperative to the context of South African education system as it offers a scope of thoughts for effective means to improve culture of teaching and learning, so that social change and cohesion can be realised. South Africa's education is still marked with inequalities (Badat & Sayed, 2014; Spaull, 2013), thereby impeding the potential progress in advancing social change.

There are many reasons affirming the importance of social justice and the principle of equal distribution of resources in post-apartheid South African education institutions. Firstly, the principle of equitable distribution of resources in education implies the distribution of more teaching and learning instruments to those with less or previously disadvantaged (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). The process ensures that the education institutions are able to provide equitable quality education to the community. The author argues that social justice in educational institutions therefore provides equitable learning opportunities, and provides each learner with opportunities to become independent citizens in a democratic society. In other words, social justice mitigates learners' background circumstances as learning barriers. Social justice helps learners "[to] reach high levels of learning and prepare them all for active and full participation in a democracy" (Villegas, 2007, p. 372).

Secondly, the concept of social justice in education corresponds with Freire's (1970) notion of education. Paolo Freire (1970) maintains that the main objective of formal education is to liberate people and transform communities by addressing inequalities. This suggests two positions with regard to the South Africa's cause of improving social cohesion. On the one hand, the challenge of increasing inequalities – which are by means of race (Khambule & Siswana, 2017), socioeconomic status (Segalo, 2015), geographic location (Nkambule, 2012) and gender (Bhorat & Van der Westhuizen, 2012) – in post-apartheid South Africa indicate that the country's education system is not well positioned for effective enhancement of social cohesion. On the other hand, the county lacks full commitment and effective implementation to improve learning and teaching conditions contributing to the decline of the education system in the country. Full commitment and effective implementation mean delivering on the promise and constant monitoring circumstances.

Lastly, Cappy (2016) attests that social justice (specifically, equitable distribution) in South African education is significant in her discussion of the country's education during apartheid. The education system was structured to divide rather than to unite society. "Resources were allocated unequally, with white schools receiving the greatest resources and (B)lack schools the fewest" (Cappy, 2016, p. 124). This means that inequitable distribution of teaching and learning resources at the time was meant to perpetuate inequalities between Black and white groups (Fiske & Ladd, 2004 in Cappy, 2016). In other words, resources play an essential role in education and societal structures. Effective practice of social justice will elevate social cohesion through equal and equitable education, and address crises in education. When the education system is unequal, the idea of a cohesive society is relegated to public speeches and policies and remains unfulfilled in practice. Rather, the education system might aggravate social fragmentation, as learners in poor-resourced schools tend to perform poorly and fail to enter higher education institutions (Sayed *et al.*, 2018; Becker et al., 2015). Thus, Novelli and Sayed (2016) conclude that one of the consequences of the situation is extreme social ills, including poverty, inequalities, and divisions.

3. Research design

This study follows the interpretive paradigm, a central research perspective that informs the methods of the research. The research adopts a qualitative case study as a technique to investigate English teachers' understandings of a socially just cohesive society. Using non-probability sampling, which enables researchers to choose the participants from whom they can learn more about the situation (Kothari, 2004), 7 English HL/FAL teachers from three public secondary schools in Merafong city, in the Gauteng province, were selected to participate. While the original sample was eight teachers, one participant later recused herself from the study. Non-probability sampling was relevant to this qualitative case study as it helped to select the best group of the participants that would offer data which could provide responses to the research. Three participants were from School A, 2 from School B, and 2 from School C.

All individual participants were observed twice to examine how they engage with learners in their English lessons, and a semi-structured interview with each teacher was conducted to elicit data. Observations help collect 'live' data, while interviews gather information based on participant's perceptions (Ary et al., 2010).

Data in this study were analysed using content analysis. Creswell's (2014) steps proved helpful:
- Organising and preparing data for analysis, the process which entails transcribing the interviews, scanning of material, and typing up field notes.
- Reading through the collected data to get an overview of the information before reflecting on the overall meaning. This stage allowed for the primary researcher to write notes about their general thoughts in margins.
- Analysing data using a coding process. The coding process comprises "taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences … and labelling those categories with a term, often based in the actual language of the participants (Creswell, 2014).

Reliability and trustworthiness were guaranteed by means of triangulation and member checking, as well as drawing on multiple data sources. The process provided the teachers with opportunities to challenge and rectify responses that may have been misrepresented, thus ensuring validity and authenticity.

To ensure that this research was ethical, permission from all the relevant stakeholders and organisations was requested and granted prior to data collection. These involved written consent granting permission to work with schools from the School Governing Body, teachers, and the principal of each site. Consent to participate in this study was also requested from the teachers. Furthermore, confidentiality was assured using pseudonyms, encouragement of voluntary participation, and inclusion of the researcher's contact information in all the letters of consent. Finally, audio recordings and transcripts have not been publicly exposed or availed, and they will remain confidential.

4. Data description and analysis

To establish English teachers' understandings of a socially just cohesive society, the primary researcher coded and categorised data from the interviews and observations into themes, focussing on the teachers' theory and praxis. The themes reported on in this paper are: English teachers' understandings of a socially just cohesive society; English teachers' classroom teachings for a socially just cohesive society; and limited pedagogic knowledge.

4.1 English teachers' understanding of a socially just cohesive society

The teachers' views of a cohesive society aligned with literature in the field of social cohesion, *inter alia*, individuals' attitudes, equality, inclusion, and participation (Addeo, Diana, Bottoni & Esposito, 2017; Fenger, 2012). Most teachers related the concept to the social condition and structure, but with varying purposes.

> "[It is] a society that does not discriminate but rather works towards integrating everyone in society regardless of difference[s]. A society that acknowledges differences and works towards merging society." (Interview with Mrs Thabethe).
>
> "A socially just cohesive society is where there is equality, a society where people are free to express themselves as they see fit… exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of inequality, and promotes lack of trust and unity among all the members of society." (Interview with Ms Makhosi).
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> "A socially just cohesive society is a society that allows and respects different views and, more importantly, free discourse whereby people listen to each other even when at odds with one another. This importance is amplified when it comes to marginalized group who have to be given a platform to voice out their grievances so previous injustices can be rectified." (Interview with Mr Daniels).

According to these three respondents, some of the features that determine a cohesive society are equity and freedom of expression. For Mrs Thabethe and Mr Daniels that includes acknowledging the fact that society is made up of diverse individuals whose views and abilities should be respected. Mrs Thabethe and Mr Daniels seem to associate a cohesive society with how individuals are treated in the community, given their views that a cohesive society is "a society that does not discriminate" but which "allows and respects" individual differences. This means that they equate a cohesive society to a social structure that is devoid of inequalities and discrimination, and where individuals are treated fairly.

Ms Makhosi concurs with Mrs Thabethe's and Mr Daniels' sentiments pertaining to a cohesive society. She highlights the importance of equality and freedom of expression in society. She feels that "exclusion and marginalisation" of other people result in negative social dimensions such as "inequality" which she believes "promotes lack of trust and unity" in society. Like other teachers (such as Mr Daniels), who highlighted the purpose of fair treatment as a possible means

to redress social injustices without providing clarity, Ms Makhosi could not expound on the idea of enacting equitable treatment in society. Yet, she mentions the consequences of unfair treatment. This implies two positions relating to teachers' notions of equal treatment, given the small sample whose views are not generalisable. On the one hand, it could be indicative of English teachers' lack of knowledge insofar as the lack of impartial treatment in society is concerned. On the other hand, it could mean that teachers do not take the idea of treating learners equally in the classroom seriously. In essence, these teachers appear preoccupied with the outcomes rather than the processes of equal treatment in the South African education system.

Despite the teachers' superficial understanding of enacting equal treatment in society, their perceptions of a socially just cohesive society indicate that they understand the outcomes of inequitable treatment and/or inequalities in society. In general, the teachers understand that unfair treatment and inequalities in society jeopardise social cohesion by triggering social instabilities that lead to social fragmentations rather than social solidarity and harmony. This is consistent with Berger-Schmitt's (2002) views about social cohesion in Addeo and colleagues' (2017) study that identifies inequalities as one of the broad social elements that need to be addressed if society wants to improve the status quo of social cohesion. According to Addeo et al. (2017), social cohesion improves when the levels of inequality in society diminish.

4.2 English teachers' classroom teachings for a socially just cohesive society
Below is an interview extract with Mrs Dibe demonstrating what it means to English teachers to teach for a cohesive society.

Researcher: *What does teaching for a socially just cohesive society mean to you?*
Mrs Dibe: *I think it is teaching in such a manner that a teacher instils values, which are going to make learners uplift unity in the societies where they come from … it is a teaching through instilling values of unity to the learners, and also teaching them skills of surviving in their societies...*
Researcher: *Can you just give me one or two examples of those values, just to be specific? Thank you.*
Mrs Dibe: *Learners should be taught that it is very-very important to respect other human beings … if you are a respectful person you are not self-centred, you also think of other people. If we see the rape cases, the murders of women in nowadays, it simply shows us that there is lack of that… (Interview with Mrs Dibe).*

This excerpt highlights that Mrs Dibe believes that teaching for a cohesive society underpins two ideas, namely, equipping learners with values that encourage unity, and equipping learners with skills that will help them survive in society. She strongly believes that providing learners with these values is essential because it encourages them to appreciate the significance of unity in society. Mrs Dibe believes that building a cohesive society begins with providing young people with social principles and other necessary skills that will help them live a successful life. This can possibly nurture a harmonious society, given her confidence that such teaching "will actually reduce" crime in South Africa.

Her colleague, Mrs Thabethe, acknowledges the importance of teaching for a cohesive society. She recognises that such teaching can improve inequalities which have been in existence for decades in South Africa. She also emphasises that more knowledge is crucial in addressing social challenges, something she feels is missing in the country's education system. She articulated:

> *"Teaching for social cohesion can help mend the bridges that equality throughout the years has burnt. The inequality in society still exists because education teaches specific individuals for specific roles without affording them all the tools and allowing them to make their own decisions regarding where they would like to fall on the economic ladder."*
> *(Interview with Mrs Thabethe).*

Mrs Thabethe sees the significance of teaching for a cohesive society but believes that the education system fails to achieve this purpose. However, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in which the general aims of the country's curriculum are based, provides for the provision of a wide range of knowledge. For instance, learners should be provided "with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country" (Department of Basic Education (DoBE), 2011, p. 4). Mrs Thabethe considers the current education system narrow to promote social cohesion. This could possibly be because her knowledge of the CAPS provisions is limited, or that she is unable to position education to provide learners with broad and necessary skills. This is a challenge in need of urgent attention for teachers and the curriculum to realise the objectives of education in South Africa. Education should be well balanced to prepare society for the labour market; to effectively develop people to think and apply their knowledge critically; to help young people become active citizens in modern and democratic society, and to realise individuals' personal growth (Council of Europe, 2015).

When asked about how they teach for a cohesive society, participants differed in ideas and strategies. One of them explained:

> *"My favourite topic when teaching English is poetry, and poetry helps me to say things like apartheid was wrong, and as a white teacher the children are often surprised that I would say something like this … So, I very often use things like that, a little bit of humour to try and include my kids in my social sphere of my life… and I think that helps them to see that we can all be part of one-big society…"* *(Interview with Mrs Morntana).*

This extract depicts Mrs Morntana's teaching techniques aimed to promote a cohesive society. She enjoys teaching poetry since it relates to authentic social issues, such as apartheid, which is a still responsible for social ills perpetuated in post-apartheid South African society (Davis & Steyn, 2012). As a white woman, she believes that poetry presents her with opportunities to condemn apartheid. Mrs Morntana applies her theoretical knowledge of a socially cohesive society in the classroom. Her teaching-learning approach draws on Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, aligning her lessons as she does with authentic and sensitive social issues which provoke a sense of discomfort. Through this pedagogy, Boler (1999) recognises how what we know, and feel are intertwined beyond our classrooms, shaping who we are. By delivering the lesson along the lines of a pedagogy of

discomfort, Mrs Morntana enables her teaching strategy to "bring students and learners to develop a value of system that takes justice, democratic values, freedom, and the suffering of others seriously" (Davis & Steyn, 2012, p. 30). For her, she teaches in this way to help learners understand the inaccuracies of political propaganda. It makes other young people recognise that life is about being able to strive for justice, freedom, and unity. Indeed, "one gains a new sense of interconnection with others" (Boler, 1999, p. 199).

Mr Daniels believes:

> *"Teaching for a socially just cohesive society means moulding learners to be future leaders who see the importance of coming back to the community and do something that will change their lives and the lives of other people in a positive way; something that will leave a legacy in the community. Most importantly, it also means to instil a hard-working mentality and a drive for success in my learner's spirits and if I have failed on the latter then I have failed as an educator."* (Interview with Mr Daniels).

A different notion of teaching for a cohesive society is expressed by Mrs Dibe who claims to treat learners fairly by ensuring that in her class they receive equal treatment.

> *"I teach by treating learners fairly, and I do not teach them like they are unequal beings in the class. They should be treated in an equal manner, and the teacher should be fair at all times … So, teachers mustn't practice favouritism, all the learners should be treated as equal beings in the class..."* (Interview with Mrs Dibe).

Mrs Dibe describes how she teaches to promote a cohesive society. Her choice of praxis, of "treating learners fairly" and not seeing them as "unequal beings in the class", resonates with Philip, Tsedu and Zwane's (2014) ideas of both fairness and social cohesion in society, as well as the notions of social justice in the terrain of education. "A sense of unfairness can give rise to social conflict and a lack of social cohesion … Lack of social cohesion as a result of inequality also lowers social trust, which makes it difficult for different interest groups to work together for a common social goal" (Philip et al., 2014, p. 17). Practising fairness and equity in the classroom serves the purpose of addressing issues of deteriorating social trust and unity, and therefore encourages social cohesion. Non-discriminatory teaching supports broad endeavours meant to transform broader society (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt & McQuillan, 2009). This is indicative of Mrs Dibe's awareness that teaching and learning play a key role in influencing learners' social conscience, and the impact it has in society at large. In this instance, her pedagogy is likely to ignite learners' sense of harmony.

Although most teachers in this study possessed knowledge of a cohesive society, and what it means to teach for such a society, they seemed to lack clarity on how to teach in this paradigm. None of the teachers could expand on their pedagogy sufficiently. For example, Mrs Mortana's pedagogy denounces the apartheid regime, and Mrs Thabethe seeks to address inequalities. A pedagogy aimed to promote a cohesive society requires a broader sense of teaching, which entails various learning objectives, "including thinking critically, connecting knowledge

to real-world problems and situations, challenging received knowledge, understanding multiple perspectives, debating diverse viewpoints, unpacking underlying assumptions, and engaging productively in cross-cultural discussion" (Cochran-Smith, Gleeson & Mitchell, 2010, p. 37). For teaching-learning instruction to realise these goals, teachers need to use a pedagogy that exposes learners to a wide range of knowledge opportunities, such as the development of essential basic skills, expansion of deep insight, attitudes and values crucial for participation in a democratic society.

4.3 Limited pedagogic knowledge: some observations

Teachers' knowledge of pedagogic application is sometimes limited, thereby depriving learners of critical thinking and robust discussions around social issues. For example, in one of the English lessons that was observed, Mrs Thabethe was teaching Grade 10s John Donne's "Death be not proud". Her pedagogic style emulated banking education (Freire, 1970). At the beginning of the lesson learners were required to recollect what was discussed in the classroom in a previous lesson. Learners in this instance repeated what they were taught, with Mrs Thabethe prohibiting them from providing their own views by saying, "No… Don't guess". This could have a negative impact on the learners' education, by discouraging them. It can discourage learners from engaging in dialogue that requires their views. What is noticeable in Mrs Thabethe's lesson is that, in the analysis of the poem, when learners could have critically engaged with the poem, they were deprived of the opportunity to actively participate.

[1] Mrs Thabethe:	*Alright. I have done line number one, **akere** [right]? I have said to you in line number one we have got a figure of speech which we say is an apostrophe. (Explains what and why it is an apostrophe in line one).*
[2] Class:	*Ooh!*
[3] Mrs Thabethe:	*(Reads line 2 and explains) So, here. The speaker is saying that 'Death' you must not be proud, meaning that he is saying 'Death' must get rid of his pride, the pride that he carries. Then, he explains to us why he says 'Death' is proud. He says 'Death' you are proud because a lot of people have called you 'Mighty', a lot of people have said that you are 'dreadful', but you are not. Are we together?*
[4] Few learners:	*Yes!*
[5] Mrs Thabethe:	*(Reads line 3 and explains) So, here, he continues again to say there are people that think that you can overthrow them. Remember, when we speak of death, we say your life has ended. So, we assume that it stops when death comes in, meaning that you don't have life anymore. Are we together?*
[6] Learners:	*Yes!*
[7] Mrs Thabethe:	*But, here, he says you are not what those people make you to think that you are. And, then, you are incapable of overthrowing. Are we together?*
[8] Class:	*(Softly) Yes.*

[9] Mrs Thabethe: *(Reads line 4 and explains) So, now, he is telling 'Death' that you cannot kill me, meaning that my life cannot end when you get to it. Are we together?*
[10] Class: *(Softly) Yes.*
[11] Mrs Thabethe: **Hale thotse lea ntshabisa** *[You are scaring me when you are quiet].*
[12] Class: *(Laughs)… (Lesson observation extract 2, 08 October 2020).*

In this extract, the poem is being analysed by Mrs Thabethe. The teacher is reading, evaluating and explaining the meaning of the poem to learners. Her role and that of the learners in this lesson clearly shows that the lesson lacks any form of critical engagement. She reads and explains the poem without discussing it with the class, or without giving learners the opportunity to express their thoughts or contribute to the deconstruction of the poem. This can be seen in turns 3, 5, 7 and 9, which point to the fact that learners receive content in the method relative to a rote learning. This is once again reminiscent of Freire's banking education, as referred to earlier. This means that the teacher deposits content into the children's minds, and they receive it without being critically engaged. The only time Mrs Thabethe engages learners in the lesson is when she wants to know whether or not they understand, as she repeatedly asks "Are we together" to which they chorus "Yes" or "no". As a result, learners are disengaged. They do not really understand anything, the question is rhetorical. This is evident in turns 8 and 10 when they expressed their response with a soft "Yes", an emergence that bothered Mrs Thabethe to the extent that she told them their silence was scaring her.

This contradicts what Mrs Thabethe claims to do when teaching for a cohesive society in her interview:

> *"I allow for learners to investigate and see life through the eyes of others, through giving open ended questions, speech and transactional writing topics. This helps learners realise that the world as they know it is not all there is to know." (Interview with Mrs Thabethe).*

Her assertion presupposes a vibrant lesson characterised by active participation of the learners in which the teacher seeks to promote critical thinking by asking unrestricted questions to give learners opportunity to explore the content. It is also evident in her articulation that she understands the importance of allowing learners to examine the content on their own to understand "through the eyes of others". In this instance, Mrs Thabethe seems to value learners' thinking capabilities, and their critical engagement. Perhaps, this equates to a dialogue-based teaching-learning pedagogy, which correlates with critical pedagogy in which "the thoughts, language use, and everyday lives of the illiterates" are appreciated, and "[the] students are cognitively animated to reflect instead of waiting for the educator to explain for them and to them what things mean and what to believe" (Shor, Marjanovic-Shane, Matusov & Cresswell, 2017, p. 9).

Although Mrs Thabethe understands the significance of learners' critical engagement in the lesson, she does not put this into practice. Rather, her lesson seems to undermine the value of empowering learners to be critical thinkers. Her

lesson appears to promote rote learning through the following aspects of banking education, which, according to Freire (1970, p. 73), do not liberate society, namely:

- the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- the teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing;
- the teacher thinks and students are thought about; and
- the teacher talks and the students listen–meekly.

For the development of critical thinking among learners, the teacher must provide learners with moments to actively participate in discussions and to engage dialogically rather than encouraging passivity (Murawski, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This paper has engaged in discussion around English teachers' understandings of a cohesive society. Essentially, the study found that teachers have knowledge of a cohesive society. However, despite their theoretical understanding of a cohesive society, their practice suggests inconsistency between their understandings and their praxis. The teachers' praxis did not always align with effective actions towards social transformation. The English lessons that were observed, presented failed opportunities for critical learner engagement. The teachers also appear to lack vital pedagogic knowledge. Learners were often left listening or responding chorally, rather than engaging with the teacher. This suggests, although not generalisable, that teaching and learning practices in this study sorely lack development towards social justice and cohesion, as is presented in curriculum policy documents. A limitation of the research was the limited number of participants, an occurrence as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the research was conducted.

These observations bear major implications for further research. Such research could involve revisiting and critically analysing policy documents such as the curriculum policies to establish what is prescribed for teachers to implement in the classroom. If teachers are not abiding by curriculum policies, it is important to recognise reasons for this occurrence. This could be because of time constraints in classrooms, or that curriculum documents are presenting already overburdened teachers with more than which they can cope. It could also be that teachers, although they say they understand concepts such as social justice and cohesion, are unable to implement such in their lessons. Another major setback could be the lack of teacher pedagogic knowledge which might require regular upgrading. Together with pedagogic content knowledge lies the teacher's ideological stance. If the curriculum stipulates core overarching issues such as social justice, transformation and social cohesion, these will not be taken to the classroom if they lie in opposition to teacher beliefs.

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